

## The Portal



**Lord of the Amazon**  
By Etheridge G. Lovett

“Ringo—tell us... How long do you think it’ll take before we get to our research destination?” Dr. Wayne Bristol inquired, his voice competing with the rotating sound of the helicopter blades.

“According to my coordinates, we should arrive there shortly,” Ringo answered.

“Wow—the great Amazon rainforest is so vast... I can’t believe the enormity of it all... There are giant trees everywhere you turn,” Dr. Alice Richardson expressed as she gazed at the luscious green jungle below. “Ringo, tell me, what’s it like exploring down there in the rainforest?” she asked.

“To be honest, I really don’t know much about exploration conditions down below. Hiking through the Amazon rainforest is all Greek to me. I spend much more time in the air than on the ground. If there’s anything you want to know about flying, I’m the man to tell you,” Ringo said.

“I know you’ve probably heard several interesting stories from people who’d hiked through the great Amazon

rainforest... Come on—tell us what you know, Ringo. I promise; we won’t tell anyone,” Wayne mused.

“There’s only one true story that I can tell you... Whenever I fly anywhere near the area where you’re about to go exploring, I always have navigational and electrical problems with my equipment. If you hadn’t paid me a comfortable amount to bring you out here, I swear I wouldn’t be flying this old helicopter in this direction. I’m telling you, the area we’re about to enter is a really weird area... Most pilots with common sense avoid it like the plague... They often call it the devil’s triangle of the Amazon rainforest,” Ringo informed.

Ah come on, Ringo... don’t tell me that a big strong man like you is all spooked by old native tales from the Amazon rainforest,” Wayne joked, laughing.

“Spooked is putting it lightly my friend... I don’t want to frighten you and Dr. Richardson but you don’t know of the many strange foreboding stories that come out of this place each year. Tales of tall dark shadows moving about, people vanishing into thin air, unexplained forces, and the list goes on and on... I personally believe that there are dark forces at play down there beyond those trees and I don’t want to have anything to do with it,” Ringo admitted.

“I don’t know Ringo... I think you may be reading too much into it... Perhaps you’re drinking far too much wild Amazon juice,” Wayne mused.

Alice glanced over at Wayne, shoving him in his ribcage with her elbow. “Don’t say such silly things,” she whispered over to him.

Ringo looked at the two archeologists in his rear view mirror, saying, “Go ahead... make jokes... but a wise old native Amazon dweller told me a year ago that it’s not the rainforest that you should be worried about, but the dark forces and creatures lurking around in it.”



The moment Ringo finished his statement something struck the side of the helicopter with a loud thud, causing the aircraft to rock back and forth in the heavens. The skies began to darken. Everyone held on tight as the emergency buzzer sounded and the red emergency lights flickered. When Ringo looked down at his gages, he noticed that they were spinning radically out of control. He sent up

a quick prayer as he kissed and rubbed the string of rosary beads strung around his neck.

“What’s happening? Are we going to crash?” Wayne shouted with distress growing on his slender face.

“I don’t know— this happens whenever I reach this area, but it was never this bad... I never encountered a storm brewing up so fast,” Ringo said, turning on his emergency radio.

“May day— May day— this is research team one... I repeat... research team one; requesting immediate emergency assistance— my aircraft’s out of control— I’m experiencing major mechanical problems—we’re about to crash into the jungle—can you read me!” Ringo shouted several times into his radio, anxiously waiting for a reply. Only static was heard emitting from the receiver. Ringo tossed the receiver off to the side in frustration.

“Damn it!” Ringo shouted with distress written all over his face. He shouted back to his two passengers, “Hold on tight—I can’t keep us in the air any longer—we’re going down!”

The young college professors strapped themselves in tight and held on to the thick safety harnesses attached to their seats.

Ringo flinched with each burst of lightning flashing from the ominous storm enveloping the aircraft. Heavy thunder followed. It sounded as if an army of giant chariots were being driven across the heavens. Sweat beaded from Ringo’s forehead like water on the side of a cold drink. Ringo struggled to keep his UH-1 Huey helicopter in the air, but the aircraft continued to lose altitude, plummeting towards the damp, Amazon rainforest below. With a sliver of luck remaining, the helicopter landed upon the cluster of leaves and branches of several towering Canopy Trees, breaking its sudden descent. Held up by thick vines, large leaves and some branches; the aircraft dangled upside down, twenty feet off the ground.

“Alice—can you hear me—are you okay?” Wayne questioned in a panicky voice.

Wayne’s voice jarred Alice from her unconscious state. She heard him and replied in a whisper, “Yeah—I’m okay.”

“Ringo—Are you okay up there?” Wayne questioned, shouting over towards the pilot’s cockpit. There was no reply. Only the fierce rumbling thunder from the black ominous clouds above and the mating calls of the Amazon creatures filled their ears.

“Ringo—can you hear me!” Wayne shouted once more. There was no response.

“I don’t think he made it,” Alice whispered, tears forming in the lower rim of her big brown eyes.

“I smell fuel... The helicopter could blow at any minute... we got to get out of here... come on!” Wayne shouted, unhitching his seatbelt. He dropped to the roof of the helicopter, crawling over to help Alice out of her seat.

“Grab all the important gear and supplies we’ll need. We can toss them out of the main side door and get them once we’ve climbed out of the helicopter,” Wayne said.

They crawled about, grabbing a large bagged-up tent, a machete and several flares, tossing them out of the open door of the helicopter down towards the jungle’s floor in order to climb out of the disabled aircraft. Wayne grabbed a rope that Ringo had stored beneath his seat. He tied the rope on the railing of the seats and then tossed the opposite end of the rope out of the side door of the helicopter.

“We can’t just leave like this... Let me check on Ringo one last time,” Wayne said to Alice. He frantically crawled towards the pilot’s cabin. When he reached Ringo, he saw him dangling upside down in his seat; his glossy brown eyes stretched wide open in a chilling death stare, with a broken tree branch piercing through the center of his chest. Blood drained from Ringo’s chest, mouth and nose like watered-down tomato paste.

“Damn it!” Wayne shouted, quickly turning his head away to block out the gruesome image.

“What’s wrong? Is he dead? Tell me the truth—is Ringo dead?” Alice shrieked, crawling towards Wayne.

“Stay back Alice—you don’t want to see this... Ringo didn’t make it... I’m afraid he’s gone,” Wayne said in a subtle voice.

Alice began weeping profusely over Ringo’s unexpected demise. Wayne reached over, gently closing Ringo’s eyes. He then grabbed the compass, map, and the hunting knife attached to Ringo’s utility vest, saying in an almost whisper, “Let’s get the hell out of this dangling tomb.”

The rain shower fell upon Wayne and Alice as they carefully climbed down the rope, landing on the jungle’s floor below. They ran as fast as they could away from the strong fumes of the leaking fuel permeating the area. No sooner than they were safely out of the area of the downed helicopter, it erupted in a blinding explosion. Flames engulfed the helicopter

causing it to crash and burn on the ground below, lighting up the one area of the rainforest. The torrential rains beat heavily upon the burning aircraft as Alice and Wayne watched from a distance.

“Come on... We’d better use the remaining sunlight to set up a tent before night falls. When the sun goes down, this place becomes darker than soot. We must protect ourselves from the mosquitoes and the elements,” Wayne said.



“It’s just so difficult to accept that Ringo died so suddenly like that... I can’t believe it,” Alice said in a broken voice as she continued crying.

Wayne placed his arms around Alice shoulders, comforting her as he said, “I never witnessed a storm strike up so swiftly like that one did... Ringo will certainly be missed... Come on Alice, we’d better set up camp before nightfall set in on us.”

Alice was so hurt and num over Ringo’s death, she didn’t respond. She continued weeping. Wayne took her by the hand, guiding her towards a clearing in the jungle up ahead.

“This would be a great place to set up our tent. I’ll set up camp while you rest a while,” Wayne said. He grabbed the gear and began erecting a tent in the clearing. Once the tent was erected, they climbed in and unzipped the thick sleeping bag from the plastic container. They rolled out the dry sleeping bag, placing it on the floor of the tent to use as a mattress. Wayne glanced over and noticed the look of sadness and fear growing on the face of Alice.

“Alice, I’m so sorry I drug you out here on this godforsaken trip... I promise you, I’ll figure a way out of this jungle by this time tomorrow.” Wayne held Alice in his arms as they both rested beside each other, drifting off to sleep under the creatures of the jungle, sending out their mating calls. The next morning, the sun peeked over the horizon of the Amazon rainforest like a burst of light streaming from a quasar. Wayne was the first to awaken as he unzipped the door of the tent and gazed outside. His blue eyes were immediately fixated upon the bright rays of the morning sun, beaming through the large green leaves of many towering canopy trees like the luminous fingers of a giant angel. Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, Wayne exhaled, followed up with a morning stretch. Despite the sun’s efforts

of trying to gain daytime dominance, the jungle held fast to its many shades of darkness like a hoarder to his or her possessions. As if a hidden mystery, one section of the jungle remained darker than that of the rest.

“Alice, wake up... It’s a perfect day to find our way out of this place,” Wayne said.

Alice emerged from the tent, stretching and yawning. Her eyes were still reddened and swollen from a long night of weeping. “Let me get my things,” Alice said in an almost whisper.

Leaving the tent behind, they began their trek through the jungle, using Ringo’s compass.

“Look over there,” Wayne said, pointing at a group of spider monkeys playing in a cluster of trees. As Alice and Wayne watched the monkeys frolic about in the rays of the gleaming sunshine, Wayne caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure lurking about near the darkest area of the jungle. At one point, the strange figure seemed to stop, pulling back the leaves and foliage in the distance as if peering at them.

“Wow —Alice— did you see that?” Wayne asked, pointing.

“See what?” Alice inquired.

“I could’ve sworn I saw something or someone moving around over there in that area,” Wayne said, as he continued to point at the darkest area of the jungle.

“Perhaps it’s a team of rescuers looking for us... They may have seen the helicopter go down last night. The fire of the crash certainly burned bright enough to draw the attention of someone,” Alice said.

“The question is; who is that someone, or something? Come on, let’s investigate that shaded area,” Wayne said.

They went inside the tent and grabbed their gear and walked in the direction of the shaded area of the jungle.



“Maybe they’re members of a local tribe we haven’t read about, curiously watching us from afar. That would be an exciting find,” Wayne said, swinging his machete back and forth to clear a foot path ahead.

“I can’t believe it... This rising humidity is almost unbearable and it’s still morning time... Imagine what the humidity level will be by noontime,” Alice said, wiping beaded sweat from her forehead. She took a gulp of cool water from her canteen, closing the lid.

“If I were you, I’d drink that water sparingly if you want to get out of this jungle alive. We must preserve as much water as possible. We still need to trek out of this botanical hell-hole once we investigate the area up ahead,” Wayne said, swinging his machete from side to side. Large sliced leaves and vines dropped before him with each swing of his machete as an opening appeared. His eyes widened when his sight fell upon a cave several yards away with strange large markings aligning its entrance. Seeing a quick bright flash of light, Wayne walked towards the opening of the cave.

“Wayne, please be careful,” Alice warned as she watched Wayne peek into the dank cave to study the markings etched upon the main entranceway.

“The writing is ancient Latin and Sumerian text. There’s another set of unknown letters here as well. I can make out some of the Latin and Sumerian letters but the unknown text I cannot,” Wayne said. He rubbed his fingers along the letters as sand fell from the crevices of the writing. Once he cleared away the black sand, Wayne gasped, saying, “The Latin and Sumerian text gives a warning of an *Ancient Lord of the Amazon*. The rest of the text seemed to be covered by the unknown text.”

“All ancient tribes in this region believed in many gods... Perhaps the writing refers to one of them... Let’s jot down the coordinates of this great find and revisit the cave later with a team of excavators several months from now. Maybe there’s some long lost, priceless treasure or artifacts hidden away inside this old cave. For now, let’s study the map and begin our trek out of this creepy jungle while it’s daylight,” Alice said.



“You’re absolutely right about that... We could always return with a team to learn more about this cave later. I’m sure it’s not going anywhere anytime soon,” Wayne said, writing down logistical information, as well as copying some of the text in his tablet.

After gathering as much data as needed, they turned to walk away from the cave. The moment they made the first step, a terrible earthquake struck, rattling the rainforest with fierce intensity. The strength of the earthquake caused several towering canopy trees to topple over, barring Alice and Wayne’s way. From a clear blue sky, powerful lightning bolts

flashed from the heavens as heavy rains began to fall. Wayne and Alice were shocked at the unusual weather pattern and sudden earthquake. They instinctively fled inside the mouth of the cave for shelter and safety from the storm and the unexpected chain of events.

“This is incredible! The earthquake and storm struck up out of nowhere... What the hell is going on out here?” Wayne questioned, holding Alice close for safety as they huddled near the door of the cave. The deep rumbling of the ground abated, but the storm continued to rage on.

In the distant pitch black darkness of the cave, Alice and Wayne heard a distinct child’s voice saying, “Don’t be afraid... Come with me... You’ll be safe in here if you follow me.”

From the shadows of the cave, a young *Yanomamo* boy emerged, with shiny jet black hair, large black eyes and deeply-tanned skin, wearing only animal skin to cover his genitals. He stood smiling with a cherubic face, saying in English, “Come with me... You’ll be safe if you follow me—Come—Hurry.”

Before Wayne could respond, the barefoot boy turned and fled into the darkness of the cave.

“Hey there— little boy—Stop—we won’t harm you!” Wayne shouted running after the boy. Alice ran only steps behind Wayne. Bright flashes of lightning from the storm outside, was the only light feeding into the dark cave. Each lightning flash lit up their images as they ran further into the cave. Although they increased their running speed, the child remained a few steps in front of them. The boy suddenly turned one corner and vanished in the darkness. Wayne was shocked at how quick the boy had vanished only mere inches away from him. He strained his eyes in the darkness, waving his hand about in an attempt to locate the boy, but he was gone.

“Hey boy—I know you’re hiding in here somewhere... We’ll see if you can hide from the light of these,” Wayne said, reaching into his pocket, pulling out several flares. He popped the flares, tossing them about in a semicircle. The bright red light emitting from the flares lit up the cave.

“Oh—my—God!” Alice shrieked; grabbing her digital camera to take pictures once her eyes fell upon a being, approximately eight feet tall, sitting upon an intricately carved throne-like pedestal. The pungent odor of the creature filled their nostrils as they cautiously approached. The creature’s skin was thick in appearance, ash gray. Its eyes were large and black as

those of an owl. His head was large at the top, slightly elongated in the back. He had a small hole where his nose belonged. His mouth was small; well defined. His neck was long and much slender than that of a human. His body appeared quite muscular, although he sat lifeless, stiff, still.



His hands; clutching the armrest of his throne, were longer and broader than those of a normal man. Partially covered in thick spider webs and thin vines; the being sat high and poised like a great king ruling over thousands of subjects. Surrounding him were treasures from many ancient lands and kingdoms from around the globe. In the center of its chest, a shrewdly-crafted spear was lodged as if it was tossed at him with great force, bringing him down to his mortal end.

“Remarkable... I wonder—what on earth is this thing?” Alice asked, snapping her last photo. She then gazed upon the deceased being sitting before her, analyzing every conceivable detail.

“Are you asking me what it is? I’m trying to figure that question out as well... Whatever this being is or was, it’s certainly not from this planet. Look at its anatomy structure... I’ve never seen a human being that resembles this creature... It looks like an ancient, alien-like nephilim of some kind,” Wayne interjected, drawing closer to the creature to get a better look. As he drew closer to the being; the flares suddenly dimmed, then went completely out, sending the chamber into sheer darkness. A cold breeze raced past the two archeologists. The hairs on the back of Wayne and Alice’s neck stood up on end as their hearts raced. The sound of something heavy walking about in the pitch darkness, and deep whispering voices, filled their ears. Fear gripped their innermost being as the cave became arctic cold.

“Oh—my—God—what on earth is happening?” Alice questioned in a panicky voice.

“Alice, listen to me... don’t be afraid... Follow the sound of my voice and give me your hand,” Wayne said, reaching out to grab Alice’s hand. When their hands met, a light blue flame appeared before them. Seconds later, the flame changed into that of a towering luminous being with radiant yellow eyes. Its ghostly appearance lit up the cave, filling every nook and crevice with light. Wayne and Alice were stunned at what they were

seeing. They instinctively backed away from the glowing being.

“Who are you?” Wayne questioned, holding Alice in his firm embrace.

The spiritual entity glanced over at the towering being sitting on the throne, pointing at the kingly image as it said in a deep, disembodied voice, “He and I; are one.”

With their fear growing, Wayne and Alice backed further away from the being.

“I am the *Lord of the Amazon*, spirit of the ancient star traveler who was killed in this starship many years ago by those who once inhabited this rainforest,” the entity said.

Only then did Alice and Wayne realize that the large cave-like structure that they were standing in, although aligned with thousands of tangled vines, thick spider webs and a thin layer of black sand; was actually the inner chamber of a great starship. Wayne glanced down at the piles of golden goblets, swords, daggers, crowns, rubies and diamonds.

“The treasure... How did you gain control of so much earthly treasure from around the world if what you say is true?” Wayne asked.

“Born with the natural ability to fly like your birds, I soared around your world while unseen, taking whatever I wanted. These treasures are meager souvenirs I took from battling many great kings and their greatest warriors. I’ve bravely fought them all in the darkness of the night... The Egyptians, the Greeks, the Vikings, and many others... I’d planned to take the treasure back to my home planet and cherish them as trophies of war. Thousands of your mightiest kind; have died by my skillful hands... So it is quite ironic that after all of my victorious battles against the strongest of earth, a local native village boy tosses a single spear right through my heart, bringing me down to my mortal end upon this wretched planet, to spiritually roam these chambers,” said the alien ghost.

“We mean you no harm... What can we do to help you?” Alice asked with a frightened look on her face.

“Hundreds of years ago in this jungle, I made a blood pact with the dark spirits of your world, vowing that if they allow me to live forever that I will bring them endless souls. The blood pact was honored, and many lives were sacrificed to them. Much blood has spilled within this chamber, within my glorious starship... I have been given the spiritual powers over the skies and the grounds of the rainforest

in this area in order to lure your kind here for centuries, to satisfy my blood pact. You ask what I need of you... Your souls are what I need of you in order to sacrifice to the dark spirits of earth, the ones I know only as the *fallen ones*... Only then, can I continue to live on in the Amazon rainforest,” the alien spirit said, laughing aloud as its light began to suddenly dim.

Darkness once again, took hold of the chamber. Deep whispering voices and scratching sounds were heard echoing throughout the chamber. Only the sporadic lightning flashes from the terrible storm outside the cave, was seen down one of the distant hallways. Wayne knew that this was their only way out of the starship.

Alice suddenly unleashed a blood-curdling scream in the pitch darkness.

“Alice—Come towards my voice and take my hand—follow me—run!” Wayne shouted, grabbing Alice’s hand, pulling her towards the flashes of lightning down the hallway, the only exit out of the haunted starship. With each stride, they ran, guided only by the constant flashes of lightning up ahead. Every so often, they’d feel something growling near them and clawing at their legs as they swiftly ran.



When they approached the mouth of the cave, it began to close. With one great leap, Wayne and Alice jumped through the opening of the cave before it slammed shut. Landing on the rain-soaked forest, they staggered to their feet and fled further through the jungle, many yards away from the mysterious cave. Trees toppled down all around them, missing them by mere inches. Spider monkeys shrieked aloud while scurrying off through the trees of the rainforest for safety.

“Whatever that thing is, it’s powerful and deadly... Hurry Alice—Run!” Wayne shouted, pulling Alice onward. They ran until they reached a safe distance away from the darkened area of the jungle.

“Hold it—my legs are throbbing with pain... I can’t run any further... Let me rest here for just a moment,” Alice demanded, gasping to breathe.

“Okay... Okay... We can rest here only for a minute or so,” Wayne said, also gasping for air as he leaned against a nearby tree.

“No one will ever believe us when we tell them what happened,” Alice said, breathing laboriously.

“Why shouldn’t they believe us? I have the solid evidence right here,” Wayne said, pulling a golden Egyptian dagger from his pocket.

A look of shock formed upon Alice’s face once she saw the dagger.

“Regardless of your possession of the dagger, I’m telling you, no one will ever believe you,” Alice said, gazing upon the priceless artifact.

“Why not... This Egyptian dagger was no doubt held by Pharaoh, Tutankhamen himself... Now it’s all mine... This is clear evidence that there’s a secret treasure trove of wealth hidden away in the bowels of the Amazon rainforest, and we, my dear, have the exact location. All we need to do is to make sure we bring a good excavation team, several highly armed men, and several priests from the Vatican to join us when we return. There’s no telling what other dark forces are operating inside that cave that caused the strange weather and calamity on the ground. I don’t think just one ghostly entity causes so much natural catastrophe,” Wayne said, handing the dazzling dagger to Alice to review.

“I hear what you’re saying but I’m telling you that they’ll never believe you,” Alice said in a whisper, looking at the jewels aligning the precious dagger.

“Come on Alice... Cheer up... We’ll be rich soon... Why shouldn’t they believe me when I show them the dagger?” Wayne questioned.

Alice viciously lunged towards Wayne, plunging the dagger in his chest then twisted it twice. Blood gushed from Wayne’s gaping chest wound like a broken faucet.

Alice then changed into the ghostly apparition, *Lord of the Amazon*.

With a look of shock and dismay upon his face, Wayne’s body lost its strength. His legs weakened and buckled as he dropped to his knees, then to the floor of the jungle upon his face in death. Dark spirits came up through the damp ground, surrounding Wayne’s corpse, dragging it off into the shadows of the jungle. The dark forces; the *fallen ones*, were well pleased with their latest sacrifice.

Lifting the golden, bloody dagger up high towards the thunderous clouds, the ancient *Lord of the Amazon* laughed aloud as he vanished. Only the rumbling sounds of distant thunder above and the animals’ constant mating calls remained.





## Demons

By Edward White/CP Bialois

“Man, don’t you lay that crap on me. It’s not my fault we’re in this hell hole.” Despite the sound of his voice, Jonesy’s smile told those around him he was joking with them. It was his way of coping with the desert heat and with being stuck there for a third tour. Considered the platoon’s resident clown, he was often given greater latitude for his antics so long as they were done in the safe confines of HQ or an outpost while off duty.

It was because of their placement in a burned out building during their downtime that Sergeant Mike Anthony let his friend and Corporal have his moment.

“I never said it was, but you have to admit its gotta be someone’s. Why do we get this detail after RnR?” Jacob Linely sat off to the side and did everything he could to antagonize Jones into expounding on his antics.

Mike and the others chuckled at the exchange. “Give it up Jonesy, he’s got you dead to rights.” The look Jones gave Mike brought out another laugh.

“That’s right, yuck it up while you can. You guys know I’m right. I didn’t do anything too overboard. How was I to know she was a general’s daughter?”

The group burst into laughter at Jones’ innocent routine. Their assignment was routine and they simply had the luck of drawing a patrol mission with the rest of their unit and needed to blame it on someone. Jones happened to prefer his Hawkeye routine from M\*A\*S\*H to blow off steam.

Times like those, when the six of them could sit around, were what made their time in the desert tolerable to their Sergeant. The small group formed a bond he never wanted to see broken and would do everything in his power to protect.

“I guess you want this now?” Jones held up a canteen before handing it over to Mike. “Wouldn’t want you to drop

from thirst on my account. Don’t need *that* blamed on me too.” Jones’ smile was spread from ear to ear.

Mike took the offered canteen and swallowed a mouthful of the warm water. Despite the water’s room temperature, the water was far more refreshing than the alternative. After his second mouthful, Mike passed it back to his friend, “Thanks Jonesy, that hit the spot.”

Ezekiel Jones, was one of the few men Mike had learned to trust with his life. While the number remained small, they were a close knit group and rarely did anything without the others. Having them around helped Mike feel invincible, like he could take on the entire world and win. He assumed that was why he never wanted to forget them, so he’d always have a place he could retreat to from time to time.

Mike sat and watched Jones pass the canteen to the others. It was a ritual they began shortly after being placed into the same squad. At times like those, he forgot about his home in the states. Those men, his fellow soldiers, were the brothers he never had and his true family, nothing could change that.

A gentle shaking on Mike’s left shoulder broke his attention away from the laughter of his friends. Confused, he turned his head to the left and right looking for the source of the motion.

Mike heard a gentle, soothing voice in his ear. “Sergeant. Sergeant, it’s time for your medication.”

*Medication?* Mike’s head began to hurt and his vision turned cloudy but his friends didn’t seem to notice when he reached out to them for help. When he reached out a second time, something took hold of his hands. The contact sent relief surging through him despite how sick he felt.

“Jonesy... something’s not right...”

“It’s okay, Sergeant. Everything’s going to be alright.” Mike recognized the voice as the same one he heard a moment earlier and he wanted to pull away, but that time he allowed the hands to control him. “That’s right, relax. No one’s going to hurt you.”

*Hurt?* The word seared itself into his brain and brought images of explosions and people being struck by shrapnel and debris. He recognized Jonesy’s face lying next to him, covered in blood and forever frozen with a surprised expression on it. Mike reached out towards his friend as an explosion next to him turned his vision white then black after the pain struck.

The images passed and Mike opened his eyes, locking his gaze on the

slow moving ceiling fan above the hospital bed. The memories of that day faded as the pain of his loss began to settle in. He could hear, more than feel, the nurse beside him as she readied his regular dose of pills. The pills were designed to help him deal with the pain of his injuries, but they did far more than that. They helped him forget the reality waiting for him back in the States.

Mike continued to lie in a semi catatonic state as the nurse put the paper cup with the pills in his right hand. He knew what to do with them, he’d done the same routine a hundred times since the rocket propelled grenade round hit. The pills weren’t going to do him any harm, Mike couldn’t stop staring at them. To him, they were a portal into salvation. Without a second’s further hesitation, he flipped them into his mouth and swallowed. All that remained for the cup of water was the bitter aftertaste, but it didn’t bother him anymore.

His task for the day complete for the next twelve hours, Mike sat back and rested his head on his pillow. How long had he been in the military hospital? His normally sharp mind was being blunted by the medication, but he could accept that. So long as it took him as far from where he found himself, he didn’t care. The usual tingling sensation he’d grown accustomed to over his stay at the hospital began in his stomach and slowly spread, followed by the numbing sensation of the pain reliever.

Mike closed his eyes and settled back in anticipation of seeing his friends once again. As another fabric of fog lowered over the reality he fled, Mike was certain someone said something about going home. *Home. Yes, going home would be nice.* The thought about being home warmed him as he took the offered canteen from Jones once again.



The nurse remained by his bed for a few seconds more to check on his vitals and the intravenous tubes running into his left arm. The skin of his arm was marked by a half dozen stitched shrapnel wounds covered with an antibacterial cream and bandages. In many ways, he should be able to stand and walk to the plane and fly home, but the patient complained about agonizing pain when he was fully conscious. At first, the medical staff thought it was due to his injuries but in time they understood he wanted a release, an escape from a world where his friends and squad mates were dead. He was addicted

to Oxycodone and their facility lacked the proper facilities and personnel to help him.

With her work done for the moment, the nurse strode towards the nurses station inside the doorway into the ward. To either side of her, cots lined the walls. Some had an occupant while most were empty, their clean white sheets serving as a beacon to the next recovering soldier. She knew her job was the easy one. Barring an unforeseen calamity, only the soldiers with light wounds were sent there.

Growing up, Gloria Stevenson wanted little more than to help her fellow man. Being part of a military family helped her choose her course when it came to medicine but what she hadn't counted on was developing an aversion to blood. For that reason, she was assigned the position she currently held. Little more than an orderly, Gloria busied herself checking bandages and IV's all the while refusing to lose control over some of the minor injuries she now faced.

Minor injuries. She stifled a chuckle at the words remembering back to the young man that changed her outlook forever. It was in her first week in the hospital when the soldier was brought in, badly wounded but stable. The field medics did a remarkable job in keeping him together until he reached the hospital and everything seemed to be an ordinary day. Then the surgery began.

At first, Gloria didn't know what bothered her more, the fact the young man looked to only be sixteen or the fact the doctor was putting his hands into the young man's abdomen. While it was no different than any of the surgeries she was previously apart of, the man's internal organs seemed to be spitting blood at them. The scene was eerily similar in that her mind went to a documentary she watched while in high school about volcanoes and how they built the Earth. The ensuing release of blood in the form of geyser caused Gloria to fall backwards and scramble across the floor screaming. Seeing the young man explode like a volcano terrified her beyond all reason.



After being taken out of the operating room, she learned one of the young man's veins opened when the doctor pulled a tiny piece of shrapnel from it. The small squirt of blood ended her career as a operating room nurse. She only kept her commission after her father pulled a few

strings with his friends.

Picking up her pen, she began to make notes in her hourly journal for the other nurses when she stopped and looked at the Sergeant in the throes of his addiction. On more than one occasion Gloria found herself envious of him, not pitying him like the rest of her peers. While the other nurses had no issue with blood or the injuries they sometimes were forced to handle, they didn't share the same apathy with the men like she did.

More times than she could count, Gloria wished to escape her fears but she could never do it through a means like the young man. No, her father would never allow it to happen if he ever found out. He was already angry enough with her over her disgrace. Sighing, she finished her notes before sitting back in her chair to contemplate her day and career. If only things could be as easy for her as they were for others.



**Frisky**  
**By Jamie White**

Frisky was completely confused and a bit nervous. She hadn't really been in a car before except for maybe once years ago and she barely remembered that experience. She couldn't understand why her master was putting her in this thing. Was she going to be left somewhere? Would they be going to a place with strange animals and people there? The possibilities ran through the older cat's mind as the bumpy ride dragged on. After what seemed like ages, the car came to a stop and there was peace. Now what?

Frisky was picked up and carried out of the car into the cool, outside air. The breeze rustled her fur, sending a chill through her slight frame. She looked around, eyes wide as she took in the unfamiliar surroundings. Actually, there was a slight familiarity to the place, but she couldn't figure out what. All she knew was,

she didn't know this house and tensed a little as she was carried into the front door and petted gently.

"Welcome to your new home," her master said.

*New home?* The cat was confused. She had no idea what, exactly, those words meant. All she knew was, they obviously meant some sort of change was taking place in her life and she didn't like it one bit! She tensed more, digging her claws into her master's shoulder as she was walked around the place. She really didn't like what she saw; everything was so big and different compared to what she was used to. How would she be able to get comfortable in a place like this? Her old home was comfortable, cozy.

She never had to go too far to find anything; this place was a maze! Who knew what other animals could be hiding in here and she was not liking the idea of maybe having to share her food and attention with others.

As her owner carried her through the place, she'd talk gently, showing here where the litter box and her food bowls were. The cat mewed in protest; this was all wrong! Her food belonged on the floor of the other place, not on some table top in the kitchen. And that bathroom with the litter box was way too out of the way. She couldn't understand why people liked to mess with a good thing.

After several more minutes of this, Frisky was set down on the floor to explore on her own while her owner walked away talking about something called "unpacking". She watched as the woman disappeared behind a doorway, half tempted to follow so she could see a familiar face. Before she could, however, the door was closed and Frisky realized she'd have to find something else to do.

Craving something comfortable and cozy amidst the chaos that had suddenly become her world, the feline began walking around to find a nice quiet place to hide. Perhaps she'd be able to stay hidden long enough to teach her mean master a lesson about shaking up a poor pet's world. Summoning all her courage, the cat began to walk through the large, confusing house by herself, maneuvering around boxes and other furniture that was all in the wrong place. How could people do this to themselves? It was a mess!

After much searching and consideration, Frisky came upon the perfect spot. There was a little opening behind what her human called a refrigerator. It was dark, quiet and warm; somewhere the person would never be able to find her in. Slinking into her new

space, the cat settled in for a nap to recover from the day's trauma. "Frisky! Come here, girl; time for supper!"

The cat stirred at the sudden noise, stretching her limbs. She could swear she heard the familiar "S" word, but there was no way the cat was going to come out right now. She was still miffed about being uprooted from her small, cozy house and there was still a lesson to be taught. As the human continued to call for her, the tone sounded more and more worried. Frisky didn't care, she just wanted to stay in her spot and rest some more. Hours later and Frisky still refused to climb out of her hiding spot. She napped off and on throughout the day, purposefully ignoring her owner's calls. At long last, the voice ceased and the lights went out. Frisky waited a while longer before emerging from her hiding spot. Careful to stay hidden until she was sure there was no one there, she crept to where her food bowl sat, leaping onto the table.

Pleased to see the bowl was filled with her favorite kibble, the cat munched hungrily, starving from her day of hiding. She then drank some water and made use of the litter box before going back to the hiding place. Another day or so of this would be sufficient to make her point. She settled in, asleep before her head even touched the ground. All night long, she dreamed of her old home, remembering in vivid detail all her favorite spots and all the fun playtimes she'd had there. The next morning, she awoke to the sound of the fridge door opening and other sounds that meant her owner was up and fixing breakfast. Frisky thought she heard the woman saying something about the food bowl and litter box. When she called Frisky's name this time, her voice was much less anxious sounding. Hmm... maybe this wouldn't be as good of a lesson as she had hoped. She listened as the woman cleaned up after herself and called out goodbye to her. Obviously her person was about to leave for the day to go to that thing humans call "work". Frisky waited until she heard the sound of the door closing before emerging from the hiding place for the day. She knew she had a lot of time to explore before her master returned and she decided to make the most of it.

To Frisky's delight, the house looked much more orderly than it had the day before. Quite a few of the boxes she'd had to navigate around the night before were gone and the furniture looked like it had been moved into better positions in the house. Walking into the bedroom, Frisky was pleased to see the room was almost

exactly as it had been at the old house. Not a single box could be seen and the bed was neatly made. Some of the decorations she remembered being on the walls were still missing, but otherwise she was happy with things.

The feline left the bedroom, stretching in the doorway before casually strolling towards another room. Sadly, the door was closed so she couldn't see what it looked like. She briefly wondered if that was where some of the boxes had gone. As she continued her exploration of the house, she saw that the only other room with an open door was the bathroom. That looked a lot like the bedroom, everything in a proper place and her litter box was freshly cleaned. Frisky decided to make use of it before playing with her scratching post for a while, which was conveniently sitting right by the couch as in the old place.



After she tired of the scratching post, Frisky decided to go into the bedroom and nap on the bed for a short time before going back into hiding. She loved the bedspread her owner used. It was very soft; Frisky sunk right into it, blissfully falling into a luxurious sleep that was all too quickly interrupted by a loud noise from outside. Now, that the cat recognized. Her master was home. Frisky didn't waste time stretching this time. Instead she leaped to the floor and raced to the kitchen, her claws digging into the carpeting as she ran. Frisky just managed to slip behind the large appliance before the door opened.

"I'm home, girl. Come say hello." Frisky listened as the sound of keys hitting a table rang through the air. She was not about to give in just yet. Frisky was coming to enjoy this new house, but she didn't want her master to know that yet. What if she decided to move them again? No, the cat was going to have to stick to her guns and keep hidden just a little longer to be sure her point got across. Let your people get away with one thing and they will try to get many more unpleasant things past you.

"Alright, girl. Come out when you're ready to." She heard the woman walk into the kitchen and open the fridge. Frisky could picture her pulling one of those cans of stuff she always drank out and her suspicions were confirmed when the familiar click and hissing sounds reached her sensitive ears. If Frisky wasn't mistaken, she'd be walking over to the couch now and sitting down to read before starting dinner. Maybe she'd watch a little

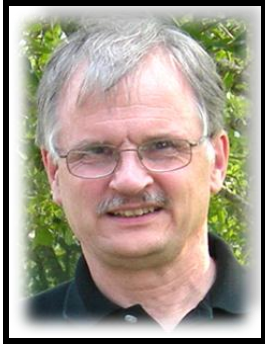
TV as well.

Sure enough, the sounds of other voices soon filled the air. It sounded like that thing her master called "the news". She watched that every day and it was kind of nice for lulling the cat to sleep. Unlike many of the other shows her human watched, this one didn't change in volume too much and there were no loud explosions or sounds of yelling during it. About now, Frisky would be curling up in the woman's lap to get some petting while her master flipped pages in her book. For a second, the cat was tempted to come out, but, once again, she reminded herself of the lesson being taught and settled in for another nap.

Another dinner time, another stealth meal while the lights were out. Frisky had perfected moving quickly and was back in the hiding place within minutes to settle in for the rest of the night. Perhaps she'd come out of hiding tomorrow before her master got home. She figured the woman had been punished long enough. Besides, Frisky was beginning to miss being petted and wouldn't mind snuggling in a warm bed again. "Hello, girl! I'm back!"

Once again, the familiar voice woke Frisky from a snooze. This time, however, that snooze had taken place on the bed. Actually, the pillows to be exact. She listened as her owner set down the keys and got something to drink. Frisky didn't make a move to greet her, though. Let the woman be surprised when she came in for her shower. That would be a nice way to end the cat's protest. The feline waited patiently as the sounds of the television drifted in from the other room. If she wasn't mistaken, it wouldn't be long now. Imagine the greeting she'd get after two days of hiding!

Finally, after what seemed like ages, the television turned off and Frisky heard the sound of footsteps approaching the bedroom. "Well, hello there, girl! Now, where on earth have you been hiding yourself?" Her voice sounded pleased and Frisky stood, approaching the woman. Her owner reached down and scratched Frisky's head, causing the cat to purr in delight. She followed that up with rubbing her ear and running her hands down Frisky's back. The cat purred louder, pushing her head into the woman's hand. Yes, the lesson had definitely gotten through loud and clear.



**Pundit**  
**By Rick Weber**

I have never been at a loss for words or ideas but I think that day has come. I am sitting in my office which used to be a mother-in-law apartment over our garage with my blank, yes blank, sketch pad in hand. My life as an editorial cartoonist has been good to me. The walls in my office are covered with some of my best works, which earned me accolades and recognition. Today, however, I cannot come up with anything to draw about, a unique situation for me, because it never happened before and I have a deadline to meet. What am I to do?

I hear the door open at the bottom of the stairs and a voice calls out, "Brian, Brian..." It's my wife, Ann.

"I'm up here."

The door closes, followed by the sound of her coming up into my domain.

"Yes?" I ask in a long drawn out tone.

"I'm on my way to work but I need to do some errands today," Ann says with a slight panting in her voice.

"Can't they wait until tomorrow? I got to get my cartoon in today for the Sunday edition."

She just glares. "What have you been doing up here for the past week?" and really lays into me. "These things have to be done today. I've been tied up at the office. Otherwise, I would have done them myself. Your suit has to go to the dry cleaner today if you want it back in time for the awards dinner next week. The mortgage has to be paid at the bank if we don't want to incur a late fee. You also have to have to mail some other bills for the same reason. We don't have any stamps which means you have to go to the post office. Last, your prescription ran out and you have to get it refilled at the pharmacy."

I am now speechless and bow begrudgingly to her demands. "Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it. I have to get a move on before I get stuck in traffic. Don't hold

dinner. I'm going to be late." Without further comment, she turns and bounds down the stairs and into the garage. I hear her car back out and the door close.

"GREAT!" I shout out loud. "Now, I have multiple deadlines to meet before the sun sets."

I look at the clock above my drafting table. It's just after eight. I best get moving, too, if I want to accomplish anything today.

My first stop is the dry cleaner. They are already open.

"Good morning, Mr. Volk. Just dropping off?" I hear the owner greet me.

"Just dropping off today, Adil," I respond. "How's everything going?"

"To be honest, not very well," the Indian proprietor informs me. "Things have been slow. I think, maybe, because it is summer. I hope things pick up after Labor Day."

Ann and I have patronized his shop for years and have gotten to know him and his wife, Bhakti. They run this place by themselves with no employees. They raised three sons, who are now all grown with lives of their own.

"Once vacations are over, kids are back in school, and parents are back to work, I'm sure then business will pick up," I say to lift his spirits.

Adil just smiles and tells me, "I hope so. Bhakti and I are here twelve hours a day, sometimes more, to get what work we have done. We'd like to retire someday but, I don't see that anytime soon."

I can only nod and bid him some parting words before I am off to my next stop.

I pull up to our town's post office to see the postmaster, Jim, raising the American flag on the pole out front.



"Brian, you're the first customer of the day," he greets me as we go inside. Behind the counter, he logs on to his machine and asks, "What do you have today?"

I go through the pile of letters Ann left me and say just these as I pass them to Jim, "Just these."

"Anything perishable, fragile, next day, or need delivery confirmations?" he asks me in quick Postal Service script.

"No, first class should be good on all these letters but, I do need a book of stamps," I respond and ask. "Are expecting a quiet day?"

Jim just looks up as he cancels the letters I brought in and says to me, "They

don't call these the dog days for nothing, hot and slow, and I don't foresee our business picking up anytime soon. The internet has got us beat. People send emails instead of letters, shop for clothes, and even pay their bills on line. I do the same things myself. Our main bosses in DC want us to stay open later during the week but are also closing some branches. I hope they keep this one open."

"I hope so, too," I tell him but, I cannot say much more because several other customers have lined up behind me with a number of packages to mail. "It looks like you have job security here," as I turn to leave after Jim handed me my receipt and stamp book.

I get to the bank and am lucky again not to have people waiting in the teller line ahead of me. I hear a voice call out to me, "Can I help you?"

I step up to the window to see a new girl working there. She's young in her early twenties. Her name tag has "Lois" on it.

"I just want to pay this," I say as I hand her our check and the monthly mortgage bill.

"I'll be glad to handle this for you," Lois tells me with a genuine smile on her face.

As she processes my payment, I ask her, "Will it show as being paid today? I don't want it to be late."

"You're good, Mr. Volk," she reassures me. "It's already in the system as 'paid'. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, Lois, you've been very helpful. You have a good Labor Day weekend."

"I have to work on Saturday so a long weekend is out for me even though we're closed on Monday but, I am not complaining. I'm just glad to have a job," she says still smiling. "I graduated college in May. This was the only position I could find. Most of my friends from school are still looking for work."

"Well, at least enjoy the holiday," I say returning a smile as I head out the door.

"I will," I hear Lois say from over my shoulder.

My last stop is the pharmacy to get my blood pressure medication refilled. "Who would think that a cartoonist would have hypertension?" I have asked myself many times.

A couple of elderly people are in front of me as I wait for Ira, the pharmacist, whose family started the business long before Ann and I moved into town.

When my turn comes, I hear Ira say, "Brian, what brings you in today?"

"I just need to get this refilled," I reply handing him my empty prescription vial.

"No problem. I can have this ready for you in ten minutes."

“Good, I’ll just peruse your magazine rack while I wait.”

During the intervening time, I looked through some periodicals but nothing struck my interest. I look around the store and saw only one customer, a teenage girl at the cosmetics counter.

“All set,” I hear Ira shout to me from the back of the drug store.

As I pull some cash out of my wallet to pay him, I remark, “Looks quiet in here today.”

“It’s been that way for a while,” Ira explains. “That big drug chain opened up a place outside of town in July and our business has fallen off a bit. We’re lucky. We still are a compound pharmacy. Most of the big places only handle drugs that are readily available. If a patient needs a special medication, they can’t process the order. When that happens, those patients come to us. We get people coming from all over for special medications. For us, it’s a godsend and it keeps our doors open.”

I tell Ira that I am on a deadline for work and head home.

Back in my office, I am sitting on a stool in front of the drafting table with a number two pencil in my hand. As I think about my cartoon which is due also today, the inspiration hits me. I pull out a sheet of twenty-four pound bright laser paper and begin to sketch.

The drawing takes shape. It will not be one of the outrageous ones which made me popular among my peers. This one will be simple and direct.

At the center of the page, I sketch an easel with a blank canvass on it. Around the border, I make drawings of the things I encountered today. In one corner, I illustrate a hot head dry cleaning press with a man operating it. In another corner, I sketch a mortar and pestle. In the third corner, I have an old fashioned teller cage and, in the fourth corner, I put in a mail box with its red flag raised. In the rest of the border, I put in tools and symbols from various occupations laid out from hammers to stethoscopes, hardhats to toques, moving vans to ambulances.

In the center of the page on the blank canvass sitting on the easel, I finish my drawing with these words to those who work for us:

“THANK YOU!”

My cartoon is finished and through the miracles of modern technology, I send in to my editor in time for its Sunday publication the day before Labor Day.



### The Goldfish By DiVitto Kelly

The annual Saint Joseph Church carnival was winding down. It had been three fun-filled days, but on the last day, Sunday evening, eleven-year-old Thomas Garvey was running out of time. In between an assortment of nausea-inducing rides, devouring typical carnival food – burgers, pizza, fries, funnel cake, and soda, and playing games, it was time for Thomas to win something other than another stuffed animal.

Thomas wanted to win a goldfish, but not just any goldfish. There was one in particular that had eluded both Thomas and all the rambunctious children for three and nine-tenths days. Mixed in between all the traditional looking goldfish, this particular goldfish was the only one that was black, with tinges of silver and red painted around its paper-thin fins. It certainly had the shape of your basic goldfish. All of the softball-sized fish bowls appeared to be the same size; ten rows of ten, and all neatly lined up, propped up a foot off the ground with the use of beat up red, plastic milk crates and a square sheet of plywood resting on top.

Yet for some reason, no one had won the mysterious looking goldfish. Maybe the mouth of the fish bowl in question was narrower than all the others. Maybe all those children were just plain unlucky – or maybe they were lucky.

The carnival man working the goldfish toss booth was grubby, had missing front teeth, and wore his green Mack Truck baseball cap backwards, his hair sprouted out in all directions like oily hay. His blue jeans and olive-green colored t-shirt had an assortment of stains, mostly grease from maintaining the hodgepodge collection of carnival rides.

“You want that fish pretty bad, don’t ya kid,” asked the carnival man (or carnie for short), flashing the open gap between his front teeth. “You ain’t the only one wanting to win it; I’ve made quite a killing these last couple of days,” holding a wad of dollar bills. He pointed his unkempt face at the boy, with bad breath that would make your eyes water.

Thomas stared at the fish; the visor of his Cincinnati Reds cap tilted down

to block his face. He didn’t want to make eye contact with the man.

“You gonna try one more time son?” the man asked, knowing that Thomas had been there a few times before already. We’re closing up in thirty minutes kid so you better make it quick.”

Thomas studied the fish intently. He paused, and then reached into his back pocket for his navy blue wallet sporting images of sharks, a gift from his cousins from Sea World two years ago. He pulled it apart. The tearing sound of Velcro made the carnie man cringe.

“God I hate that Velcro sound!”

“Sorry sir,” said Thomas, thinking it was rather odd that a man working on noisy machinery and listening to bad carnival rock music all day and night would mind the slight tearing sound of Velcro.

“How much you got, son?” the man asked impatiently, watching the boy dig for change. “Come on kid, I got a line of people here.”

Thomas turned around but didn’t see anybody. He pushed the bill of his cap upward, “It looks like I’m it sir.”

“I guess so kid,” he answered with a smirk. The man was itching to leave.

“And if you want my last dollar sir, you shouldn’t be so pushy,” Thomas added. The man gave Thomas a glaring look, not appreciating his smart-aleck remark.

“Okay, okay kid, sorry. It’s just that we’re ready to close and I could really use a cold beer.” And a shower, Thomas thought to himself. The boy pulled out a crisp, folded up dollar bill tightly hidden in a small crevice of his prized wallet.

“Alright kid, tell you what. You know you get three throws for a buck, but since you’re my last customer, I’ll give you six.” The man thought he was being extremely generous, considering how much annoyance he had endured these last three days.



At least the weather hadn’t been so bad, he thought, but tonight was looking like a different story. The man’s occupation, with its long hours, cramped living conditions, and constant traveling, was demanding, but the pay was better than decent, and most of it ‘under the table.’

“I’ll only need three this time,” replied the confident boy, blocking out the ten dollars he’d already spent the past two-plus days. “I’m gonna win it this time sir.” A rumble of thunder reverberated over the

carnival grounds; a light drizzle of rain began falling.

“Better hurry up kid, it’s now or never,” he said, looking up at the menacing charcoal gray sky. Shots of lightning etched out over the clouds like flowing lava.

Thomas blocked it all out, instead focusing on the black goldfish barely moving in its bowl; it seemed to be watching him. The boy licked his lips and stretched out his arm, trying to get as close as possible to the target. He clutched the yellow ping-pong ball in his right hand and tossed it underhand, but it clanked off the back part of the bowl, rising high before falling off to the side and onto the ground.

“One down, two to go young man,” he said, smiling. A bolt of lightning pierced the sky; thunder followed. Thomas aimed again, this time taking a deep breath and squinting a little. The second throw clinked off the front of the bowl, coming up way short. Thomas slumped his narrow shoulders. “Rats.”

“You choked on that one kid,” said the carnie man. “Stay focused, one more time; you can do it.” Thomas turned around thinking the carnie was starting to sound like his little league baseball coach.

“Thomas, where are you?” called out his mother, holding her seven-year-old daughter’s hand and an ice cream cone in the other, her purse sliding down her arm in annoyance. She was exhausted.

“Just one more chance mom; I’m gonna win that cool-looking fish.

“We’ve got to go now,” she exclaimed, struggling with her always-effervescent daughter, Fiona. “In fact I have to go now!”

You said I could have a pet, right?” asked Thomas, more determined than ever. The mother of two was worn out, having spent three straight days at the carnival, a big fundraiser for the Church and Catholic school, where Mrs. Kelly was also the art teacher.



“Thomas, I’ve spent thirty hours with you and your sister here, not to mention volunteering at your grade’s game booth. It’s time to go!” Mrs. Kelly was certain her husband planned his business trip this weekend on purpose.

“Just one more throw mom; I’ll get it this time!” replied her son.

“While we’re young kid!” said the carnie, sneering, already packing up his gear. The man handed Thomas the last ball. The boy took off his baseball cap,

handing it to his sister, who put it on. He stretched out his arms, blew on his right hand and took aim.

“Alright fishy, this is it,” said Thomas, glaring at the target. The fish remained still, looking at the boy. It winked and gave a minute smile. The boy straightened up, surprised. He paused for a moment. Did he really just see a fish smile? That would be weird he thought, and creepy. He began to second-guess himself, wondering if he should even try to win the fish now.

The fish pressed its nose against the round bowl, looking at the boy. “That’s so cute mommy,” said Fiona, tugging on her coat sleeve. “The fishy is smiling at me!”

“Fish don’t smile, Fiona,” said her mom quickly, wanting to leave ASAP.

“Oh this one does ma’am; it’s quite special,” the carnie man said emphatically.

“Fish smiling? Please,” she said.

“I said this one does,” he replied, flashing his bold, toothless gap.

“You need to win this fish, boy,” the carnie said, emphasizing the word, you.

Thomas tossed the ball just as a bolt of lightning struck a nearby oak tree, causing one of the large limbs to fall, sparks shooting everywhere. The ping-pong ball hovered briefly, and then descended. It bounced straight up off the back edge of the glass bowl. The ball came down hitting the front end, flying up a few inches before dropping into the targeted bowl. A winner!

“I got it mommy, I won the fish!” screamed Thomas.

“Hurray for Thomas,” screeched Fiona. “Now we have a pet!”

“You mean I have a pet,” answered Thomas, proudly.

“Yippee to all of you,” said the carnie, prying open his blue and white cooler and popping open a Miller beer. “Salud kiddo, as they say in Spanish. And here you go little girl, a fish for you too.” The carnie man handed the girl a small goldfish in a bag and placed it in a fishbowl, about the size of a softball-sized piggy bank. Fiona said thank you to the carnie man.

The carnie man poured the black goldfish, the largest one there, into a large bag and handed it to Thomas. The boy held it up; the fish looking directly at him. The carnie man was bent over, collecting empty fishbowls and placing them in a big box.

“This goldfish looks like it has teeth,” said Thomas, surprised.

“What kid?” he asked, hearing only part of what the boy was asking. He dropped one of the glass bowls, breaking it then knocked his beer to the ground. “Oh for the freaking! Sorry folks, but that was my last cold beer.” He picked it up and drank the rest, savoring every ounce before belching.

“We feel your pain,” said Mrs. Kelly, eagerly wanting to leave. “Thank you again for the extra goldfish.”

“No problem,” said the carnie man. “Son, let me know if that fish gives you a hard time, alrighty?” looking the boy straight in the eyes with a chuckle. “It’s very unique.”

Thomas stood still, nodding, “Uh . . . okay.”

The rain was coming down harder as the family left the carnival. The winds were blowing harder and more lightning painted the pitch-black sky.



“Hurry up kids,” yelled mommy. She fumbled for her keys and pressed the button for the sliding door to open on their minivan. Everyone settled in; the fish kept looking at Thomas no matter how he turned the clear, water-filled bag. Fiona was spinning her bag around. “Mommy, do fish get sea sick?” Her mom rested her on the steering wheel for a moment.

It was nearing ten at night; the kids had already changed into pajamas and brushed their teeth.

“Bedtime guys,” said mommy, getting into bed and finding a copy of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone on her pillow. Thomas had been bugging her mom for weeks to read it.

Thomas placed the fishbowl on his dresser, next to his bunk bed. An occasional lightning strike would spotlight the fish, now staring upward at the young boy. Thomas, resting on his side, looked down at the fish, watching it. He took out a mini flashlight he had stashed under his pillow when he wanted to read late at night and shone it on the fish. It looking like it was smiling again. Thomas had a weird feeling about his new pet.

It was near midnight; everyone was asleep. Thomas had left the flashlight on, pointing it at the fishbowl, the gentle beam of light beginning to fade. The fish fluttered its fins and moved to the center of the fish bowl. The fish blinked its circular eyes, which then turned completely black; tiny triangular teeth sprouted up on the upper and lower jaws. The water level in

the bowl started to rise, spilling over the edge. The fish started to swim around in circles, faster and faster.

An hour later, the bedroom floor was covered in water, nearly a foot and filling up fast. The bedroom door was now shut tight, not a drop leaking out. The storm was going nowhere, rain coming down in sheets and lightning illuminating the blackened sky like lines on a map. Bellowing thunder followed.

It was nearing two in the morning; the water now covered the lower bunk bed completely. A gentle splash almost woke up Thomas, who turned to the other side of his bed facing the wall. A stuffed animal shark fell, barely making a ripple in the water. It rested on the surface momentarily when something pulled it under. An hour later, the water was halfway up the ladder leading to the second level bunk bed.

A crack of thunder made the young boy lift his head, turning towards the window. Before sinking back into his down pillow, Thomas noticed the fishbowl almost at eye level, floating. "What the . . .?"

Thomas jumped to his knees on his bed, terrified. He searched for the flashlight now under his blanket. He picked it up, shining the weak beam of light around his water-filled room. He heard movement coming from the front part of his bed facing the door. He picked up his pillow, using it as a shield, and peered just over the top. To his right in the water, Thomas noticed his favorite shark stuffed animal floating on the surface, shredded in half. He continued to inch closer to the front of the bed, still unable to see anything . . . living.

Closer to the edge Thomas moved. He reached back and tossed a stuffed animal seal into the water, wondering what would happen. Silence. The water kicked up and the stuffed animal's head appeared in front of him at the end of the bed. It kept inching up towards Thomas. He shined the flashlight at the seal when a grotesque head followed; the stuffed animal in its mouth. Thomas tried to scream but he was terrified with fright. He grabbed his stuffed animal and then swung the pillow, hitting the horrific-looking fish, sending it back into the water.

Thomas jumped back to the other end of his bed, trying to make out where the fish was. He aimed the flashlight in every direction. There, at the other end of his bedroom, Thomas spotted the dorsal fin protruding from the water. The right pectoral fin, tattered green with black spots, lifted from the water, unveiling a grease-stained hat, the words Mack Truck standing out in bold red letters. The bulbous head

poked out of the water; the fish grinning at the boy. The front two teeth were missing.

"You shoulda picked another fish boy!" the voice lashed out, laughing like a mad man. "It's dinnertime baby!" Thomas recoiled in horror.

"I hate kids, boy, especially ones that where red baseball caps, haaaaaaaaa." The fish torpedoed towards Thomas's bed. The boy leaned against the wall pulling up the mattress for protection. The hideous fish was five feet long, dark green and covered in grease marks. It barreled out of the water, smacking into the mattress with its dirty gray teeth. "It's dinnertime baby!" Thomas pushed back, the snapping jaws lunging closer.

"Mom!" Thomas screamed out weakly, his eyes frantically searching his room for protection.

"You're toast boy, and I like mine topped with humans!" Thomas noticed his baseball bat floating in the water. He lunged for the thirty-inch Louisville slugger, grasping it in his wet hands.

"Alright Mr. Carnie fish, come and get me!" roared Thomas, one of the best hitters on his little league team. The fish pounced again, only to be met with the wielding bat.

"Oh for the freaking . . .!" screamed the carnie fish. "You little punk; now you're dead meat!"



Thomas noticed the water was spilling over his top mattress. Preparing for another attack, he looked over to the window and had an idea. If he could get rid of the water, the fish would be helpless, and would earn a much-deserved pounding. Thomas turned to the lone window in his room. He pulled up the blind, and started smashing away, the top windows first then as the water receded, the lower ones. Water poured out like a crumbling dam.

The fish attacked again, this time having to jump up a bit to reach the boy. Thomas was ready, christening the ugly fish's head with a powerful whack.

"You son of a rat; I'll kill you!" yelled the carnie fish, shaking its now aching head. Thomas broke more windows, the water gushed out profusely.

"What's going on in there Thomas?" asked his mom, awakened by the sound of breaking glass, "I can't open the door!"

"Everything's under control mom," said Thomas, raising his tween-age voice.

He climbed down the ladder to pummel the carnie fish. The water receded quickly, now only a couple of feet deep in his room.

"You snot-nosed rat," the hideous fish bellowed, reaching its repulsive head above the water and snapping at Thomas violently, determined to gobble up the boy. "The carnie fish always triumphs! Thomas rolled his eyes and smacked the fish again.

The rest of the water started retracting into the glass fishbowl, swallowing it up. Soon, only a damp rug on the floor remained. The fish flopped around helplessly.

Thomas raised the bat again but noticed the fish was shrinking, small and smaller. "What the heck?"

"This ain't over kid," screeched the carnie fish, flailing away with its fins on the floor, most of the water now gone, its voice sounded higher and higher as if he'd swallowed helium. Thomas scooped the fish up with his baseball glove and dumped it into the bowl. The angry fish cursed under water, a slew of bubbles reaching the surface.

"Are you alright Thomas?" his mom screamed, pounding on the door. She barreled in, finally able to open the door. She noticed her son standing in the middle of his room, holding the fish bowl and baseball bat.

"What's going on here Thomas?" mom asked, soon realizing she was standing barefoot on the soaked rug. "What happened in here?"

"It's a weird story mom," said Thomas, clutching the fish bowl. He walked out and headed for the bathroom.

"Are you feeling okay?" his mom asked, calling down the hallway. "What are you doing with your fish?"

"I just need to use the bathroom real quick." her son replied with a grin. "You may want to check on Fiona."



**(Poetry Corner)**

**Vampire Stream  
By Emiliano Moreno**

I had a dream near a moonlit ravine  
Where looking down I spied a body of  
Water known as *Vampire Stream*

There she danced beneath the  
moonbeams  
Skin as white as alabaster, hair as dark as  
pitch  
There were others like her, but these  
remained  
Unseen, only she was visible like an  
enticing dream

Scarlet lips, teeth white as marble and  
sharp as  
Needles, eyes glowing under the starlight  
like  
Bright red coals, her short, white nightgown  
Waving unceasingly in the gentle night  
wind,  
Creating a dozen folds and in my arms,  
*her*,  
I wish I could hold

And she moved under the moonlight in a  
way  
That called to me, yet I had to resist  
temptation,  
Stop all elation, for no boy should ever go  
near the waters  
Of *Vampire Stream*

So, I shunned dark and wicked beauty,  
Turned my back to her livid form and  
Thought only of duty, yet writhing with  
terrible  
Desire, I through my own strength of mind,  
Put out that fire and left her below while in  
Nightly phantasms, as time went on, with  
*her*  
I climbed higher and higher, such as the  
flames  
Of a funeral pyre

Nay, never did I return to the waters of  
*Vampire Stream*, where the babbling of  
water  
Is akin to sweet feminine laughter which  
lingers  
Ever after, whispering to me, echoing  
within the  
Deepest recesses of my mind, a sound so  
undauntedly  
Divine, that in the dark of the eventide I  
fear I shall lose my mind, but I resist the  
urge to return to  
That place, yet am forever haunted by her  
face

**Untitled**

**By Julie Doussou**

Why fight with yourself knowing this is what  
you wanted

You accepted it for all this time

So what's the problem

It taught you me patience, faith, the  
strength to hold on to something needed

It gave hope where it wasn't even expected  
but wait,

Then you realized something, that its not  
what you wanted

Sometimes wanting something can cause  
pain that the want is destroyed into hate

So really you just sit back and watch  
everything as if it played

But he taught you something right...hpmh



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