

# The Portal

**A cool collection of short stories and poems.**

*\*We've added new writers!*



**The Spring**  
By DiVitto Kelly

There is a natural warm spring in Florida that has very special healing qualities. It's a popular spot for those with achy bodies and limbs. Elderly people, mostly of eastern European descent, venture there religiously. Few Americans go there . . . ever.

The spring, located just south of Sarasota, lies in the sleepy town of North Port. The surroundings are rustic; there are no manicured landscapes or picturesque walkways. The spring has been around for hundreds of years, maybe longer. It may in fact be the "real" fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon relentlessly searched for.

The spring was set up as a recreational spa in the 1940's, adding a gift shop, restrooms, showers, massage areas, and a simple restaurant a few years later. Not much has changed since. In fact, not many of the patrons have changed since. The story goes that swimming in the mineral-rich waters rejuvenates the body, actually slowing down the aging process.

So who am I? Well, I cannot divulge my real name out of fear so I'll just use . . . Oscar Madison. I teach elementary school math, but on the

side, I'm a freelance writer. My family and I were on an extended summer road trip through Florida, something we wanted to do for a long time. We left our home state of Georgia in mid-June; our goal was to spend a month crisscrossing the Sunshine State, checking out the hidden gems and off-the-beaten path oddities. We were determined to expose our children to the other side of Florida; not the Disney World/adventure park stuff. The children actually looked forward to experiencing the natural beauty and wonders of Florida, as long as at some point we ended up at the house that Mickey Mouse built. My wife 'Blanche' and I promised that our last stop would indeed be Disney World. Cased closed.

The first part of our trip went as planned: visiting pristine beaches, a winery up in Clermont (no samples for the kids), the Devil's Millhopper in Gainesville, sponges in Tarpon Springs. Throw in a little sunburn, mosquito bites, stop-offs at Cracker Barrel, and iffy motels, and you had the makings of a memorable trip. But things were about to get weird.

We were exhausted, having spent the last six days traveling, snorkeling, sightseeing, and eating lots of Key Lime pie along the Florida Keys. Instead of taking the always perilous Highway 95 back up the east coast, we opt to travel across Alligator Alley, making a quick stop off at the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum in Big Cypress, home of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. After lunch, we resumed our travels onto state road 75 heading north. Blanche browsed the Florida AAA Tour Book from front to back before spotting an interesting place called Warm Mineral Springs, supposedly the original fountain of youth.

"I could use that right about now," I said. The last snorkeling trip gave me a heaping case of sunburn and strained lower back.

It was lunchtime. We decided to veer off 75 at the town of North Port and visit the spring. After a brief thirty minute drive down a winding two-lane road, we arrived at our destination. The

outside building was rather unassuming. Its' unkempt exterior, painted in pastel hues, sported a faded mural featuring marine animals, including a pair of grinning manatees. The place looked like it hadn't changed in sixty years, garnering a feeling of old-time Florida.

The main one-story building was surrounded by various types of palm trees, Australian pines (which are invasive and currently being removed by the state), and just the right amount of native Florida plants, lots of 'em. We strolled towards the entrance, absorbing the tranquil presence; you couldn't avoid it. It was certainly a change of pace from the multitude of t-shirt shops and bars we saw in the Keys. The parking lot was already three-quarters full.

I stepped up to the cashier and paid the entrance fee. Thankfully, we got the AAA discount. In these struggling times, every bit helps. According to the brochure, the spring officially opened to the public in the 1944. The gift shop was simple; the way things probably looked pre-Disney. There were kitschy Florida trinkets, pens, hats, goggles, beach towels, and salt-water taffy for sale. We bought a refrigerator magnet and one special bottle of "straight from the source" spring water.

The children were enamored with the place right off the bat, but quietly reminded me about Disney, and the Contemporary Hotel; that's the one where the monorail runs through it. I remember staying there as a kid; that's something you don't forget. Of course there are other hotels (and motels) that remain forever etched in my mind. Take the Sarasota Quality Inn Blanche and I stayed in before we had children. I'll never forget that because there was a cockroach the size of a Hostess Twinkie in the bathroom. Or the flea infested Palm Bay Inn. I think it was more dog friendly than people friendly.

There was a long-covered walkway, carpeted in Astroturf that led to the spring. On both sides were herbal gardens with the fresh scent of

rosemary and thyme in the warm, humid air. Our children, ages ten and eight, started running ahead, anticipating this curious body of water. At the end of the walkway, the children stopped with a look of astonishment. We caught up to them and inhaled the panoramic view of the spring, which was almost perfectly symmetrical. It was surrounded by acres and acres of Florida green. There were scattered palm trees near the waters' edge, a handful of towering oaks, and a large congregation of Australian pines that offered patrons ample shade. Lavender colored plastic reclining chairs lined the spring, most occupied already.

My kids noticed something immediately. "Where are the children?" Basking in the water were old people, and I mean lots of old people, wading around in a circle in chest-deep water. In the center, the water was black as ink.

The kids looked up to us and inquired about the dark spot in the middle. In the early morning before the water gets mucked up by swimmers, aerial views reveal a perfect black circle directly in the middle like an eclipsed sun, intriguing yet eerie.

I started reading the brochure back to front. "It says here kids the spring is 150 feet deep in the middle, they've actually found prehistoric bones down there."

"Wow," said our son, impressed. "Can we snorkel there?"

"I don't see why not, people are swimming there, and it's not like some sea creature is going to emerge from the depths below and swallow you whole."

"That's scary, Dad," said our daughter, who eyed the shallow end designated for children. The kids, armed with nets and buckets, ran down to the designated area and jumped in where they discovered scattered minnows.

We followed behind at a leisurely pace but were taken aback by the low frequency buzzing of Eastern European dialect. "Are they speaking Russian?" I

asked, still dealing with water in the ear from snorkeling in the Keys.

"It's definitely Russian, with a bit of Romanian thrown in I think," said Blanche.

Sweating like I'd played tennis in an attic for an hour, I walked up to the restaurant to buy some drinks, soon returning with a couple of ice cold Gatorades. The woman at the counter said almost all the people who come to the spring are Russian, including some other Eastern European countries. She added that not many Americans come here. "Going to springs is Europe thing," she boasts in a confident voice. "Americans prefer pools."

We set up shop under a cluster of Australian pines then waded into the 87 degree water, quickly adapting to the mineral-rich spring, although the slight odor of sulfur was a tad unappealing. It stated in the pamphlet that the water has dozens of therapeutic qualities. Now that I'm thoroughly entrenched in my forties, I'm beginning to like this fountain of youth idea. After an hour of swimming, I tell Blanche I'm going to use the restroom.

As I walk up the slight incline of grass, I accidentally bumped into a silver-haired gentleman, very old with a full, peppery mustache, hairy back, and black rimmed glasses. He could have passed for Einstein's older brother. Agitated, he grabbed my shoulder and said something in Russian. His cold stare unnerved me.

After a quick lunch, mom and the kids returned to the spring. I sat in the recliner, jotting down a few notes, more like observations of the spring. I always bring a notepad just in case. The spring closed at five pm so we made our way to the car and planned our next destination. The kids liked the spring so much they begged us to stay the night. Our search for a motel was short lived. We found a local motel right down the street appropriately named the Springs Motel. It had a vintage look – the large neon motel sign screamed 1950's. The huge rectangular pool, complete with a slide, was an immediate hit with the children. After washing up, we stopped

by an old style burger joint and dined on hamburgers, fries and milk shakes. The shakes tasted great, but my stomach started gurgling up a storm. Oh what the heck, we're on extended vacation I thought. Pass the Tums, please.

After we returned to the motel, the kids changed into their swim suits and head to the pool for an evening swim. I brought out my laptop and decided to do a little research.

Surprisingly, there was scant information about the spring. Most of the info related only to the discovery of mammoth bones and other prehistoric remnants in the early 1990's. There were diagrams highlighting the numerous chambers on each side, resembling rib bones. Because the water pressure is so tremendous, nothing lives in the deeper water of the spring. In the shallows where the kids were swimming, there were small fish and even a couple of turtles. There use to be a pair of four-foot tarpons but they disappeared years ago I'm told. The water in the spring changes daily with millions of gallons of fresh water emerging from aquifers. There's also a small creek where the water runs off into the Gulf of Mexico.

The next morning after breakfast, I dropped off the wife and kids at the spring and then headed to the library for a research fix. At first, I asked the librarian a few general questions, but as I inquired more, the librarian became hesitant. I assured him I was not a reporter, just a curious tourist. I was beginning to like the idea of doing a story about all these senior citizens believing this strange body of water could actually be the fountain of youth.

The librarian pulled me aside, making sure no one was watching. He said there were stories about how some of the regulars there at the spring may be 140 years old – maybe older. Granted, most of the people there were old, but not that old. No way.

"You'll think I'm crazy, but there are stories of a serpent like creature at the bottom of that spring," said the librarian,

late fifties, balding with wire-rimmed glasses. I nodded in disbelief.

“We joked as kids, calling it the fountain of death. The story goes that an old person must be sacrificed to keep it happy – in turn, you get to live longer.”

“So when this mysterious creature gets its fill of elderly humans, things are peachy keen and these people get to live as old as tortoises?” I mused. The man offered up a weak grin.

The librarian said of course the story was full-fledged loony tunes, “But the truth is, strange things have been occurring here for a long, long time.” The librarian grinned, but turned serious. “You don’t tell anyone I said anything to you, you hear me.” It was the first time I’d ever been intimidated by a librarian.

He was upset with himself, like he had said way too much. He shrugged off his own threat and set up the microfiche machine for me. “We go as far back as 1947, but I’d focus on the 1970’s; that was a particularly strange decade.”

“You’re telling me,” I replied, “Disco, Carter, it was a mess.”

As I scrolled through the multiple containers of film, I came upon story after story of people who went missing; completely vanished, all were older folks too. I came across an April 1974 edition. I noticed on the front page a photo of a particular man, probably in his late 60’s, who’d caught a record sized tarpon. Where did I see this person - short, graying hair, with a bushy mustache and a thick pair of black rimmed glasses? It was the guy I bumped into yesterday at the spring. I printed out a copy and asked the librarian about him. He raised his brow, saying the man sometimes stops by the library to read the New York Times and flirt with the bingo ladies.

After dinner, I tried to relax in the hotel room, reading, but my mind kept wandering. “What are you thinking?” asked Blanche.

I must admit I don’t have a great poker face. “There’s something very peculiar going on at that spring,” I said.

“The person I bumped into today at the spring looks just like the same person in this photo, dated nearly forty years ago, and he still looks the same.”

“Maybe he got plastic surgery,” she answered, half seriously.

“When you’re as hairy as Sasquatch, you don’t worry about looking young,” I said. “You want to know another weird thing? A large number of elderly people have gone missing. I don’t mean a few, I mean dozens and dozens of people have gone missing for decades. There was an investigative reporter from the Tampa Tribune who did a story about this oddity twenty-five years ago. I don’t know if he’s still alive, but I wouldn’t mind talking to him.”

After everyone fell asleep, I ventured outside and borrowed a bike from the motel – one of those big beach models with a wide-body seat, the metal frame painted in tropical colors. The front wheel squeaked, a little suspect, but I managed to wobble down the mile stretch of road until I saw the spring entrance. The sounds of wildlife permeated throughout the humid evening. I peddled over to the back of the property, placing the bike near a heavily rusted old farm truck then cut through the palmetto scrub.

I climbed up a pine tree to get a better view, about twelve feet off the ground. An owl perched on a neighboring branch stared directly at me. A circle of tiki torches surrounded the glass-calm water close to the waters’ edge. Strange, I thought. Maybe there’s some sort of party going on. But what I saw next was no party. Two elderly gentlemen carried what appeared to be a sedated woman, very old, nearing the century mark I guessed. They placed her in one of those cheap yellow two-man inflatable boats shaped like a Tylenol.

There was a rope tied to the front of the craft that stretched across the spring. A tall, heavy set man started to pull the boat slowly across the water, stopping as it reached the center of the spring. The sound of crickets stayed constant. At the worn down concrete

steps, two men restrained an elderly man. He was crying out to the woman on the inflatable boat. I assumed it was his wife languishing there in the middle of the spring. I recognized one of the men holding a tiki torch. He had a cold stare in his eyes and a bushy mustache.

“This is strange,” I quietly murmured. By now there were just a few people at the water’s edge. Aside from a brief turn of the boat, it remained almost stationary in the middle of the spring. The woman hung to one side, her arm overhanging, fingers touching the warm water. She tried to right herself, placing every ounce of energy she could muster, but slumped over on her back.

A swell of water from below lifted the boat up like a mammoth fountain. Quickly, the men surrounding the spring doused the flames. The sounds of crickets ceased. A pale yellow glow started to emerge from the water. The light was direct and appeared to zone in on the boat. With a brief thrust of its body, the serpent engulfed the boat in a single swallow. In seconds, all was dark with barely a ripple to be seen. My jaw dropped, speechless. I didn’t move for ten minutes. What exactly did I just see? A few of the men uttered something in Russian, barely audible, and slowly walked away.

I was about to descend when I noticed a gathering of people standing at the base of the tree, each looking rather displeased. The man with the bushy mustache stepped up, carrying his tiki torch. “We need to talk.”

I thought I was dead, and at the hands of a gang of golden oldies no less. “Just looking for my kid’s Frisbee folks -- I best be going now.” Of course that didn’t work. I climbed down the tree sweating like Nixon.

The old man glared at me looking up; his tiki torch nearly singing my hair. “You not see anything here; you understand me young man?”

I surveyed the woods, hoping to make a run for it, but no chance. “Uh, I think I do.” The geriatric mob inched

closer. The only thing missing were pitchforks.

“I repeat to you again. You see and say nothing and we let your family live. Do you now understand?”

I nodded yes, unable to form the words. They handed me the bike, bent like a pretzel and followed me back to the street. “I think you know way back to motel. Kiss your wife and children for me.”

I walked, more like jogged, back to the motel, slid under the covers and remained wide awake until dawn.

That morning, I barely said a word, munching down on cinnamon Pop Tarts with the kids. I jumped in the pool for a quick wake me up, changed, and drove off with the family to Orlando, destination Disney. Mum’s the word.



**Stiletto Hell**  
By DiVitto Kelly

Harold Jackson dashed into the bathroom and slammed the door shut, locking it. He trembled as he reached for his cell phone, dialing the number before dropping it on the tile floor; luckily it didn’t break.

“Come, come on,” he screamed. “Answer the phone! Hello?”

“Chatham Police, how may I help you?” said the female voice, firm and cool.

“I’m getting attacked by a pair of stiletto heels!”

“I’m sorry. Did you say stiletto heels, sir? Is someone trying to harm you with a pair of shoes?”

Whack, whack, whack; each time louder. The heels punctured straight through the measly wood door like a sword, fragments splintering off in every direction. Harold’s eyes grew big as cue balls in horror.

“They’re coming though, you gotta help me” yelled the distraught man, cowering in fear, now crouching in the bathtub.

“An intruder is breaking in, sir?” the voice asked, trying to make sense of the situation.

“No ma’am. It’s a pair of killer stilettos, blood red in color. The heels must be six inches long! They’re trying to murder me!”

“Is this a prank?” asked the woman, noting the date as October 30, also known as Mischief Night, a pre-Halloween ritual where children and teens toilet paper neighbor’s trees, egg houses, an occasionally bash in mailboxes.

“No, I swear,” stammered Harold, sweating bullets despite the chill in the three story, hundred year old house. He stood up, but slipped on the half used bar of Irish Spring soap, skiing right out of the tub and landing flat on his back. The phone went flying, a three pointer straight into the toilet. Splash.

Harold reached down and dried it off quickly with a hand towel. “Son of a bitch!”

“I’m sorry, what did you say to me?” bellowed a gargled voice.

“I didn’t mean you. Look, I . . .” The officer became rather irked, her patience spilling over with annoyance; it wasn’t the first prank phone call she received tonight. The woman hung up on the hapless man and went back to her game of computer solitaire.

“Aaaah, howled Harold, hanging up the phone and stuffing it in his back jean pocket. He turned towards the door; the four holes creating a perfect ‘connect the dot’ square. The man picked up the foot-long wooden scrub brush and inched ahead. Harold approached the door, bracing his left foot at the bottom.

“Where are you, you abomination to women’s footwear,” said Harold as he

leaned in, closer and closer to the hole. He squinted his right eye, trying to focus better. There on the floor, like a predator stalking its hapless prey.

“Hold on, I see one of you, but where’s the other?”

Slam. The other gleaming red stiletto heel torpedoed through the lower part of the door, piercing Harold’s left thigh. The lethal weapon penetrated his flesh, cutting into his leg.

Harold wailed in pain as he backed away, blood squirting out of his impaled leg. “You bastard!” He fell to the floor on his rump, holding the wound tight as blood seeped through his fingertips. He pulled a hand towel from the gold hoop holder and pressed hard to stop the flow.

He dragged himself over to the cabinet below the sink and scurried for bandages. “Where the hell are they?” He scooped everything inside with his arm and littered the bathroom floor with the contents.

“Toys, soap, flashlight, and uh jeeze, what’s that horrible smell? Out rolled a decaying hard boiled Easter egg, at one time sporting a golden hue, now rotten to the yoke.

“Ha, and everybody kept blaming me for the stink!” His wife and two children were visiting her parents in nearby Denville, enjoying an evening of pizza and soda.

Harold pulled down his pants to examine the damage. “Oh, for Christ’s sake! I’m gonna turn you into sandals!”

He doused the wound with hydrogen peroxide then grabbed a handful of cotton balls. A roll of duct tape lay next to the stinky egg. “Perfect.”

After dressing the wound, Harold pulled up his jeans and limped over to the sink. He opened the mirrored cabinet door and snatched the bottle of Tylenol. “Let’s see, the proper dosage for . . . what the hell am I saying? He quickly popped four in his mouth and chased it down with water in his cupped hands.

“Alright shoes; your sole is mine.” Harold let out a crazed laugh with just the right hint of evilness.

The size six and a half pair of shoes was a gag gift from one of his wife's school teaching friends. Mrs. Kathleen Jackson was the school media specialist at the K-8 Saint Anthony Catholic School. Miss Kathy, still bitten by the preppy look of the 1980's, never wore high heels, maybe an inch at the most, and that was daring. For a playful joke, Miss Andrea, the always effervescent and uniquely dressed art teacher decided to spice things up in Kathy's mundane 'podiatry' lifestyle.

On a Saturday afternoon trip to the Village in New York City, Miss Andrea spotted a wicked pair of deep ruby red stiletto shoes on a folding table of Madam Celeste's Sidewalk Emporium. The disheveled woman, long black hair dressed in a paisley tapestry dress, smiled a gold toothy grin. Andrea couldn't resist, plopping down a crisp twenty.

A week later at Kathy's surprise birthday party, the unadventurous woman opened the silver-wrapped box and was bowled over. "Now this is me," she laughed. After schnorts of various boozes, Kathy was finally sloshed enough to try them on.

She slipped off her favorite pair of bubblegum pink Van's sneakers and prepared to step into the unknown of skyscraper footwear. After some trial and error, her legs wobbling a bit, Kathy stood proudly like a stilt walker, now towering over her husband by two inches, maybe three.

Already conscious about his below average height, Harold barely made five foot seven, the father of two smiled, but felt embarrassed. One of the reasons, actually, the main reason he liked his wife's taste in shoes so much was he was always taller.

But now, how could this mild mannered professional keep up against a pair of hot red, six-inch stilettos? Would his wife of ten years change? There were strip clubs a couple of towns away.

What if Kathy came home one day and decided teaching to a bunch of snot nosed elementary school children was just a tad tedious and boring. What

if she fancied slipping on those stripper heels? He could already hear her saying, "Harold honey, from now on I'm gonna flaunt my flesh for serious Do, Re-Mi!"

No, no, and no. Mister Harold Jackson was going to put a stop to it, which brings us back to the current situation.

Harold staggered to the door once again, this time with a bit more awareness. He leaned in again and took in a deep breath. There on the floor stood the right shoe, tapping incessantly on the light parquet wood floor. He scratched the door with the scrub brush, provoking the devil shoe to attack. And right on target, the metallic red spear from the left shoe shot through almost completely, only this time Harold clutched the hostile heel, smothering it with a towel. He wrestled with it, the raging shoe nearly pulling his arms out of their collective sockets, desperately flying in every direction like a captured hawk.

Harold stuck to his guns, finally dragging the shoes down into the toilet. He stuffed the bundled up towel inside, slammed the lid down and ran rings of duct tape around the bowl. And for good measure, he flushed the toilet. The shoe banged against the porcelain object violently then simmered down. Was it dead? Harold pondered. Hold on, how the hell can a shoe be alive in the first place?

With the left shoe secured, it was on to the right. He peered out one of the holes left by the heel, but didn't see a thing. It was gone. Suddenly, the lights cut out. He fumbled for the flashlight on the floor. Harold flicked it on, thankful it worked.

The house was dead quiet; his wife and kids wouldn't home for another hour of two. He opened the door as gently as possible. The old hinges squeaked no matter how much Harold showered them with WD-40. He walked over to the bannister near the top of the steps, his thigh throbbing in pain now. A faint sound seemed to come from the kitchen. Harold turned off the flashlight and tiptoed down each step like a cat

burglar. At the halfway point, he paused, his eyes becoming more accustomed to the darkness. The fireplace flickered with short, dark orange flames, the last remaining log starving for more wood.

So far: nothing. He managed to make it into the basement unnoticed where he went to check on the fuse box, but it was smashed to bits like someone who'd taken a hammer and whacked away at it repeatedly.

"Crapola," Harold uttered. He turned on the flashlight searching for a way to defeat the shoe. Generally speaking, scrub brushes don't make intimidating weapons he thought, offering up a minuscule smile.

"Ah ha! Cast net! Harold ventured into the garage and searched for his fishing equipment. There, stuffed in a five-gallon orange bucket was a circular, six-foot in diameter nylon cast net with inch long weights lined along the ends. He grabbed a hand saw and beat up hockey stick then headed back upstairs.

"All right you shoe of shit, time to meet your maker." Harold walked over to the fireplace and dropped a couple of split logs and newspaper onto the dying fire. It perked up almost immediately, providing much better lighting. He backed into a nearby corner and opened the net like an inviting spider web. The hockey stick rested to the side of the fireplace. The only sound was Harold's beating heart and the crackling of dried wood turning into flames. Hold on.

At the top of the stairs, a pronounced tap of a heel echoed throughout the old house. Harold's heartbeat kicked into overdrive. Tap. Tap. Tap. The sound was methodically paced like it knew what it was doing, coming down the stairs for the climax, slowly. Through the railing Harold could see the light of the flames reflecting off the metallic red shoe. It would be either Harold or Satan's stilettos left standing.

"Oh no," he said as . . . both shoes appeared at the bottom of the stairs. They stood side by side, glaring directly at Harold. They inched closer, taking

short, measured steps. He prepped the cast net in his hands and teeth, which still had the effervescent taste of ocean, a couple of pieces of dried out seaweed still clinging to it.

The foes stared at each other, or as much as shoes could stare. It was the O.K. Coral, Twilight Zone style.

The shoes shot from the floor like harpoons, the pointed heels zooming straight at Harold's head. He dropped the net in fright, but it still managed to tangle the deadly heels up in knots. Harold raised the hockey stick and started clubbing the shoes into submission. One scurried away but the other limped around, helplessly. Harold dropped to his knees and whipped out the hand saw and cut the heel right off.

"What the hell?" Blood started pouring out at the base of the removed heel. He clutched the rest of the shoe, but could feel it pulsating like a heart. He dropped it in disgust but picked it up again, tossing it in the fire. The shoe let out a high-pitched squeal like a boiling lobster.

Before Harold could even catch his breath, he recognized a familiar grinding sound coming from the kitchen. He stood up, grasping the hockey stick in his right hand and stumbled over to the remodeled kitchen, full of stainless steel appliances, hanging pans, and a painted tile backsplash.

"No way," he said, almost mouthing the words in disbelief. The stiletto was sharpening its lethal heel, the tip almost glowing hot. Harold plucked the hanging black metal skillet and held it firmly. The malicious stiletto stopped and turned towards the man.

It shot off the countertop, but Harold blocked it cleanly with the heavy duty cooking utensil, knocking the shoe unconscious. He whacked it again and again repeatedly so much so he broke the Spanish floor tiles underneath. He picked up the throbbing red shoe with a pair of tongs and raced over to the fireplace, plopping it right on top of the highest flame.

The shoe squirmed as it roasted on the glowing wood. A strange bloodshot

cloud emerged from the dying shoe before evaporating. Harold stumbled over to the recliner chair and plopped his weary body down. He grimaced in pain as he reached around to call the doctor. "God I hate stilettos."

On a crisp early November afternoon, the phone rang at the Jackson house. Harold had just walked in with a new bathroom door, propping it up in the hallway. He picked up the phone.

"Oh, hi Andrea. No, she's not here – I think she went to the store with the kids. Sure. Tell her you bought a pair of shoes from the same place? Made of shark skin? That could be dangerous."

On the other end, Andrea was laughing. "You have such a dry sense of humor Harold, no wonder you and Kathy are in love." He could hear her snapping away on her bubble gum. "You're such a kidder."

"I'll have her call you when she gets back," answered Harold, his wound still smarting a bit.

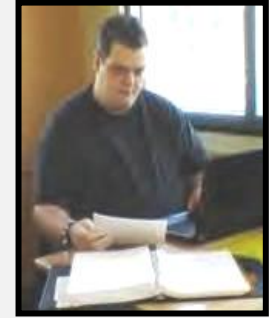
"Thanks. Uh, hold on for a second, I hear something. No way. What the hell? The sound of screams permeated through the phone as the shoes zeroes in, attacking the colorful art teacher.

"Who's kidding?" Harold hung up the phone then made a quick call. "Hello police? I need you to go to 1975 Ormont Drive; there's been a shoe attack."



"For that you get the heel, the toe, the whole damn pair."

Buster Brown



**Moonlight Eclipse**  
**By Edward White/CP Bialois**  
<http://cpbialois.wordpress.com/>

The soft grass felt good under his feet, each time he wiggled his toes the blades of grass tickled the soft inner portion of his ties. He let out a deep breath, nothing tasted or felt as good as good old mother earth. He wasn't sure why but he felt that he'd been away for a long time and that this time nothing could make him leave it. He quickly shook his head to clear out any of those thoughts, he was home and he intended to stay. He closed his eyes and raised his face towards the sun. How warm and pleasant the sun felt on his skin as it's warmth penetrated through him until it filled his heart and soul. This was the way to live, there could be no doubt about it. In the distance he heard thunder but he didn't pay it any attention as it was miles away and this was his special day. It was his first day back from... where? Strange he couldn't remember where he had returned from. Why was that?

"Doctor Jones." A strange voice filled the air. Something about it was oddly familiar.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, no one else was near him. It had to be his imagination, why would anyone be here except him? They were gone... weren't they?

"Doctor Jones. It is 0700."

*Where the hell was it coming from?* "Who are you? You can't be here." *But why can't they be here?* He asked himself. As sudden as the arrival of that

strange voice the world around him changed, the sun was gone and a cold rain began to fall. He looked around frantically searching for the cause of the change. "No, it's been so long." His voice was weak and sounded more like a whimper than it's usual tone as he watched the world around him faded into a bright white light.

When he opened his eyes they settled on a smooth grayish surface of the bottom of a bunk. Slowly he rubbed his eyes and sat up, his legs touched the cold floor. "Doctor Jones, forgive my intrusion but you are needed in the botanical garden."

That voice, that cold unfeeling voice he heard in his dream. Damn that voice and it's creator. "I'll be right there BOB." He rubbed his eyes once more and looked around him. The plain white and gray walls of his quarters stared back as did the haunting eyes of Miss November from the calendar's welcoming perch on the wall to his left.

"Very well Doctor Jones."

Thomas Jones stood and stretched as he walked to the cabin door. As he approached it BOB signaled him. "Doctor Jones my sensors indicate that you are not dressed. Should you not put on proper attire?"

He looked down at himself, a white t-shirt and a pair of white boxers. Not appropriate dress for any circumstance that he could think of, but then who would mind? "I think this is proper all things considered."

"Very well Doctor Jones." BOB's autonomous voice seemed to echo in the room. In fact it echoed everywhere on the moonbase. Such was the result of having only one in the station's population.

Thomas reached out and pressed a button next to the door and it slid open with a swishing sound. The soft hum of the automated oxygen recyclotron filled the air. Although it was barely above a whisper it had the distinct advantage of being the only sound aside from his footfalls. Long ago he noticed the combination of the two held a type of rhythm and he often found himself humming along with it. It was a far cry

from the sounds of the Rolling Stones or Third Eye Blind but hell he wasn't in the position to argue. With no new music or other entertainment available he had to make due with the few songs that were in BOB's database.

The doors to the botanical garden opened with a push of a button, the sweet smell of the roses and jasmine filled his lungs. He held onto their smell until he thought his lungs would explode. When he let out the breath he couldn't help but smile. This was where he belonged, this was his world and he knew he'd never find happiness anywhere else. He looked around at the plants, everything was as he had left it. "Any change BOB?"

"No Doctor Jones. Subject F and Subject S have shown increased metabolic rates. Unusual but not entirely unexpected."

*Unusual was right*, Thomas thought as he stepped across the path and activated the terminal. The screen flashed as power coursed through it, the black dissolved and was replaced with graphics then a series of numerical equations before stopping on the comparison readouts of the two subjects. He read through the statistical analysis and programmed in the correct change to the automated system. When he was finished he turned around, that was why he had demanded a swivel chair for his laboratory, he liked to swivel. The memory caused him to laugh as he stood and walked over to the specimens. The plants doubled in size in less than a day, that was promising. Now he just had to ensure he could use the same technique in the hydroponics lab.

"BOB, run a spectrum analysis on subject F and S and cross reference with Specimen A, B, C, and D,"

"Yes Doctor Jones." There was a brief pause as the enormous computer brain of BOB followed his instructions and worked through thousands of simulations to justify the results of the test. "Complete, Doctor Jones."

Thomas nodded then hesitated for a moment. He wasn't sure if he really

wanted to know the answer, maybe it would be easier if he didn't bother. His food supply would last another month, two if he rationed it. Then instead of starving to death he'd walk out of an airlock and instantly freeze, quick and painless. Too bad that wasn't his style, he was too cowardly to take his own life no matter how simple it sounded. "Are the findings consistent?"

"Yes Doctor Jones."

"Alright, prepare the hydroponics specimens for integration with the botanical extract serum." He looked at his watch, "Set integration for twenty minutes from... mark."

"Yes Doctor Jones, integration will begin in nineteen minutes fifty-eight seconds...nineteen minutes fifty-seven seconds... nineteen minutes fifty-six seconds..."

"BOB, continue silent countdown."

"Yes, Doctor Jones."

Thomas nodded with a sigh, listening to a countdown was not something he needed to hear not then and not ever. Satisfied that everything was ready and his task for the day was completed Thomas headed for the door. He'd check back in about an hour, and every hour after that as he had for the past ten months but for now he needed recreation.

Under any other circumstances it would've been entertaining, how many times had he dreamed of just goofing off every day, of not having any responsibilities. He was living the dream that so many people had wished for and he would've given it all away just to have one of them again. With that thought in mind he took it upon himself to learn the mechanical skills he needed to maintain the moonbase but in truth it was only to keep busy. The base had been so well constructed that it wouldn't need any maintenance for at least sixty years, and even then BOB would be able to handle anything that needed to be done.

Still, it was a nice distraction at times to have something to do. Casually, he made his way to the command center and sat in the center chair, the "captain's chair" in most sci-fi

shows. "What would you like to play today Doctor Jones?" BOB's voice filled the room with its steady tones.

He sat quietly for a moment, "I don't feel like a game today, how about a movie?" The main window in front of him shimmered as an electron based screen materialized out of it and a selection of movies were listed. Thomas couldn't help but smile, he was in his own utopia. His eyes scrolled down the screen until they settled on one. "Ever seen *Dracula*, BOB?"

"I have no need to watch movies Doctor Jones, however, yes I have viewed it as it is in my database."

"Cheater."

"Which one would you like to see Doctor Jones?"

The name *Dracula* was highlighted, followed by a series of dates and actors appeared in a subcategory. An interesting selection, some of the greatest actors of the twentieth century were in them. "1979 version BOB. It had a wonderful shot of the sun at the end."

"We'll be facing the sun in fourteen hours Doctor Jones."

Thomas shook his head, he missed the warmth of the sun. A pity it had saw fit to destroy the human race, but then he was never one to dwell on the negative side of things. At least not for too long. "I prefer technicolor."

"Yes Doctor Jones." On the screen the movie began in the grainy texture of primitive films but his mind was elsewhere. The command center had been designed to be the center of the moonbase, from there the functions of the base's systems could be controlled. It had been hoped that within the next ten years it would've expanded into a colony. But then the Solar Cataclysm happened, an enormous solar flare engulfed the planet Earth and superheated the atmosphere. The moonbase was spared by its position on the far side of the moon. With Earth and its moon as a shield the station was spared from the worst of the radiation, or so they thought at the time.

NASA had thought it best to have a skeleton crew on the base to test out

it's botanical, hydroponic, and atmospheric capabilities. Ironic thing was that the rest of the crew had suffered radiation poisoning and had died days after the solar cataclysm. Why he had been spared could be attributed more to dumb luck than anything else. Thomas had been in the shielded under carriage of the moonbase tending to the botanical garden. Had they not been a week behind schedule and had a solar greenhouse constructed he would've been among the first to die. "Small favors." He thought then, now he looked at it as more of a curse than a favor.

At least he wasn't alone, technically anyway. He had BOB. The moonbases computer was designed to interact with each of the personnel as one of their own. BOB was a breakthrough in computer programming. Bridging Organisational Battology, in simpler terms BOB was an endless dictionary of useless information and conversation. At the time Thomas had laughed at the name and wondered if the programmer had a degree in full-of-shitness. Now he looked at BOB as his one and only friend.

"The atmospheric conditions have improved Doctor Jones. It appears the radiation levels on earth have dropped to normal."

"A lot of good that'll do us." Thomas remained quiet as the movie continued to play. He had held out hope that someone else had survived but if they had the chances they could communicate with him were astronomical. "Nice choice of words Doc" He mumbled to himself on considering his thoughts. He then turned his attention to the readouts on the main control panel. He was a botanist, but he did understand the basics of those readings. "Any signs of life?"

"Yes. Abundant in the rural areas."

He wasn't surprised, at least not totally. A lot of the animals would've been inside shelter and may in fact been strong enough to avoid any radiation sickness, at least for the

moment. Thomas Jones always wanted to be an astronaut, it had always been his dream to travel through the stars and to see what other worlds awaited them. Now he just wanted to watch the movie. "Save your readings, we'll analyze them later. I have plenty of time."

"Yes Doctor Jones."



**Restless**  
**By Jamie White**

<http://www.jamiebmusings.webs.com>

**Author Note: This is the first part of a continuing story.**

"What the hell possessed me to get a rental?" Jonathon Warner muttered as he scanned the empty house. He scowled as he noticed the damage to some of the walls, and a couple of doors that needed a good sanding and paint job. He made notes of the damage before taking some pictures of the offending areas.

He sighed as he trudged from the living room to the kitchen. He supposed he should be happy there was only a slightly off-hinge cabinet door greeting him. A couple of minutes and his trusty screwdriver would take care of that. He ran his tongue back and forth along his teeth as he turned his attention to the floor. *A little dirty, but it should come up easy enough.*

He went one by one through the rooms, a notepad in hand to record any and everything his prospective future tenants might complain about. A half-dozen times going through the process

had taught him what to be on the lookout for. He rolled his eyes as he remembered the lady who'd come in and immediately declared that the paint in the place was completely unacceptable, and she expected it to be freshened up before she'd move in.

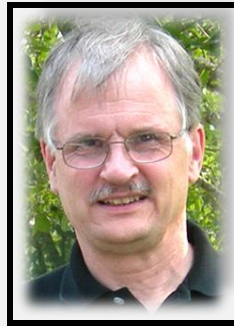
Then there was the couple who'd wanted some new hardware to match their weird antique tastes. Everything had been so fancy, he'd actually been afraid to ever take a seat when he stopped by to collect the rent or discuss repairs. At least they'd left the place in great shape when they took off suddenly.

None of them seemed to stay long, and he couldn't figure out what the problem was. They'd never do more than give him some vague justification for breaking the leases they'd signed. After the first few battles in court, he'd grown weary of the whole process and decided to just cut his losses and let them be on their way—with a hefty deposit when they moved in, of course.

He finished his inspection of the interior and walked into the front yard, wondering if he should just sell the place and be done with it. As he walked towards the car, he caught sight of the several "For Sale" signs in the yards surrounding the rental and thought better of it. It'd probably take him years to unload this place—assuming he ever did. *No, I best hang on to it for now.* Jonathon opened the back door and pulled the all-too-familiar "For Rent" sign out, resting it against the side of the vehicle with care, lest he get a scratch on old Agatha. *Can't let that happen.* He gave the roof of the vehicle a quick pat before turning his attention back to the sign.

Jonathon grabbed the metal base and lifted it up, walking over to the edge of the property and rested the metal legs against the grass. He pulled a hammer out of his tool belt and began pounding one side of the sign into the ground before turning his attention to the other. Once his task was completed, he put the hammer back in place and headed back to the front door to double-check that he'd locked

up before getting in his car and backing out of the driveway. Jonathon shifted the car back into drive and steered the car towards his home. As he put some distance between himself and the house he'd spent part of his day inspecting, a sense of relief that he couldn't explain overwhelmed him. No matter how many times he'd felt it, he could never get over the discomfort he felt there, and the happiness he experienced when leaving the place behind. *These people must be driving me insane.*



**The Lost Letter  
By Rick Weber**

I opened the front door and was hit by the sharp blast of frigid air from the Alberta clipper pummeling our town. I was glad we lived in an older neighborhood, and all I had to do was reach out to grab the mail out of the box outside the door. I quickly shut the door and looked down at what today's delivery brought us, a couple of bills, some junk mail, and a letter addressed to Tricia L. Bateman with no return address. I had no time to ponder its contents. I had to go meet a client and put the mail on a console table inside the front door.

Later as the sun was setting and the wintery gale force winds subsided, I made it home after a very productive meeting. I closed the front door and heard my wife Sheila calling out to me. "Jim, we're having chili for dinner tonight. The kids have a basketball game at school so, we're eating early."

"That's fine," I answered and hung up my coat in the hall closet.

I saw the day's mail was still on the console table. I picked it up and made my way to the kitchen where the aroma of Sheila's secret chili recipe filled the air.

"Smells great," I bellowed and kissed her on the cheek as she stood over the stove.

I sat down at the table and glanced over the mail again asking, "Where are the kids?"

"Upstairs doing homework. I told them they had to get it done if they wanted to go to the game tonight."

I nodded tossing the junk mail into our recycling bin, putting the bills into the basket on the counter reserved for them, leaving me with the letter addressed in block letters to: *Tricia L. Bateman* at our address. We bought the house two years ago, and I thought we were past getting mail for prior residents. This letter was strange. The old owners were named Smith and we never received anything for someone named Bateman. Sheila saw me eyeing the envelope and asked, "What's that?"

"A letter addressed here to a Tricia Bateman. Did we ever get any mail for this person after we closed on the house?"

"Not that I remember. Just return it to the sender."

"We can't; there's no return address on the envelope."

"Let me see," Sheila said taking the letter from my hand. She inspected it commenting, "Jim, this letter is postmarked October 26, 2004. That's a long time ago. I can't make out where it was sent from. That part of the postmark is smeared."

While we talking, our twin fourteen year old sons Rory and Todd bounded into the kitchen both asking, "Is dinner ready yet?" Looking at what their mother had in her hand, Rory asked, "What's that?"

"A mystery letter, did both of you get your homework done?"

"Yes," Todd replied. "What do you mean a mystery letter?"

Sheila handed him the letter as she served dinner, and I told them about it.

Their curiosity was piqued as we talked about the mystery envelope over dinner.

“So if we can’t forward it or return it to the sender, what are we gonna do with it?” Rory asked.

“Good question, since the letter took this long to get here, another day in transit won’t hurt. What do you two guys think we should do?” I countered since I didn’t know what to do myself. Both shrugged.

“This can be a project for the two of you to work on,” Sheila told them.

I dropped them off at school in time for the game and made it home as Sheila was putting the dishes away. Turning to me, she advised, “I dug up the Smith’s phone number for their condo in Florida and called them. They never heard of a Tricia Bateman.”

“I guess you’re right. This will be a nice project for the boys to work on.”

After picking them up after the game, I gave them the latest on their new assignment. It did not surprise me that they were eager to jump into it.

I came home early from work the next day to see Todd and Rory getting off of the school bus. After getting settled, they gathered around the kitchen table. Sheila was still at the office. Looking at the letter in the middle of the table, Todd asked, “What do we do now?”

“Why don’t you tell me what you have in mind? I’m sure you talked about this at school.”

“Since we got no place to send it, I say let’s open it,” Rory offered with Todd nodding in agreement.

I also nodded and passed Rory a letter opener.

With a nervous twitch, he sliced into the edge of the envelope and took out a birthday card. A check for twenty dollars fell out. Todd picked it up and handed it to me. The check was from a Louise Bateman of Denver. I handed it to Rory asking, “What’s next?”

My question caught them off guard. “The card only says ‘Happy Birthday, Mom,’” Rory replied.

They knew it was their undertaking and hashed out a solution, while I went through our voice mail messages.

“This is what we decided,” Todd announced when I hung up the phone. “Since there’s an address on the check, we’re going to mail the card and the check back to Mrs. Bateman in a big envelope with a letter from us explaining how we got it.”

I smiled, “Make sure you have our return address on your envelope.”

About two weeks later, I found a small envelope in our mailbox addressed to Todd and Rory. They opened it at dinner.

Rory read the one short one page note inside.

*Dear Todd and Rory,*

*Thank you for returning the card and the check. They were for my daughter, Tricia, who ran away from home many years ago after we had a big fight. I’ve been looking for her all this time without any luck. I’ve sent letters to any place I thought she may have been. I have no idea how I came up with your address, and I don’t know why it took the Post Office so long to deliver the card. I’m grateful that there are people out there like you who cared to make the effort to return it. This means a lot.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Louise Bateman*

Rory put the letter on the table. Then, without prompting, the four of us joined hands, and said a prayer.

### **Flashpoint By Rick Weber**

“We need better numbers this quarter,” Miles shouted at me. “How do we take care of it?”

I could only stand on the other side of his desk and shake my head. Sales were not my responsibility, but I couldn’t tell Miles that. Neither could anyone else at the company. I heard the outer office come alive with voices, and I was able to hear it all.

“I don’t know how Bill takes it.” I heard Miles’s secretary say through the

open office door to the Head of Accounting, Miles next victim. “You think you have it rough. He has it a hundred times worse.”

To block Miles out, my mind drifted off. It wasn’t always that way. Miles’s father started the company in a small shop across town years ago. The secretary was there from the start. I remembered coming in as a teenager asking about a part time janitorial job and seeing her sitting behind the same old desk she still occupies. Miles’s father, whom everyone called Mr. G, hired me on the spot to work after school, a time when the shop quieted down for the day.

My life was no bed of roses. I took the job to help my mother, a widow. After graduation I went to work full time on the production line. Through a tuition reimbursement program set up by Mr. G I attended college part time. Within six years I got a degree in business administration. Mr. G moved me around the various departments in the business.

He told me that I was a natural fit in every position he put me in. Competitors took notice of this and made me job offers. I turned them down remaining loyal to Mr. G and the company. BAM! I heard Miles slam his fist on the desk, and I was jolted back to reality.

My heart rate raced. Beads of sweat ran down my face. Miles did not appear to notice, nor did he seem to care. He needed me to fix this latest predicament. One of many he ended up in and one he expected to be bailed out of. Until a year ago his father took care of his faux pas. That ended with Mr. G’s untimely death from a heart attack. Without warning, I became a surrogate parent, a collateral duty I did not need.

To my own detriment, I suffered in silence. The abuse from Miles got worse. He brought Jonah a college buddy, who never worked in business, to handle sales. Twenty years out of school and both thought the front office was a frat house. I ended up with all of the responsibility. Employees and

customers came to me even though I had no ownership stake in the company.

“What’s Jonah been doing?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about him. You have to pitch in,” Miles said.

I was the head of production and got orders filled in record time. Now, I also handled human resources, purchasing, customer service, and any other position in need of a scapegoat. Mr. G took me under his wing and taught me the business. On the other hand, Miles only set foot in it after he graduated college with a 2.0 grade point average. Unfortunately for me, Miles was an only child. Though to the other employees, it appeared Mr. G raised two sons.

“My father gave you a break,” Miles continued.

“I could. I could,” I stuttered, which I do under stress.

“Could, could, could, could what?” Miles echoed loud enough for those in the outer office to hear and to comment on.

Last month it was customers complaining about service. The month before, there were charges of sexism against Miles by women who worked on the line. He never accepted responsibility for anything.

I became silent which belied what was going on inside me. I did not have anyone to talk to. My mother passed away a few years back. I never married. My job was my life. Until Mr. G died, it was a very good one to me. That no longer existed. The pressures continued to grow. Humiliation from Miles made it worse.

There I stood across from the man who was driving the company into the ground. Maybe he wanted it that way I thought. He didn’t need the money. His father left him well off. What about the employees? They needed to work.

As Miles ranted, my thoughts became dark. Anger became rage. I started to see red and did not know what to do. Fear gripped me in a way I never experienced. For the first time I contemplated giving Miles what he deserved. I clinched my fists. I

wondered what it would feel like to strangle this monster and to finally have peace. I shook my head, crossed my arms, and took a deep breath.

I uttered my second complete sentence since coming into the office. “I have a solution.” Taking out my cell phone I placed a call.

“Greta, it’s Bill. You drive a hard bargain. When can we follow up...Good, see you then,” and I hung up.

“What’s the deal?” Miles asked sitting up in his chair.

“Simple, I quit.” Turning I walked out of Miles’s office passed a smiling secretary and out the door. This time, Greta made me a job offer I could not refuse.



### Yellow Flowers By Joanne Williams

Maylissa and Glen were moving their last piece of furniture into the house. “Hold it steady. I don’t want the vase to fall and shatter, it’s very special to me. It was my Aunt’s favorite,” said Maylissa to Glen as he nearly tripped over the steps with the vase in his arms.

“Don’t worry,” he replied. If I trip, I’ll catch the vase while I fall and bust my head on the floor.”

Maylissa and Glen had been married for about a year when Maylissa’s Aunt Dally passed away and left the house to Maylissa as an inheritance. It was a single story small brick house with a walkway leading to a screened in porch in the front. The lawn was spacious and trimmed, surrounded

by a red picket fence. On the left side in front of the house was a flower garden. It had white roses, lavender, and yellow daffodils.

Glen put the vase on the wooden table. They went outside and sat on the white vintage rocking chairs on the porch. Maylissa admired the garden.

“Aunt Dally sure loved her garden,” said Maylissa. “She talked about it all the time. When I would come to visit, she would tell me to never pull the flowers out of the garden.”

Glen looked at her and asked, “Why can’t you pull the flowers?”

Maylissa replied, “She would say ‘it’s not the time.’”

Glen looked puzzled. “Not time for what?”

“I don’t know, but I will keep the garden up to par as much as I can. I just won’t pull the flowers.” said Maylissa.

“Yeah, you don’t want to dig up something gross like a body,” added Glen, as they headed back inside to unpack the rest of their furniture.

“It’s sad that Aunt Dally isn’t here anymore,” said Maylissa, as she carefully moved the vase to the center of the wooden dinette table.

“Yeah, too bad she didn’t leave us any money,” chimed Glen.

Maylissa turned to her husband. “How can you be so insensitive?”

“I’m sorry honey, but face it, I lost my job; we don’t have any money. How are we going to get through these tough times without any money?” added Glen.

“Let’s hope to find a way, Glen,” Melissa says as they embrace.

That night while Glen was sound asleep, Maylissa climbed out of bed and walked over to the window of the bedroom. She looked at the garden and started to think about her aunt.

In a whisper she said, “I hope we could find a way to get through these tough times. Please show us a way.”

Maylissa got back into bed and fell asleep. Quickly, she started to dream in which she is wearing a lavender gown, walking outside of the fence and in front of the house. She made a right turn on

the walkway then saw someone standing there. It appears to be a woman standing at the entrance of the porch facing towards the ground. The woman wore a yellow dress that reached down to her knees, and a yellow bonnet that was glowing in the evening sunset. She had something in her hand.

Maylissa walked toward the strange woman, who was facing down when slowly handed Maylissa a flower, a yellow flower. Maylissa reached out to grab the flower, but soon as she touched it, she woke up.

The next morning during breakfast, Maylissa told Glen about her dream last night.

“Was it a nightmare?” Glen asked while sipping his coffee and looking at the newspaper.

“No, it didn’t scare me, but I wonder what it meant,” said Maylissa.

“We’ll talk later. I’ve have to go to this interview at the Jewelry store, see you later,” replied Glen as he kissed her goodbye.

Maylissa went to the garden to water the flowers when she suddenly noticed the patch of yellow Daffodils. “Daffodils?” she said to herself, remembering the yellow flower in her dream.

“Was that the flower in my dream?”

Later, Glen returned home from his interview. He told Maylissa that he felt optimistic.

“I hope the man calls me back for the job.”

“So what did you do today?” Glen asked.

“I was watering the garden when I noticed the yellow Daffodils. I think that’s what the woman gave me in my dream last night,” said Maylissa.

“Well, now that you know what the flower is, maybe the dream is telling you to notice the flower. Can we forget about the stupid flower thing already?” Glen marched into the bed room.

Maylissa thought that Glen was extremely rude, but maybe he was right. It’s just a flower. What’s the big deal?

That night, Maylissa was lying in bed staring at the ceiling, dismissing her thoughts of the day. Soon, she fell asleep then started dreaming again.

In the dream, she was walking past the fence of the house and made the turn onto the walkway. There, the strange woman in yellow was facing down. This time her hands were closed together. Maylissa walked up to the woman and held out her hands. The woman too opened her hands revealing a bright ball of light, so bright that it illuminated the darkness of the evening. The woman places it into Maylissa’s hands. As Maylissa stared at the light, her eyes became wide. She tried desperately to see the woman’s face. Before she got a chance, she woke up.

The next morning at breakfast, Maylissa was very quiet. Without saying a word to Glen, Maylissa went outside to water the garden. Back in the house, Glen was still sitting at the kitchen table.

Glen thought that Maylissa was still upset with him. He wanted to surprise her with flowers so he stepped outside into the garden and spotted the yellow daffodils. He plucked the vibrant yellow flowers and quietly walked into the house. He tip toed to the dinette table and puts the flowers in the vase.

Maylissa stepped out of the room and saw the yellow daffodils in the vase. Glen was sitting on the opposite side of the table smiling.

“Honey, please tell me that you didn’t pull those flowers out of my aunt’s garden?” Maylissa asked in a stern voice.

“Well, I thought you liked the flowers, so I put them on the table,” he explained.

“Why did you pull those flowers? My Aunt told me never to pull those flowers,” Maylissa yelled as she took the vase and ran out the door.

Glen followed behind. “Wait, where are you going?”

“I have to replant the flowers! My aunt said it’s not the time,” said Maylissa.

“She’s dead, Maylissa. What is wrong with you?” said Glen.

Maylissa went to the garden with the vase of flowers and with both hands, starts digging in the patch where the yellow daffodils were.

While she was digging, she struck her finger on something hard. “Ouch.” she said.

“What is it?” asked Glen. He put his hand into the soil and dug around the hard object and pulled it out.

Glen brushed off the dirt and stared at the object. It glimmered in the sunlight. Soon, both realized it was a gold nugget.

The couple took the nugget to the jewelry store where Glen applied for a job. The dealer valued it at over one million dollars. They looked at each other and in excitement, Glen jumped up and down. “We’re rich! Honey, can you believe this? Those flowers were gold!”

“So that’s what the woman was showing me in my dream,” said Maylissa.

Both became overjoyed that they were not going to have to struggle with money anymore.

That night, after mumbling “We’re rich” for like the hundredth time, Glen finally fell asleep.

Maylissa, unable to sleep, went to the window and looked out at the garden. Suddenly, she spotted the woman dressed in yellow kneeling in the garden. The woman stood up, turned and looked at Maylissa. At that moment, Maylissa recognizes the woman. It was her dear aunt Dally smiling, holding yellow daffodils in her hands.

Maylissa opened the window, waving to her as he called out. “Thank you” to her aunt dressed in yellow.

Aunt Dally waved back before disappearing into the night air.



### Shadow Fields By Yeshua Espallat

The foreboding gray mansion known as Shadow Fields stood alone on a desolate hilltop, lost among a dreary sea of skeleton trees. The low-hanging dark clouds that seemed to almost touch the roof made it look like it came from a world of shadows. Dried up leaves would occasionally be blown across the land it sat on giving it a menacing feeling to any who see it

Built in the early 1930's for a man named Reginald Lavallo, there have been countless reports of bizarre occurrences and mysterious disappearances since the unsolved death of Mr. Lavallo. The staff that once worked for him claimed to hear the sounds of lone footsteps shuffling through the empty halls like a drunken man years after he passed. They even claimed to hear someone playing the piano in the library. These plus several other eerie rumors made Shadow Fields a popular tourist attraction during the 70's.

People would travel from all around the world to the haunted mansion hoping to witness the supposed ghost of Lavallo. The stories were bringing a decent income and the interior was restored to its original art deco designs after it began to decay, but the once popular tourist attraction became the scene of several police investigations. Five people staying in separate rooms scattered around the mansion vanished without a single trace and two others were found dead in the hall where Lavallo was rumored to have disappeared. After a decade of investigations, it was permanently closed to the public and began to decay

once again. Not a single soul stepped foot inside the mansion...until today.

Amy McKinley, alone in the world, arrived at Shadow Fields late one night. She stepped out of the cab with her bags, paid the driver, and sent him on his way. There was a heavy fog all around that seemed to dance in the moonlight. Her instincts told her not to ever come to this place, but as the world's foremost paranormal investigator, she felt it was her duty to find out exactly what was happening in the mansion and try to put together the pieces of this unsolvable puzzle. The stories she heard about this mansion were unlike any other she had come across and it piqued her curiosity to the point where she had to know. She had to know what happened to Lavallo, why he was haunting this ghastly estate, what happened to the people who vanished and died, and she had to find out what other secrets the mansion itself may have been hiding.

She dug into her pocket for the key to the front gate wishing that she had waited for the rest of her team to arrive, but like all of history's greatest explorers, she wanted to be the first one in. With the key in hand, she approached the heavy iron gate feeling a cold shiver run up and down her spine. Her heart began to race as she inserted it into the lock and turned it. Then, the rusty gate slowly creaked open allowing her access to the stone path leading up the mansion's main entrance.

"Here we go," she said to herself not realizing the nightmare she was about to enter.

She took in a deep breath and made her first step onto the property. She reached the main entrance and just as she put her finger to the bell, the massive oak doors swung open, and there stood Marcus Lamb. She laughed inside when she first saw him. He was an old man with pale skin, nearly dead eyes, and few strands of greasy white hair; everything she expected to see from a cheesy horror film. She was able to stay professional and greeted him with a handshake.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Ms. McKinley. You're here a little earlier than I expected," said Marcus.

"I wanted to start the preliminary tests to save my team the trouble of hauling all of their equipment here in case things don't pan out."

"Did the gate give you any trouble?"

"No, the key you delivered worked just fine."

"That's odd. Usually, it doesn't allow anyone else to waltz in."

With a raised brow she asked, "It *doesn't allow* you said?"

He dismissed her and went on, "Yes, well, let me show you where you'll be staying."

She gazed past him and into the main lobby in awe. A deep red carpet led from the doors to a large staircase that split apart to the east and west wings. Up above, she could see a beautiful golden chandelier that lost its shine. Pillars made of marble lined the walls giving it an almost royal feel, but at the same time bathed many areas in shadows adding to the sense of it being a haunted mansion.

Looking nervously in every direction, Amy followed Marcus up the wide staircase and into the west wing as the sound of their footsteps on the thin carpet echoed throughout the vast room. She noticed various brightly colored paintings were hung on the walls depicting everything from children playing in peaceful fields to angels saving a woman and lifting her into the heavens. The only painting different from the others was a large oil painting of Lavallo himself hanging on the section of wall on the stairs between the east and west wings. He was probably in his late forties with deep-set eyes, no hair, and an oddly shaped brooch on his coat. Already her mind was riddled with questions, so she decided it was time to start asking them.

"Was Mr. Lavallo a big art collector?"

"Not only art, but statues and gems, too. He was wealthy beyond imagination, but all he cared about was collecting rare objects. He paid all of us

ridiculously when he was alive, so we knew money meant nothing to him.”

“Did anyone ever ask where he got some of these collectables?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll see why in a moment. I keep all the pleasant pieces out in the lobby, but the others are somewhat...disturbing.”

She realized exactly what he meant when they walked through the west wing door. It was poorly lit and incredibly stuffy, but the paintings stood out clearly enough for her to see. Lavalley seemed to have a taste for gothic and biblical works of art. The paintings here were much darker in color than what was in the lobby and they depicted terrible events like the infamous witch burnings in Salem, people drowning during the great flood from the story of Noah’s Ark, and even a painting showing a demon about to strike a mother and baby sitting peacefully in a rocking chair.

“Was Lavalley a religious man?” asked Amy as they continued walking through the narrow halls.

“Not at first,” he began, “Mr. Lavalley started by collecting beautiful works of art like the ones in the lobby. A few years later, he added statues that were replicas of priceless work like Michelangelo’s David, but then he included rare gems.”

“That’s when he changed?”

“Yes. I remember he was especially protective of one jewel when it arrived. I can’t recall the name, but he kept it locked in a small wooden box that had strange carvings on it. The jewel itself was red and small, but it looked to me like it was part of a larger piece.”

“Is there any way I could take a look at it?”

Marcus shook his head with a disappointed look on his face, “Unfortunately, I don’t know where it is. He brought it over when the east wing was being built and made changes to the architect’s plans after showing us the jewel. After construction of the east wing was finished, he went back and made alterations to the west wing.

During all of the construction and remodeling, he claimed to us that he lost the box with the jewel shard in it.”

“But you didn’t believe him?”

“Not one bit. His personality had changed so drastically after he acquired the jewel that I knew he was lying. He seemed to be in a constant state of paranoia, he was delusional, and he even attacked a member of the house staff in the middle of the night claiming she was some kind of demon that was going to kill him if he didn’t give her the jewel. Shortly after that incident, he told us he lost it.”

“He attacked someone?”

“Yes, but he paid for her medical treatments and gave her a hefty sum to keep quiet about the whole situation. He even built another smaller mansion behind this one for the staff to live in to avoid any other incidents.”

They arrived at the room where she would be staying. The walls here didn’t have artwork of any kind making it feel much less intimidating than what she’d seen so far. Across from the large bed against the wall to her right was a door that led to a small bathroom. Unfortunately, it was just as stuffy and dusty as everything else she had seen so far. She set her bags down by the bed and sat on it to feel how comfortable it was for fear that she might spend the next few nights sleeping on an old lumpy mattress.

“It’s softer than I thought,” she said.

“It’s one of those Tempur-Pedic beds, actually.”

“What? They had those in the thirties?”

“Not everything here is old. I had a few things replaced a year ago thinking I’d be able to open the mansion to the public again, but then I decided I was too old to run a business.”

“Oh,” she replied feeling dumb after asking.

“Well, if you need anything, you can use the phone to reach me in the secondary mansion. The number is on a card next to it on the table. Goodnight,” he said with a smile as he left the room and closed the squeaky door behind him.

*“Tempur-Pedic beds?” She thought to herself, “How haunted can this place be if it has Tempur-Pedic beds? I bet that story about the shard was just something he told the guests that used to stay here to make them feel scared about this place. The paintings were probably added later on to give Lavalley’s insanity more realism. I’ll probably be on my way back home tomorrow night.”*

Marcus Lamb, the master of Shadow Fields, often disappeared mysteriously during the following days. He usually was nowhere around while Amy was conducting her tests of the mansion. She thought it was a bit strange considering how most of her clients liked to see how she hunted for ghosts. Every morning, he’d knock on her door and greet her in the same worn out suit he met her in. At times, he seemed to be distant when talking with her during meals like he left his body temporarily and went out into space. Even stranger though, was the fact that he never once asked her how the preliminary investigation was going. It was like he didn’t even care.

When she put more thought into it, she realized Marcus never really made it clear why he hired her to begin with. She dismissed the question in her mind only because it would serve as a distraction. She spent three days straight taking photos of various rooms, using her EMF detector to get energy readings, walking around the darkest places with infrared thermal scanners, and every test came up with negative results. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, the story of the haunted mansion was turning out to be as bogus as Marcus’ story about Lavalley.

The very night Amy was about to call it quits and break the news to Marcus, something happened in her room that terrified her like nothing else. She concluded her hunt for the night and wanted to shower before telling him the mansion wasn’t haunted so she could head back home. She went into her bathroom with a small bag and ran the hot bath water. While the water was

running she turned her back to the tub, set her bag on the counter where the sink was, and rummaged through it to find her iPod. When she reached over to shut the faucet off, a brief flash of light blinded her and disappeared. Her eyes adjusted a moment later and her bath water was crimson red. In confused awe, she dipped the tip of her finger into it only to realize that the tub had been filled with blood. Her body was suddenly frozen with panic as the odor bombarded her sense of smell. Before she could react, a rotting hand broke through the surface of the red plasma and took hold of her wrist. She tried to pull away, but only managed to yank the assailant out of the tub and they fell over on the floor with the blood-covered intruder on top of her. Amy caught a good look at the person and felt her stomach shoot up into her throat. It was actually a decayed corpse of a woman shrieking in her face like a terrified banshee. Amy struggled with the reanimated cadaver and managed to push her off while screaming in fear. She swiftly got back up feeling her heart beating so quickly she thought it would explode in her chest, but when she gazed back at the where the woman was, she saw nothing. All traces of her attacker and the blood had simply disappeared. Her mind kept playing the moment she gazed at the woman over and over until she realized that the corpse she saw was herself. After holding her hand over her heart for a moment, she calmed down and realized that she finally hit pay dirt.

The next morning, her two partners, Chris and TJ, had arrived. She and Marcus greeted them at the main entrance, they went over the story of Lavalley and his lost gem, and then sat down for lunch after getting accommodated in their rooms. The head master served them their meal and went back into the kitchen leaving the three ghost hunters alone.

“So, what did you find so far?” Chris asked Amy.

She set down her salad fork and said, “At first, nothing. I didn’t get anything suspicious in my photos, all

my meters came back with nothing, and I was getting a little pissed. But then, I was attacked last night by a dead corpse that looked like me in my bathtub.”

“Your bathtub?” asked TJ. “What were you wearing?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Chris asked.

“Nothing. I just wanted to get a mental image of our hot boss in the tub.”

“The *corpse* was in the tub,” she corrected him.

TJ groaned, “Ugh . . . gross.”

“Anyway, I think it definitely has something to do with that jewel Marcus told us about. If we can find it, we should be able to close the book on this one.”

“So, you want us to hunt a tiny jewel instead of invisible ghosts,” TJ reiterated. “I don’t know which one is harder.”

“Where should we start?” asked Chris.

“We’ll meet tonight in my room after Marcus leaves the mansion and go over a search plan. He said the west wing was remodeled after it was already built, so I think we should start there.”

“You’re the lady boss,” said TJ.

Amy, looking out of her bedroom window, watched Marcus disappear into the night. The sun had just set and he was making his way toward the secondary mansion in the back. She looked at the smaller building and realized there was an area to the right of it surrounded by iron bars. After glancing at it for a few moments, she realized it was a cemetery. Marcus had never mentioned it before, but she had a feeling there might have been a valuable clue buried somewhere in there.

There was a knock at the door and she called the visitor in. It was Chris and TJ right on time with some equipment ready in hand. They joined her by the window and gazed out at the cemetery she was looking at. She looked over to TJ with a wicked smile.

“Please, tell me you’re joking,” he whined.

She patted him on the shoulder and said, “Tonight, *you* are our grave digger.”

“But you said a zombie was in your bathtub and now you want me to go into a cemetery? That’s asking for something to happen! You know black people always die first!”

“It wasn’t a zombie and you won’t die. Try to scrounge up a shovel and come back with anything odd that you find,” she instructed.

He stormed out of the room cursing under his breath.

“Lavalley became highly religious after getting the jewel,” Amy explained to Chris, “so it’s safe to assume that there could be clues in his private cemetery.”

“How do you figure?”

“Ritual burials. We might be able to determine exactly what religion he followed by examining the way a body is buried. With that, we could start picking out statues and paintings related to that same religion.”

“From what I’ve seen, he could’ve been Christian or Catholic.”

“One of the first rules about hiding treasure is to make clues that could throw off treasure hunters. I wanna be positive about where to look.”

“So what should we do while TJ’s digging up graves?”

“We need to start looking for secret rooms or hidden passages in the mansion.”

“This place is huge,” exclaimed Chris. “With only two of us a search like that could take days.”

“Well, we better get started then,” she replied.

Hours went by as the duo scoured the massive mansion and TJ dug up the graves one by one finding nothing on both ends. Those hours quickly turned to days without any repeated incidents like the bathtub. They spent every night sneaking around conducting their investigation hoping to find anything, but Amy was beginning to doubt herself. The only clue she

found was a small journal belonging to Lavalley that mentioned his discovery of the cursed jewel that brought about his disappearance. It was described as a shard from a large jewel shaped like a flame. The poor souls that were unfortunate enough to come across this gem called it Hell's Ruby. Other than that, she and Chris couldn't find anything else related to it.

One night, the grave digger in the cemetery near the second mansion dug up an object, which he gave to Amy. Excited about the latest clue, she quickly took it to her room and began studying it. It appeared to be a small wooden cube with strangely shaped markings on all sides.

"Do you think it's important?" Chris asked as he watched Amy sit on her bed tampering with the cube. "The shard could be inside it."

"We won't know until we figure out what it does."

"Let's just smash the damn thing until it breaks open," TJ suggested.

"Do you really want to risk damaging the ruby shard and pissing off whatever ghost is haunting this place?" she asked.

"No, thank you. The only naked women I like seeing in my tub are ones that are still alive."

She let out a frustrated sigh and clutched the tiny cube in one hand. Something clicked on it and the odd markings all fell off onto her lap.

"What did you do?" Chris asked.

She picked up one of the pieces and examined it, "These are magnetic."

Chris looked at the different sizes, "They look almost like puzzle pieces."

She put the pieces together as best as she could and her eyes widened when she recognized the shape. She saw this exact object when she first entered the mansion. The large oil painting of Lavalley in the lobby showed him wearing a broach that matched the same shape as the magnetic puzzle.

With the pieces in hand, she took off to the lobby while her friends followed her.

They reached the painting and she ran her hand along its surface. The small area where the broach was

depicted felt hard like a metal plate was underneath it which meant that she probably found the location of an important clue if not the shard itself. With a smile, she placed each piece of the puzzle onto the painting until the broach was complete. There was a loud clanging sound that echoed in the vast lobby, and then the painting slid back and to the left revealing a long narrow corridor with practically no lighting.

"I ain't going in there," said TJ.

She looked to Chris.

"Do I get a raise for this?" he jokingly asked.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. It wasn't much, but she didn't bring any flashlights with her for this ghost hunt, so it would have to do. Together, the two slowly crept down the cold cobblestone hall and into the unknown abyss. The entrance behind them seemed to shrink in size the further they journeyed from it making them feel like they were walking into a trap. Eventually, the duo came to an old wooden door on the right wall. The hall kept going down, but there was no way to know if there were any other doors along the way.

"We're not splitting up," Chris said to Amy before she could suggest the notion.

"Fine," she huffed as she pushed open the door.

It creaked open revealing a small library filled with shelves lining every wall. There were other shelves scattered around making it seem more like a maze than anything else. They carefully made their way through memorizing each turn they made until they reached the very center where a small square table waited for them. A tiny candle stood flickering beside an open book. Amy approached the book and began reading it to herself.

*June 24<sup>th</sup>: The cursed piece of ruby calls to me every night. It begs for chaos and demands blood. I've tried all I could, but nothing seems to work. I can hear it in my head. I can feel it in*

*my soul. It is slowly driving me to the brink of insanity for no apparent reason. Is this my form of punishment from God? Have I angered Him in some way? Why am I being tormented like this?*

*June 30<sup>th</sup>: I figured it out! I figured out how to silence the bloody ruby! It needs a human sacrifice! Today, I felt the urge for violence and struck one of my servants with a shovel. He died instantly, but it calmed the ruby! I dragged the corpse through the secret passage and left it in the room where the jewel rests. Maybe it will be satisfied enough to leave me alone!*

*July 2<sup>nd</sup>: I killed three more servants today. I only meant for one, but a maid witnessed what I had done and rushed to one of the cooks. I had to kill them both to protect my secret! If the authorities found out what I've been doing, they'd throw me in a cage for the rest of eternity! I can't have that! I must continue to satisfy the spirit of the ruby or face more torture!*

*July 4<sup>th</sup>: Parents visited today...killed them. Had to. Ruby wanted them. Brother and sister come in the morning. Wants them, too.*

*July: Ate today. First ate garden food. He taste good. We want more.*

*We...tired...want sleep...watch hall...*

"What the hell happened to him?" Chris asked as he read the final sentence over Amy's shoulder.

"It made him insane and turned him into some kind of monster."

"He referred to himself as 'we' in the end. Do you think it possessed him?"

"I can't say for sure, but he *did* say he heard it in his head. He also said there was a room here where he dumped the bodies for the ruby. Hopefully, it's still in that room. I just wonder if the hall he was watching is the same one where he vanished."

"I don't think we want to find out. Let's find the room and get out of here before we start hearing voices in our heads," Chris replied.

"TJ," someone whispered out to him.

He turned around frightened and looked all over for the person speaking

to him. He couldn't see anyone, so he started walking down the steps and stood in the center of the lobby. There was another loud clanging sound and the secret passage began to close. He yelled and ran toward it, but was too late. The door sealed shut trapping his friends on the other side. He turned his back to the secret door and realized that all the other doors in the massive room were gone. Feeling panic take over, he dashed back down the stairs to where the main entrance used to be and began beating on the wall with his fist.

"What the hell's going on?" he screamed.

"There are souls that must be judged, TJ. We want you to pass judgment on them."

"Who are you?! Come out here!"

Marcus Lamb stepped out from behind one of the marble pillars with a devious grin on his wrinkled face, "You've been chosen for a higher calling, TJ. This old man is no longer capable of serving us. We need you."

TJ inched backwards as the old man walked toward him, "Back off, man! I mean it!"

Marcus' body began to twitch uncontrollably as he continued approaching TJ. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, blood began pouring out of his mouth, and his upper body looked like something was trying to burst out of him. The sound of skin tearing open was almost like paper being ripped in half and TJ could see massive amounts of crimson red seeping through his clothing. Every bone in Marcus' body began to break; the sound of them cracking and snapping filled the lobby like an orchestra. Then, the old man ruptured sending blood and flesh flying in every direction leaving only a hideous monster standing in his place. It had a thick body, bulging legs and scythed arms, horns curling out from its head with spikes running down its spine, and it was soaked in Marcus' blood.

"Oh my, God," TJ whimpered.

The monster shook its boxy head and replied, "God isn't here to save you."

It dove toward TJ as its roar shook the entire mansion.

Amy and Chris took a deep breath and kicked open the door marked with a devil on it. They both gagged at the sight before them. Countless skeletons littered the room along with dozens of other bodies in various states of decomposition. The ones that still had faces bore expressions of pure terror. The stench of blood was heavy in the air and it caused Amy's stomach to twist in ways she never thought possible.

"I recognize some of the people here," Chris stated wishing it weren't true. "They're paranormal investigators like us. I used to work with them before I met you."

Amy tried her best to keep her last meal down, "Did you know they were dead?"

"I left their team, but lost touch with them a couple of weeks ago. I just thought they were busy."

The door slammed shut and startled them. They began pounding on it and tried to kick it down, but nothing worked. Then, something shuffled in the room full of corpses. Amy slowly turned her head to see one of the female bodies standing up with its jaw dropped open.

"Chris," she managed to quietly say.

He looked back to see the corpse and felt like his heart shot up to his throat.

"How do we kill it?" Amy murmured.

"I'm already dead," sobbed the corpse.

Caught by surprise, her only reply was, "What?"

"I was killed by Marcus Lamb almost two months ago, but my soul is still trapped here."

"How is this possible?" Chris asked.

"He hired my husband and I to find out what happened here. At first, we couldn't find anything, but then we got our first ghost sighting. It was Lavalie shambling through the same hall he

vanished in. Later on, I found the passage behind the painting and went in to investigate. When I found this room, he killed me after performing some kind of ritual. Then, he killed my husband."

"How does the ruby tie in to all of this?" Amy asked.

"Hell's Ruby has an evil spirit within it. The ruby was shattered by someone and Lavalie found a piece decades later. He brought it here and the spirit started messing with his head. It made him kill everyone in the mansion and fed off the negative energy produced by each murder. If it gathers enough energy, it'll be strong enough to kill every human on the planet."

"How do we stop it?" asked Chris.

"You have to find a way to reverse the energy held in the shard. Only then will the spirit be forced to move to another shard and start over. By now, it's become strong enough to have a physical body of its own, but it still needs a human host like Marcus in order to reserve the energy it uses."

Amy turned to Chris, "We've gotta get our hands on that shard."

"Easier said than done," he replied. "The door won't budge, remember? And we still have no idea where the shard is."

The corpse slowly turned and pointed her rotten finger at the wall opposite the door, "Through there you'll find the shard of Hell's Ruby."

Before the two could thank her, she fell to the ground and became as lifeless as she was before. Chris rushed to the wall and felt all around with his hands for a hidden locking mechanism of some kind. Amy stood back and examined it from afar.

"I don't think it'd be that easy," she said to her cohort.

"What do you mean? Where else would a secret switch be?" Chris asked as he continued his fruitless search.

"This room is full of corpses. If anyone stumbled on it, like we did, the last thing they'd ever want to touch is one of the dead bodies. If I were as insane as Lavalie, I'd hide the switch in or around one of the bodies."

“But the switch had to have been here before there were ever any bodies,” Chris pointed out.

“Exactly, so that’s why you disguise it as a body. Or better yet, as skeletal remains.”

The pair immediately went to work throwing around the grimy bones of Lavallo’s victims searching for the one that was false. Chris rummaged around randomly, but Amy deducted the switch would be underneath another body in the back of the room, so that was where she started her search. She was rewarded with success when she pulled on a leg bone that was attached to a chain in the ground. The sounds of heavy gears turning broke through the dead silence of the room and a small section of wall rotated halfway to reveal the secret chamber where the shard was hidden.

The chamber was smaller than the corpse room and had a circular shape, but it was well lit with torches on either side. The flames danced in the calm stillness randomly lighting different objects in the room. There were small shelves built into the walls that went all around the chamber and they were filled with various items like ancient books and small effigies from different supernatural beliefs. The two paranormal investigators ripped through each shelf like tornadoes throwing everything useless behind them until they came across a small chest. It had a lock and normal keyhole, but there wasn’t any time to try and find the proper key. Amy set it down on the ground and Chris used the heaviest statuette he could find to smash it open. Eventually, the lock broke off and Amy opened the chest.

Resting peacefully on a small velvet pillow was the treasure that damned Lavallo and every person he encountered. The infamous shard of Hell’s Ruby glistened in the light from the torches. Amy picked it up and held it against the flame to get a clear look at it. Inside the deep red gem, she could see swirling clouds of what she

assumed was the energy it had gathered up until now.

“Now what?” Chris asked.

“Now,” she began, “we find a way out of this room and figure out how to reverse the negative energy in this thing to positive.”

She pocketed the shard and looked around the chamber.

Chris pulled a medallion from the ground and said, “This fell out of one of the books I tossed while we were searching. It’s probably another one of those stupid puzzles.”

She took the heavy golden medallion and carefully examined it. It was round and about the size of a teacup saucer. On the edge of it were the letters “N”, “S”, “E”, and “W” which obviously represented north, south, east, and west. Depicted in the center was a woman pointing her hands east and west, her head pointing north, and her feet to the south. The woman wore a blindfold, held a large feather in her right hand and a scroll in her left, and her feet were bound together. Amy turned it over and saw an inscription that read:

*The sun will set at half past nine and the path to Hell will be revealed.*

“I don’t get it,” Chris responded after reading the confusing clue. “This thing has letters like a compass not numbers like a clock. And since when does the sun set at 9:30?”

“We have to look at it from every possible angle,” Amy said as she stood in the center of the round chamber.

On the wall directly in front of her was a carving of the number three and underneath her feet was a round indentation where the medallion needed to be placed. She thought the clue over in her head and came up with the solution after a moment. She knelt down and began to rotate the medallion until it was in the proper position.

“Wait,” Chris interrupted, “do you know what you’re doing? If you get it wrong, something bad could happen.”

“I know exactly how it’s supposed to go,” she replied. “The sun always sets to the west. On the western side of the medallion, the woman is holding a

feather in her right hand, but it isn’t a normal feather. The scroll in her left hand indicates that the feather is actually a quill pen, so I know she’s right handed. Moving on, human legs are longer than arms and if she were a clock, her bound legs would represent the minute hand while her writing hand would indicate the hour hand. Her left hand has to be pointing toward the three on the wall so that she’d be at half past nine. Her hour hand has to point at nine to the west where the sun sets. Got it?”

“No, but you’re probably right,” he said after trying to make sense out of her explanation.

She set the medallion in place and stood back up. For a few moments nothing happened. Chris was ready to deliver a smart-alecky remark, but was stopped short when the rotating wall that led them to the chamber sealed shut. They began to panic again as the ground beneath them split down the middle and the halves began to slowly retract into the walls. They scrambled to find a way to keep from falling into the pitch black hole, but once the floor was fully retracted, they plummeted downward at breakneck speeds screaming at the top of their lungs. To their relief, the darkness concealed a large slide that guided them safely down until they reached the end and landed on a small boat floating in an underground canal.

“That was actually pretty fun,” Chris said as his heart rate went back to normal.

Amy scoffed and grabbed a paddle attached to the outer right side of the boat. Chris grabbed the one on the left and they began making their way down the canal. After thirty minutes of paddling, they came to the end of the canal and got off at a small dock. It seemed like nothing more than a cave, but they already learned that nothing was ever what it appeared to be. A large section of rock at the end of the area slowly rumbled open to reveal a doorway. TJ walked out of the opening and greeted them with a smile.

“How the hell did *you* get here before us?” Chris asked him.

TJ chuckled, “Fools. We’re the one that put the designs for this place in Lavallo’s head. For years this mansion has served as a buffet for us and the shard. In just a few minutes, it’ll be June 13<sup>th</sup>; the anniversary of the day the shard arrived here. Your deaths will give us the last bit of energy we need to wipe out your entire race!”

“We won’t let you take any more innocent lives!” Amy exclaimed.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter!”

TJ pulled a large dagger out from behind him and rushed toward Amy to attack her. Chris got in the way and knocked the weapon from TJ’s hand. They wrestled with each other while she scooped up the dagger and tried to pull her possessed friend away from Chris. He hit her across the face with the back of his fist and started choking her defenseless partner. She fell hard on her back and dropped the knife.

“Die!” TJ screamed as Chris began to lose consciousness.

Amy snatched the dagger again and plunged it into TJ’s back with a loud scream. He yelled in pain and instinctively let go of Chris to tend to his wound. Amy joined her friend while he caught his breath and his face turned back to its normal color. TJ successfully pulled the long blade from his back and growled loudly at the two humans.

“We don’t have enough time to deal with you like this,” said TJ.

The monster that possessed his body burst out sending pieces of his bloody remains everywhere. It let out a tremendous roar that shook the cave like an earthquake. Then, it began to approach them as each thunderous step it took made the ground tremble beneath them. Before it could reach them, something unexpected happened. A person covered in a tattered black cloak dashed out from somewhere behind Amy and Chris and delivered a kick straight into the monster’s chest that was powerful enough to send it flying backwards into a wall.

His dark hair was down to his shoulders and the bottom portion of his face was wrapped in black cloth showing only his dark eyes. The stranger helped Chris get back up on his feet.

“Who are you?” Chris asked.

“I’m the guy that shattered Hell’s Ruby,” he replied.

“It was *you*?” Amy asked. “Didn’t you think something like this could’ve happened? This whole thing is all your fault!”

“I didn’t have a choice. I’m sorry that you’ve been through all of this, but the responsibility of taking this spirit down is mine.”

To which Chris responded, “And I was really looking forward to fighting off an eight foot monster from Hell.”

The creature regained its composure and slowly started making its way back toward the humans.

“You have the shard, right?” asked the stranger.

Amy took it from her pocket and showed it to him, “Safe and sound.”

“Good,” he said. “Focus some kind of positive energy into it to weaken the monster.”

He took off to fight the creature again.

“How the hell are we supposed to do that?” Chris exclaimed.

As the two powerful beings fought each other, the cave rumbled more violently than before and large pieces of rock started raining down. Amy and Chris covered their heads to avoid being hit by smaller pieces of rubble, but the bigger ones caused them to start running for cover. They found a small area where they were relatively safe, but they were pinned in that spot and were easy targets for the monster.

The heroic stranger found the dagger on the ground and quickly snatched it up. He took aim and threw it with expert precision at the monster’s head, but it deflected the thrown weapon and sent it flying off in a different direction. Before anyone could react, the blade plunged into Chris’ chest piercing one of his lungs. He collapsed as he felt his lung slowly

filling with his own blood. Still clutching the shard in one hand, Amy used her free hand to push down on the area around the dagger. She knew taking it out would only result in killing him faster, but there was no way she could save him.

While the other two continued their battle, Chris softly spoke to Amy, “You have to get out of here.”

“I can’t leave you behind,” she said as tears of sadness flowed from her eyes like rivers. “I’m so sorry I dragged you and TJ into this. I never should have taken the case to begin with.”

“Can’t argue with you on that one,” he forcefully chuckled through his ragged breath.

She let out a small laugh at his dying joke, but the humor was replaced by sorrow when she realized he was no longer breathing. Her heart sank and she could do nothing but cry over his corpse. She lay his head down on the ground and felt something happen to the shard. She opened her hand and saw that it was slowly becoming lighter in color until it became crystal clear. It continued changing and had become a light blue as her tears continued pouring out.

The stranger noticed a difference in the monster’s strength and quickly shot a look back at Amy and Chris. He caught a glimpse of the scene taking place far behind him and knew exactly what was happening. The opportunity to finish off his enemy had almost come. All he needed to do was wait for the shard to change from Hell’s Ruby into Heaven’s Sapphire; a gem that drew power from the pureness in each person’s heart.

Amy didn’t understand what was happening to the shard in her hand, but she felt unthreatened even when beams of white light began shooting out from it in all directions. The shard was now deep blue and brimming with positive energy brought on by the love she had for her friend and the tears of sadness for his untimely death. The light had become so intense, that it filled the cave blinding everything in

sight and bathing everyone in stark white.

Finally, June 13<sup>th</sup>, the long-awaited day arrived. Amy McKinley found herself kneeling on the ground outside the iron gate to Shadow Fields. Stretched out beside her, was the body of her friend Chris. The moon was starting to set already. Feeling deeply confused, she stood up and approached the gate.

The mansion seemed completely normal for a while, but then, it started to rumble like the cave underground. Bright beams of light shot out through every door and window painting the dark sky with stripes of white and shooting glass and wood like an erupting volcano. The building eventually exploded like a balloon with too much air, but the debris stopped moving in midair and was slowly sucked back to where the manor once stood. A hole opened up in the sky above the mansion and strong gusts of wind kicked up out of nowhere as every single piece of Shadow Fields was sucked into the vortex. In a flash, it was over just as quickly as it had begun.

Amy stood silent for a moment, but jumped when she heard a moan come from behind her. She turned and her heart nearly skipped a beat when she saw Chris sitting up without any trace of ever being mortally wounded.

"I feel like I spent the whole night binge drinking," he groaned.

She hugged him and shouted, "I'm so glad you're alive!"

"What happened?" he asked.

"Weren't we in a cave a second ago?"

She showed him the blue shard she still held, "You died and the jewel changed color. I think it brought us out here where it was safe and brought you back to life."

"Oh, that makes sense," he replied. "What about that other guy that came to save the day?"

She shook her head, "I don't know what happened to him."

He sighed as he picked himself up off the ground, "Whatever. I'm just glad it's finally over."

"It's not over, yet," she said.

"What do you mean? We solved the case and made it back out in one piece."

"There are other ruby shards scattered around the world. That dead woman told us that the spirit would move on to one of the others and this whole mess would repeat itself."

"You can't mean..."

She continued, "We have to find the other shards and make sure something like this never happens again. If you don't want to help, I'll understand."

He put his arm around her and said, "Well, I guess this means I'll get that raise after all. Let's get this show on the road, boss. Any idea where we should start?"

She looked on at the rising sun with a smile on her face. Her entire career was based on supernatural occurrences all around the world and she made it her business to document each and every one of them. This time, however, was different. She felt like she finally gained a true purpose in life despite the fact she could never reveal the events that took place at Shadow Fields to the public. And she was okay with it.

They exchanged smiles and together walked away from Shadow Fields and off into the sunrise. Lavalley, Marcus, TJ, and everyone that died in the mansion could finally rest in peace. However, the danger of being destroyed by the monster that resided in each shard of Hell's Ruby was far from over. From this day on, Amy McKinley decided to spend the rest of her days finding and destroying each shard with Chris by her side. Unbeknownst to either of them, the real menace was not the creature in the shards, but the being that created Hell's Ruby itself. They'd find out soon enough, though, that there are certain things that even the most evil beings are afraid of and they live in places where devils fear to tread. They didn't realize it now, but Amy and Chris were only small players in a massive story leading up to the end of all life.



Sorry, no poems this month!

### Join the Writer's Portal today!

Beginning in the month of August, meetings will be held the second Monday (6-7:30pm) and fourth Thursday of every month (1-2:30) in the second floor conference room.

From picture books to novels, stop by and discuss your ideas. Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal at [mkelly@broward.org](mailto:mkelly@broward.org).

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### **FEEDBACK CORNER**

We want to hear from you! Let us know what you think of our stories! Feel free to email Michael Kelly, head of the writer's group at [mkelly@broward.org](mailto:mkelly@broward.org) or call (954) 201-8870. Please specify the story and writer. Thanks!

\*Starting in August, the writer's group will meet the second Monday of every month from 6:00pm – 7:30pm and the fourth Thursday of every month from 1:00pm – 2:30pm. I want to accommodate those who cannot make out afternoon meetings. Thanks!



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