

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems.



Christmas Edition



**Are you Elfing Nuts?
By DiVitto Kelly**

“Are they elfing nuts?” roared Santa Claus, as he overlooked downtown North Pole from his penthouse office. He crumpled up the fax paper and tossed it in the garbage. “Going on strike – ridiculous!”

Yes, there were times when the ‘Big Guy’ went ballistic. Like the time Blitzen accidentally stepped on his big toe – the one with the bulging bunion, or when Yukon Cornelius accidentally spilled a mug of piping hot chocolate on his lap. His belly wasn’t exactly shaking like a bowlful of jelly after that incident.

Santa fell back into his custom made caribou leather recliner. “This is prime toy-making season.” He’d never experienced something like this before.

“Don’t they like their jobs?” he asked, rhetorically. “Like the song goes, ‘we work hard all day, but our work is play.’ ‘What’s not to like about making toys?’ But apparently having a fun job was not enough for all the striking elves. And if the situation wasn’t rectified soon, Christmas would be in doubt for the first time since . . . forever.

“Hold on. Hold on,” smirked Santa as he checked his desk calendar. April 1st. “That little shrimp,” mused Santa. “It’s a joke. Oh that Ralph, what a pisser. You got me, you got me!”

Or was it?

Apparently, an ever earnest elf named Ralph was absorbing the financial news report on television one night. The bombastic money expert stressed the importance of planning for retirement, 401Ks, investment portfolios -- you get the picture. After some serious thinking, Ralph discovered none of the elves had any type of savings accounts, or money to speak of.

Although Santa provided everything for his staff of hundreds, Ralph opined to his fellow elves about the need to become more ‘elf sufficient.’ For every stab at humor there is a half-truth, Ralph surmised. And the truth was he needed to have a serious sit-down discussion with the Big Guy.

After dinner, Ralph held an “elf only” meeting, excluding everyone - - even the Bumble and Santa’s reindeer.

“Attention everyone, attention,” said Ralph, as he pounded his little balled-up fist on the makeshift podium. “We are here tonight because we need to – and should be, compensated for our exceptionally hard-work and dedicated skills.” The resentment apparently had been smoldering with his fellow co-workers for some time. They erupted in vigorous applause.

He continued, raining both fists down on the podium. “We are Santa’s elves, my ass – we are Santa’s slaves!” That line brought down the house.

Everyone was on board, except his wife, Alice, who saw the scenario as half empty. “What if Santa gets upset and does something drastic,” she asked. Ralph blew her comment off like a sneeze, pooh-poohing her concerns.

“Oh, we’re doing the right thing, my dear; you just watch and see,” said Ralph, a bit too overconfident for his own good. Alice thought her husband had too much ground under his tiny little elf feet.

“Besides, we got Santa by the ornaments, if you know what I mean,” winked Ralph. “You’ve never read Roger Fisher’s *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In?* It’s the perfect blueprint.” Alice shook her head in disagreement.

“You better not blow it,” said Alice.” With this stagnant economy, we can’t afford to lose our jobs!”

So it was, on the second of April, with Christmas looming three-quarters of a year away, that Ralph broached the subject to Santa Claus in person.

Ralph made an appointment with the secretary for two in the afternoon, knowing the man in the red sweatpants and white turtleneck would be in a jolly mood after consuming his supersized lunchtime meal. After a brief post-Christmas trim down, it was that time of year when the Big Guy needed to start plumping back up.

The middle-aged looking elf, sporting scruffy black hair and round-rimmed glasses, knocked on the door to Santa's office and entered. Ralph inhaled, closed his eyes for a moment, exhaled, before proceeding into Santa's office. He noticed right away the Big Guy seemed agitated. His cheeks were rosy red, but not in a good way.

The elf paused at the doorway. "Hello?"

"Oh that blasted Kung Pao chicken," grumbled Santa, as he thumped his chest, grasping for a burp. "Santa loves his Kung Pao, but not when it's hot as the freaking sun." He waved at his mouth then guzzled down a tall glass of ice cold Coke. "Sorry Ralph, please, please sit down. Santa then dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "Now what can I do for one of my top workers?"

"Well, it's . . .

Santa thumped his barrel chest again. "I'm sorry; could you please pass that bottle of Tums on the table behind you? Jeez Louise, you just can't get good Chinese up here in the Pole."

Santa's stomach was gurgling like bad plumbing. Ralph hopped down from the big, comfortable ruby red suede chair, retrieving the plastic container. Santa popped it open and poured two round tablets into his hand, shoving them into his

mouth. As he chewed, Ralph posed the delicate subject as professionally as possible, but got the answer he expected.

Santa spat out the finely chewed antacid bits everywhere, following it up with a hefty belch. "Your fax!" Ralph was prepared to dash away from Santa's office just in case the Big Guy got really ticked off.

"Oh Ralph, that was a good one," replied Santa, now erupting in laughter. "I didn't realize you were such a jokester. April Fool's Day, and I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Maybe you should do standup at my new comedy club I'm going to open. I'm thinking of calling it Ha-Ha-Ha's. It's a take-off of Ho, Ho, Ho. You get it?" Ralph stood defiantly still; not a facial muscle moving out of place.

"You're not serious about striking . . . are you?" asked Santa, thinking he may need to pop another pair of Tums. "Strike? Really?"

"Really," replied Ralph.

"But I thought you were happy here? All of you." Santa started to turn a 'less than rosy' pinkish hue, his jocular mood evaporating before the little elves' eyes.

"We are Santa, but my co-workers and I firmly believe we should be compensated for what we do," said Ralph, with steadiness in his tinny voice. "And what we do do, we do extremely well, do you think not?" Ralph shook his head.

"Of course I do," said Santa, raising his bushy white brows a bit. He stood up, arms behind his back and peered outside the huge window overlooking Santa, Inc. "You know Ralph, we have a good thing going here up in the North Pole, a monopoly of fun you could

say. So why would you want to potentially mess things up?"

"I don't see it as a liability, sir," said Ralph, ever the researcher. He brandished his iPad just in case he had to site any articles pertaining to worker/employee relations. He was armed with Wikipedic knowledge.

"I mean, we work hard all day, and yes, our work is – or can be play, except for the time I nearly sawed off my index finger building that blasted . . ."

Ralph quickly refocused, apologizing. "To be perfectly honest Santa, we should be earning a decent salary; just like anybody else, so we can afford the good things in life. I could sure as heck use a week or two in beautiful Barbados, maybe Key West. I heard the Hogs Breath Saloon is a fun place to savor a cold one."

"Ah, Key West," said Santa, pondering the moment with fondness. "I remember delivering deep-sea fishing equipment to Hemingway one year; great writer you know. Had all those seven-toed cats roaming around his property – polydactyls I think you call 'em." Santa smiled, making walking movements with his chubby fingers."

"Did you know I won the Hemingway lookalike contest a few years back at the Hogs Breath? Almost blew my cover with excitement when I started belting out my signature Ho, Ho, Ho's."

"Santa?" waved Ralph, trying to get his attention. "We get tired of the cold year 'round too. You've got the dough to travel. Shave the beard off, lose a few pounds, put on a Hawaiian shirt, incognito, and you're off to somewhere warm and

sunny. We're freezing our collective tuchuses up here."

"Tuchus? What's a tuchus?" asked Santa.

"It means butt in Yiddish," replied Ralph.

"Oh," replied the Big Man, stroking his bushy white beard, still needing it to grow out a few more inches for that patented Santa Claus appearance. "This is true, about taking time off, but what if I decide not to pay you, then what?"

Ralph fixed his eyeglasses on the bridge of his narrow nose. "Well, I've been doing a lot of research on the subject."

"And?" probed Santa.

"All of us elves agreed that it may be time to put the kibosh on the toy making," posed Ralph.

"That's serious business, and quite bold on your part," said Santa. "Are you really sure that's what you want to do?"

"We do," replied Ralph. "Look, you're the best boss in the whole wide world, no question about it, but then again, we've never been paid. I mean, my parents, grandparents, you get the picture."

"Well, times are tough my friend, especially these last few years, and I'm not sure I have the resources to pay you all. Throw in the cost of supplies, the skyrocketing cost of healthcare, sick days, vacation days – that stuff doesn't grow on trees you know."

"I understand that sir, but . . ."

"Sir? Please Ralph, don't call me sir; it's Santa 24/7, 365 days a year."

"Sorry Santa," said the elf. "It's just that . . . we don't enjoy being freeloaders."

"Freeloaders?" replied Santa, his voice rising. "Never ever have I thought of you and the other elves as freeloaders. You're the best at what you do!"

"I know Santa, which is why I think we should be paid. Look, we don't need to break the bank on this, but a long term deal, signed sealed and delivered would go a long way for all of us."

Santa put his hand on his chin and pondered the situation. He turned around, his back facing the elf. The Big Man gazed through the panoramic window facing the beautiful postcard worthy North Pole landscape. A light snow began falling.

"Outsourcing," he mumbled under his breath.

"What was that Santa?" Ralph asked.

"Outsourcing," replied Santa as he turned to the elf. "It's something companies do to save money. I heard there are elves in China who would be quite happy to have a job such as yours, although they might disapprove of the food up here."

"Excuse me for a moment Santa," said Ralph, who quickly Googled the word and began reading up on the subject. He mouthed the words as he scrolled down using his scissory little fingers. His eyes widened, realizing this could be a major snafu.

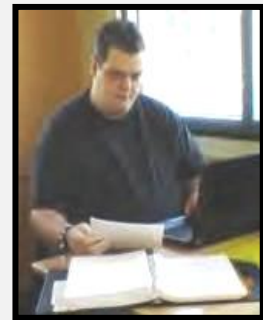
Santa sat back down in this comfy chair and reached into the top drawer. He pulled out an authentic Cuban cigar and lit it, savoring the first puff like fine wine before exhaling.

Ralph waved his hands and coughed.

The Big Man peered at his watch. "As you were saying?"

Ralph, his eyes watering, gazed up at Santa like a sad puppy. "Maybe we can discuss this matter . . . next year?"

"We'll start negotiations right after Christmas; you have my word on it, Ralph," replied Santa, shaking the elf's hand. "Now get back to work."



Lucky Brown's First Christmas
 By Edward White/CP Bialois
<http://cpbialois.wordpress.com/>



Things in the world change around us with each passing breath, but for one Lucky Brown things were changing even faster. Originally born into a loving family he and his brothers and sisters were put up for adoption when he was only seven weeks old. During that time he knew nothing of the outside world or even of his being able to be bought for

four hundred dollars. You see, Lucky is a puppy, half black lab and half Akida. His four brothers, two sisters, and mother are the only things he's known about until the day the Brown family came to see him.

When he first saw the boy run up to the enclosure he and his siblings were placed in on the front porch he couldn't stop his tail from wagging. In fact, out of the eight puppies he was the only one to show any enthusiasm at all. It was early December and while the weather hadn't yet turned too cold to be outdoors, the others had already developed a love for the comfortable indoors and soft carpet where they were usually kept. While Lucky enjoyed the carpet and warmth as much as the rest of them, he also enjoyed his time outside like this. The scent and feel of the cool air on his nose was unbelievable. He knew these periods were only for a brief time for visitors to see and play with them.

A happy and good natured puppy, he only wanted to play and love someone so when the young boy came to the enclosure he reared up onto his hinds legs and stretched as far as he could to try to reach the boy's hand.

"Daddy, can I have this one?"

The boy's father paused to look down at his son and Lucky. Smiling he shrugged, "If you're sure that's the one you want. Sure you don't want to play with the others first to make sure?"

As if on cue, Lucky's siblings began to bark in their high pitched puppy voices and crowd towards the boy. Lucky wasn't the biggest but he'd already decided this was his boy, no matter what the others said about it. They could have the other children when they came to visit but this boy belonged to him. In seconds, he used his desire to push his siblings aside, being the most determined and smartest of the litter had its priviledges.

At the sight of his aggression the woman with the man and boy turned to the person Lucky recognized as his mommy's mom. "I don't know, he's awfully aggressive isn't he?"

"Awe mom." The boy whined looking

sad. The look he gave the woman broke Lucky's little heart forcing him to begin whining until the boy looked back at him. With his boy's attention Lucky reared up again to try to reach him.

The man watched the whole scene and shook his head. "He doesn't seem to be a problem unless the others crowd him. He wants Tommy." He nodded towards the third woman. "Isn't that right?"

Lucky's mommy's mom nodded, "Yes, I do believe so. I don't know how much experience you have with animals, but I believe they choose us to be with them. Not the other way around."

The woman still looked worried but the man seemed satisfied. Tommy smiled as he reached in between the to pet Lucky's head and ears. Lucky reciprocated by licking every part of the boy he could reach with his tongue.

"Gross." Giggling, Tommy remained determined to pet the puppy whether he could reach him or not.

The third woman smiled at the pair, "If you'd like you can take him into the parlor and play with him some while we talk things over. Would you like that Tommy?" Another giggle was her answer and so she called her husband to separate the puppies and take Lucky into the house with the others.

While Tommy's dad and the woman discussed the dog, Tommy's mom sat watching the two play in the safe confines of the house. She was worried because of rumors that Akida's were viscous dogs but the more she watched the more she understood that despite his size Lucky was taking it easy on Tommy.

Lucky didn't care about what the others were doing, he was too busy having fun with his new boy. The two roughhoused throughout the room going from chew toys, to old socks, and finally to each other. Each time Lucky got close enough to Tommy's face to make his mom hold her breath he bathed the boy in licks.

The pair continued on their breakneck pace for the better part of an

hour while the others discussed how to take care of a dog like Lucky from medical to food and training. The whole time the pair fell more in love with each other until Tommy's mom felt comfortable with them being together. By the time they were ready to finalize the deal she believed in her heart of heart that they'd just gotten the one friend Tommy could always count on.

Over the next couple of weeks Lucky became acclimated to his new home and even learned his name, Lucky Brown. He also learned about many interesting things around the house that he could chew on or play with. Some things like their shoes and wooden chair legs seemed to anger his humans although he didn't understand why. What was the point of having something so tasty and interesting if one wasn't going to chew on it? Others like the occasional mouse seemed to terrify his boy's parents, especially Jill, his boy's mom, when he'd bring one he caught to her. She didn't like the other interesting things he found and brought to her either. The one thing he could smell but couldn't yet reach was the most interesting of all: toilet water. Oh how the smells of minerals and chemicals teased him, sometimes to the point where he'd lay next to the toilet wishing for it to become shorter

Through it all the one constant in his life was his boy Tommy. Whenever Tommy was awake the two were inseparable. Especially with the first snowfall of the year. For Lucky it was something he never dreamed was possible and yet something cool, wet, and neat fell from the sky. He sneezed and leapt backwards three feet when the first snowflake touched his nose. The shock of the sudden coolness brought out his playful side causing him to bark and bite at the white stuff settling on the grass. He'd show it not to mess with him. That would be the day the white stuff would learn the name Lucky Brown!

Lucky continued to bark at the fallen flakes until he was satisfied they'd learned their lesson then turned his

attention to the falling snow itself. As fast as he could he raced around the yard, snapping at the flakes before they could land on him. For minutes he bound from one side of the yard to the other trying in vain to catch all of the snow flakes and tripping over his oversized paws more than once. Tommy laughed hysterically throughout most of the event as Lucky was the craziest and coolest dog in the world.

Even Jill's call for them to come in when the sky began to grow dark didn't break through Lucky's desire to teach the snow a lesson. He kept right on barking and running around until he heard his boy calling him. Without hesitating he looked towards Tommy and when he saw him entering their house he ran after him as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Once inside, Lucky was forced to sit off to the side and watch as his boy was given a wonderful smelling treat called hot chocolate and buttered toast. The smell was so intoxicating that he let out a whimper or two earning a reproachful glance from his boy's mom. Each time he tried to use his inborn charm by looking as sad as one could possibly imagine. While only a couple of months old, Lucky had already mastered the art of begging to the point one thought he was dying by the sad look on his face.

Jill was never one to give in, in fact she made a practice of not allowing Lucky to have any people food for the simple reason it wasn't healthy for him. Tommy, on the other hand, had no problem in sneaking a little something to his friend. When his mom's back was turned Tommy took a small piece of toast and held it out below the table for Lucky. Without hesitating Lucky took the treat and scarfed it down in two bites. The taste that welcomed him was something he never experienced before. It was far better than the food he normally ate and he would be sure to work harder to get more in the future.

Tommy was about to give him another piece when his mom interrupted him. "You'd better get ready for bed, Santa Clause will be coming

soon."

Lucky tilted his head to the side, *who was Santa Clause?*

Jill turned around as Tommy was already trying his hand at mimicking Lucky's sad expression. "Don't try that with me kiddo. I'm immune."

"But moooooom." He drew the word out until he ran out of breath.

"Don't 'but mom' me. I let you play in the yard after dinner and now it's your bath and bed time."

Fussing, Tommy slid from his chair and stalked out of the room. Lucky would follow in a few seconds, he wanted to make sure nothing would be left to waste. Licking his lips Lucky propped himself on Tommy's seat and looked towards the table sure no one would miss the crumbs.

"Down! Shoo!" Jill waved her dish towel at him and Lucky took the hint. With a defeated expression he followed Tommy upstairs.

Sleep. The glorious, wonderful moments where Lucky could chase after rabbits and eat all of the toast he wanted, not to mention being big enough to drink out of the toilet bowl as an added advantage. Just as he was about to take a deep, refreshing gulp of the mysterious toilet water he woke to a strange sound. His head raised from the ground with his ears perked in an effort hear better. When the sound repeated a low growl escaped from his throat but he forced himself to be quite. He wanted to bark and scare away the intruder but he didn't want to wake his boy. Instead he glanced over to make sure Tommy was still sleeping then he rose and walked out of the bedroom.

As would be his habit for the rest of his life, Lucky began his first late night check to ensure everyone was safe and sound. He made his way down the hall towards his boy's parent's bedroom as quickly and quietly as his paws would let him. He bumped into a hall table at one point with his bottom when he drifted too close and gave the offending part of him a reproachful look. This was no time to not do what he told it, and in answer his tail wagged which greatly satisfied him

Once that was behind him he nosed into the bedroom and looked towards the bed. He could see his boy's mom but not the dad. Interested, he walked around to the other side but it was empty. Hmm. Set on finding the cause of the late night noise he went back into the hallway when he heard it again. It came from downstairs!

Excited he was about to catch someone he ran to the stairs and down them as fast as he could, narrowly missing falling over his paws a few times. When he was near the bottom he saw his boy's dad leave the room and head towards the kitchen. Well that was that. With a job well done he was about to climb the stairs again when he noticed another figure by the Christmas Tree. A low growl came from him again and the hair on his back began to rise. Someone had dared to infiltrate his family's house!

The man turned around at the sound, his white beard was long and the spectacles he wore reflected the light from the lamp. Moving slowly, he raised a finger to his lips and shushed Lucky. Confused, and never being shushed before, Lucky gave out a high pitched bark. It'd grow deeper as he grew older but at the moment he was forced to make due with what he had. The man smiled at him and held out a small bone.

Lucky struggled with himself at seeing the prize that was obviously meant for him. He wanted to taste the treat but he had to defend his family and home. The man seemed to know what Lucky was thinking and set the bone down on top of a present as the boy's father came into the room.

"Lucky? What're you doing boy? You know how late it is?" Stan walked over and rubbed Lucky's ears but the puppy refused to be so easily foiled in his roll as protector. Didn't he see the man? "Did you hear something?" Lucky did a quick prance to show his boy's dad had gotten it right and looked to where the man was but he was gone.

Stan laughed, "It's okay boy. No one's going to break in tonight, it's

Christmas. Did Tommy send you down here to find Santa Clause?”

Lucky didn't know what Christmas was or who this Santa Clause was. What he did know was that he must've scared the man off and that filled him with pride. His eyes settled on where the bone was sitting and he licked his lips. He wanted to take it but something told him he couldn't until the morning when his boy was there. He turned and climbed the stairs as a hero. Maybe he'd dream about this Santa Clause everyone kept talking about and the man he chased away from his family.



Stains of the Soul: Chapter One
By Jamie White

(Available on Amazon.com)

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

The flames from the torches danced around her, creating a terrifying glow on the gathered crowd. The young girl struggled against her restraints in an attempt to escape the fate that awaited her. The jeers of the spectators echoed through her mind like a demonic chorus, sending chills down her spine.

The more she struggled, the tighter the ropes that bound her felt. She knew it was a futile endeavor—even if she did get free, she was in no condition to attempt an escape. Plus, contrary to their insane notions, she had no special powers. Her only power was her knowledge of the earth and how its resources could be used to cure ills. What good would that do against a mob such as this?

Her heart pounded and her breathing came quick and ragged as the men kneeled down to light the kindle piled beneath her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing herself to keep calm. Her fate was sealed, but she could at least deny them the pleasure of seeing her fear. She opened her eyes, and her gaze settled on one of the spectators.

Fiona Stevens gasped as she sat up in bed. She took a deep breath and shook her head in an attempt to rid herself of the horrifying images that had begun to haunt her sleep. For the past week, she'd been having nightmares so real it took her a minute to realize who and where she was.

“Another nightmare?”

Her sister's voice brought her back to reality. She was safe and sound in the bedroom she shared with her sister, centuries removed from the days when events like the one in her dream happened. *Get a grip already.* “Yeah, it's no big deal.” She reached for the book on her nightstand and tossed it into a drawer. “I think I need to stop reading this stuff before bed. It's just fueling my muse.”

Rebecca smiled. “Writers—you're all insane.” The younger girl grew serious as she studied Fiona's face. “Are you *sure* you're okay? You're white as a sheet right now.”

“I'm fine. Seriously; it's no big deal.” Fiona pushed the comforter aside and stuffed her feet into a pair of slippers by the bed. She stood, grabbed the robe lying on the end of her bed, and then wrapped herself in the soft, warm material. “I think I'm gonna go downstairs and get something to drink. Sorry I woke you; go back to sleep.”

Her sister frowned but shrugged her shoulders. “All right. See you in the morning.” Rebecca rolled over and pulled the comforter tighter to her body.

What is wrong with me? Fiona gripped the mug of hot cocoa tightly and took a sip, allowing the hot liquid to take away the chill that had settled in her stomach ever since the first

nightmare a week ago. She could still feel heat from the flames in her dream as she looked out the kitchen window. She was beginning to question her sanity, and that terrified her.

Maybe it's stress. Fiona sat back in her chair, thinking of the stack of boxes in the corner of her closet and the empty spots on some of her shelves. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, a queasy feeling settled in her stomach. She squirmed in her seat, struggling to breathe against the sudden weight on her chest.

“Or maybe not...”

As she muttered the words, the sensations went away, allowing her to relax again. Tapping her fingers against the ceramic mug, she set it down and glanced at the clock. Seeing how much time had passed since she'd come down, she yawned as she stood and carried the cup into the living room. Fiona picked up the book she'd left on the coffee table earlier and settled into her favorite chair. *Might as well do something more constructive than watching the clock tick.*

Fiona opened the book and flipped through the pages until she found her place. Another yawn escaped her lips as she read. She stayed like that for hours, until the words swam in front of her eyes. The realization she'd read the same paragraph five times caused her to abandon the book and trudge back upstairs to her waiting bed. As Fiona pulled the covers back over herself, she prayed for a deep, dreamless sleep.

Fiona stood in her bathroom, staring at the image before her. *I look like a wreck.* Red lines covered the whites of her eyes, while the dark shadows beneath them contrasted with her pale skin. “Damage-control time,” she muttered, splashing some cold water over her face in an attempt to wake up. She'd only slept a few hours the whole night. Despite the fact her alarm had yet to go off, Fiona had opted to get up for the day. She just didn't feel like lying in bed any longer.

She contemplated her reflection a moment before opening a drawer and

digging through her makeup. She was sure she had some concealer left in there; that should take care of the dark circles at least. Fiona carefully applied the concealer, standing back afterward to inspect her work. “Not bad.”

She dropped the tube back into the drawer and pushed it closed, turning her attention to the other major sign of her sleepless nights. Fiona opened the cabinet and pulled out the eye drops she’d bought the other day. After applying the medicine, she put the bottle back and returned to the bedroom to find something to wear. Jeans, tees, and other items flew behind her as she dug through the dresser. “Ah ha; here it is!”

Fiona straightened as she pulled on her favorite top. It was a purple cotton tee she’d decorated herself. Odd symbols ran along the V-neck collar she’d put on with paint she’d gotten in a craft store. For the life of her, she couldn’t figure out how she’d come up with the design—or if it meant anything. Her best friend Amy had been fascinated with it when she first saw the shirt and had become convinced the symbols had to have some kind of meaning. Months of research by her friend produced no answers, and Fiona decided Amy read too much into a lot of things. It was just a shirt after all, made from doodles she’d done during chemistry class last year. Jeans and a pair of ankle boots finished her preparations.

With that done, she picked up her bag and left the room, stepping around some of the clutter from her clothing search. Fiona moved down the staircase as if she were walking through molasses as another yawn escaped her. She took the last couple of steps and stopped at the bottom of the stairs a moment to rub her eyes before continuing on. *Please let the kitchen be empty...* She approached the room, listening for any sound. She sighed and cursed under her breath when she heard the familiar voices. Fiona breathed deep, allowing the smell of percolating coffee to fill her lungs. Steeling herself for a potential

interrogation, she smiled and stepped into the room. “Morning.”

Her mother sat down at the table and poured some juice into a glass. “Morning, sweetie. How’d you sleep?”

She didn’t tell them. Her shoulder muscles relaxed as she grabbed her travel mug. “Not bad.” She picked up the coffee pot and poured some of the steaming liquid into the waiting container. “Hey, Becca, need a ride? I can drop you on the way to the library.”

“Sure.” Her younger sister pushed aside her plate and stood to give their parents hugs before running to the door. “I’ll be ready in five!”

“All right.” Fiona twisted the lid on her mug and opened the cabinet to retrieve a snack bar before stuffing it into the bag slung over her shoulder. Her shoes clacked against the tiled floor as she waved and attempted to hurry out of the room before they could start a conversation. “See you later!”

Her father set aside the paper he’d been reading and motioned to one of the empty seats. “Fiona, hold on. You have a few minutes until your sister’s ready. Have a seat; we wanted to talk to you a minute.”

She clenched her teeth as her mood turned even sourer. *Maybe she squealed after all.* Fiona turned and walked back to the table where she took a seat. “What’s up?”

Her father handed her an envelope. “This came yesterday.”

Fiona glanced down at the envelope, seeing the familiar seal in the corner. Her shoulders tensed, and she bit her lip as she opened it and looked at the contents. Her stomach dropped as the words registered in her mind. *I got in...*

“Well?” Her mother’s voice rose in pitch as she waited for Fiona’s answer.

Fiona folded the documents and stuffed them back into the envelope. She glanced down as she forced an answer out. “They chose someone else.” Even without looking, she could feel the change in the room. The air of anticipation had given way to an uncomfortable silence. The weight of their disappointment overwhelmed her.

“We’re sorry, sweetie.” Her father stood and walked over, wrapping his daughter in a hug.

The gentle tone of his voice and the pity in her mother’s eyes did little to soothe the growing knot in her stomach. She didn’t want to lie, but there was no way she was going to go to the school her parents wanted. Fiona had other ideas for her future, and they didn’t include giving up her spot at Lockhart for this place.

“It’s okay...at least I have somewhere else to go, right?” She tried to project the right mix of disappointment and nonchalance—the last thing she wanted was for them to try and pull some strings for her and find out about her lie. “Lockhart’s got a great campus, plus they’re closer.” She put some emphasis on the last point, hoping to play on their impending case of empty-nest syndrome.

“True.” Her mother nodded as she bit her lower lip. “You know, it would be nice for you to be closer.”

Score... Before either one could say anything else, her sister’s footsteps sounded through the house. “Sounds like Becca’s ready.” Fiona stuffed the envelope into her bag and stood. “I’d better get going.” She gave them each one last hug before hurrying for the door, almost bumping into her sister in her rush.

“Oops!” Rebecca laughed and readjusted the strap of her purse. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem.” Fiona motioned for her sister to walk and followed her out the door.

The wind whipped through the sisters’ hair as they sped down the familiar streets. Large green trees lined the road, and the sweet aroma of a neighbor’s flower garden permeated the air along with the sounds of children playing in their yards. Rebecca pulled her short brown hair back from her face with one hand while she looked out the window at the passing homes.

Fiona tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as she glanced over at her sister occasionally. Each moment

of silence between them allowed her to think a little too much about the dream she'd had and wonder whether or not she should say anything. Once she'd come to a decision, she forced the words out before she could change her mind. "I need a favor."

Rebecca looked over at Fiona, her eyebrow raised. "What?"

Fiona's gaze strayed to Rebecca a moment before turning her attention back to the road. "You know those dreams I've been having lately?"

"Yeah?"

Fiona paused, considering her words. "You haven't said anything to Mom and Dad about them, right?"

"No, why?" Rebecca reached in her bag and retrieved her lip gloss. She pulled down the visor mirror and applied a thin coat before tossing the small tube back into her purse.

"I'd just rather you not. You know how they are—I really don't need them starting to worry more than they already do."

Rebecca giggled and looked up at her sister. "Tell me about it! You are so lucky; you're going to be leaving soon. I'm stuck here another two years!"

"Exactly—it would make my life so much easier if you kept quiet. Deal?" Fiona took her right hand off of the steering wheel and extended her pinky.

Her sister linked her own pinky with Fiona's and nodded. "Deal."

Fiona pulled into the parking space, cringing as the turn of her steering wheel caused a squeal of protest. "I really need to get you checked out," she muttered. She put the car into park and slammed the door behind her as she exited the vehicle.

She paused outside the car, breathing deep. The scent of flowers filled her senses as she approached the quaint building that housed Fiona's home-away-from-home. She'd started working in the bookstore the first week of her senior year, and now she frowned as she contemplated how soon she'd be leaving it.

Paul's Books was a charming one-story house that the owner had

converted into a store when Fiona was about ten. She'd always loved visiting the place, charmed by possibilities that filled the shelves and the homey atmosphere inside. He'd used an old antique desk to house his register and adorned the hard-wood floors with old rugs. He always left the windows open during the day, filling the space with cool, fresh air and lots of natural lighting.

Chimes filled the air as she pushed open the front door. She walked toward the back of the shop, suppressing a giggle as she watched her boss struggle with an armful of books that covered his line of vision. "Looks like I showed up just in time."

"As usual. You'll have to teach me that trick someday. Can you take some of these?"

"Sure." She grabbed part of the stack and glanced at the cover of the one on top before walking across the room to put it on its proper shelf. She noticed one in perfect condition and opened the front cover, breathing deep of the distinct scent of fresh printing while Paul's back was turned.

She wandered through the store for several minutes, placing the new acquisitions on the shelves before taking her normal place at the counter. She pulled a small notebook out of her bag and began scribbling while she waited for the chimes above the front door to sound.

"What's that you're working on?" Paul walked over and opened the register before proceeding to relieve it of its contents. He glanced up at her as he flipped through the bills, no doubt adding them in his head.

She looked up from her notebook and frowned as she considered the answer to that. "I'm not sure. I have to wait and see what the characters have to say."

Paul chuckled as he finished counting the money. He placed it in a bag and scribbled some information on the front. "When you figure it out, let me know."

Fiona nodded, resuming her hasty scribbling. "You got it!"

Just as Fiona was beginning to get lost in her new story, the chimes sounded, and she snapped to attention. She sighed as she saw Sloane Phillips walking toward her. *Maybe leaving in a few months won't be so bad after all...*

"Hi, Fiona."

The smile on his face caused her stomach to twist. It was a goofy grin that made his green eyes shine and caused more than a few girls to stare. *A look like that really should be illegal.* That smile was what made her agree to go out with him. He was just so damn nice she hadn't been able to say no. That had been a mistake; he was clearly getting more serious about her than she liked. "Hi, Sloane. Did you need help finding anything?"

"No, I just came in to talk to you."

"Oh." She bit her lip and softened her tone. "Sloane, I'm working right now. Maybe we can talk a little later?" *How am I going to do this?*

He raised an eyebrow at her as he appeared to debate saying something. A moment passed, and he nodded instead. "No problem. Would it be all right if I stopped by when you get off?"

"Sure." *Why did I just say that?* She gave him a weak smile.

"Great.... See you then." He leaned over the counter and gave her a small peck on the cheek before he turned and walked away.

I'm in so much trouble... Before she could get too caught up in her thoughts, a young man approached, asking her to help him find a book. More customers filed in and out, quite a few of them needing her help. A distraction was exactly what she needed at the moment.

In Loving Memory By Yvette Forbes

We stood less than thirty feet from His cross. John suggested moving closer to hear his last words. He uttered, "Woman, behold thy son"! I heard those words over and over in my mind. I thought they were the last words I would ever hear my son say.

He was my first-born. Over the years, I watched Him mature into a wonderful man. Today, I watched and mourned silently as He gasps for His last breaths. John wrapped his arm around me, but nothing comforted me. My whole body ached.

My limbs felt sore from weariness, my head ached from not eating, while my eyes blurred because of endless tears. I felt dizzy but I refused to faint. My insides knotted up because of the pain and grief. However the physical pain was nothing compared to the heart ache. It seemed someone ripped my heart into tiny pieces as I watched Him. I recalled the words of Simeon “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be spoken against, (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

This day, those words came to pass. The hearts of many respected men of Israel were exposed; the hatred of some of our priest devastates me. How could people be this cruel? They hate without a cause. In spite of them, so much of Israel loves Yeshua; many believe and are faithful. I am grateful to John, Mary and the others, who have been loyal to the end.

We heard Him prophesy that men would destroy His temple. His death and suffering should not be a total shock. I dreamed of a pierced hand and a crown of thorns. Somehow I knew they related to Yeshua but I refused to accept His death. When the morbid dreams came to mind, I purposely put them out of my mind. Maybe the Father tried to prepare me. Maybe I should have prayed about them but nothing could have prepared me for this massacre. Just as everyone else, I hoped He would liberate our people. I was wrong. This was the worst day of my entire life.

Life isn't easy. I experienced much sorrow. I conceived before I was married. For a young Jewish girl, that could be a fatal disgrace. I am a widow. A widow woman knows sorrow. When you lose your husband it seems

a part of you has been taken away. It's a pain that takes years to heal. Yeshua stood by my side through it. I don't know if I can go on, He's been the strength of my family, my gift from God. Losing the one who brought me so much joy and peace creates a void that can never be filled.

When the Lord sent the angel to me to tell me of His birth, I felt honored and humbled. My God choose me to bring forth His Son. He said “He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of his father David. And He shall reign over the House of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”

Immediately after this visit I questioned what happened. Had I really experienced an angelic visitation or was it just my imagination? Then I remembered the writings of Moses, how Hagar had been visited by an angel and told of a child. The Lord appeared himself to Father Abraham and Sarah to tell them of Isaac, and what about Samson's mother? She too experienced an angelic visit announcing his birth. But I know not a man! How could this happen to me?

The God I serve opened the Red Sea and destroyed an army of Egyptians! He brought down the walls of the city Jericho! He caused Israel to win over many a stronger opponent. He fed them manna from Heaven and kept His children's raiment for forty years. Could He cause a virgin to give birth? This was unheard of.

Joseph was a good man. He believed the words the angel spoke to him in his dream. Joseph lived a godly life before Yeshua. He worked hard to provide for us and taught Yeshua his trade. We raised Him the best we knew how. He loved to study the scrolls, and we started reading them to Him at an early age. We did not tell the other children about His birth. But He appeared different to them. He always stood out. He took care of us all, after we lost Joseph. And when He left home to start His ministry they did not

understand, but I knew that day would come.

From the day He slept in the manger, I knew of His divinity. But how could I know He would suffer like this, How could I know they would treat Him this way? My mind cannot comprehend it all. What is happening? I wonder if there was any way to prevent this. What does it all mean? I continued to ponder all these things in my heart.

The miraculous happened in our home all the time. He would say such profound things. They would come to pass. That is why at the wedding I sought His help. We were all there that day, when they ran out of wine. I instructed the servants to do whatever He required. I knew He had only but to say a word and things would change. There are those that still speak of how great the wine tasted at that wedding.

One day, after leaving Jerusalem, we missed Him. We checked with all our other relatives. No one seemed to know where he was. His father and I went back to the temple. There He was, conversing with the elders. He spoke with authority and wisdom of one far beyond his age. It became more and more evident that He was special. Our son was adamant about doing the work of His Father in Heaven. Nothing could change His focus. I so admired that in Him. He was beautiful inside and out.

Today I am bewildered. He is the Christ! I expected to see my son seated on a throne robed in a king's garment, not hanging from a cross with his blood dripping down his body. He was the Hope of Israel, the Liberator and King. How could this be happening to Him? My God, My God, have you forsaken us?

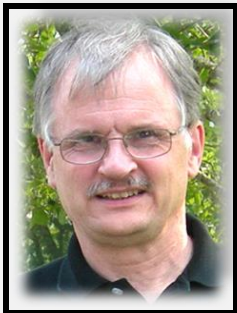
I understand now that He knew this would happen. I do not know how long He lived with this in His heart. I wish I understood more before now. I am His mother; I just want to help Him. I wish I could have done something, anything to make it easier for Him. Today He laid down His life, for no man could take it. That I know for sure. No man is responsible. His love for mankind

caused Him to submit to this. I never saw love like His.

As I pondered the whole ordeal, I feel this is more than any mother could handle. I feel so weak today, so helpless. They call me Mary, meaning strong or bitter. No one could be strong enough to endure this. However, bitterness tries to overtake me at times. Then I remembered my Son that was never His way. The hurt is so deep. I feel like I want to die. If it were possible I would have taken His place.

The Heavenly Father asked Father Abraham to sacrifice his son. He never questioned or complained. Who am I that I should question Him? I do not understand much but I know our sacrifices are for the greater good. As hard as it has been for me, I know this was for the greater good, the bigger picture. Yes, I lost my son, but the world and I gained a Savior.

Here I am talking about how hard this has been for me. My Lord took the most intense beating and made the greatest sacrifice of any man. I know that He loves us and if nothing else, today He proved it. Yes, their hatred was intense but His love was even more passionate. Have faith in God! From the heart of His loving mother, I lost my son but you do not have to lose your soul. Receive Him, He suffered much for you. He is the Christ, Savior of us all!



**Black Friday
By Rick Weber**

It was very early on a cold and damp Friday, Black Friday -the day

after Thanksgiving and Art North was trying to jump start his old Honda Civic with his wife, Marie's, almost as old Dodge Mini-van. He connected the cables to the Honda's battery and jumped into car praying that it would start. Luck was on his side and the Civic kicked over on the first try. Art was thankful for that because he had to be at work by 4:30 AM. Art was a salesman at a nearby big box store. He got the cables off both vehicles and closed up Marie's van after putting the jumper cables in the trunk of his Honda. With that done, he headed to the store.

This was Art's fourth Black Friday at the store where he worked in the electronics department. He did not always work in retail sales. Art had been a human resources (HR) manager at a local factory and lost his job more than three years earlier when the company closed the plant as a downsizing measure at the start of the recession. Art landed his new job first as a temporary worker for the holiday season but he became a regular full time employee when he had the best sales record of anyone in his department that Christmas. Art felt lucky just to have a job. The area where he lived with his family in the Northeast had been particularly hard hit by the economic downturn. No other HR positions had become available locally and relocation was not feasible. Marie worked as an elementary school teacher and had been with the local school board for over twenty years. Both Art and Marie had strong ties to their community having grown up there even attending a local college where they met. They married shortly after graduation.

Art focused on the slippery wet roadway in front of him as he drove to the store. As Art pulled into the mall parking lot, he saw that a long line of customers had staged themselves at the store's main outside entrance. Art parked near the employees' entrance and went inside to clock in. He put his overcoat and lunch in his locker and headed out to the sales floor after checking his appearance in a mirror on

his way out. His thinning gray hair was combed neatly and his store name tag was pinned evenly on his sport jacket lapel. He was ready for the opening volley of the Christmas rush. He knew that the next four weeks were crunch time not just for the store but also for him. Marie and Art were depending on his commissions from the Holiday season to help them break even with their finances for the year.

In his assigned department, Art could see his boss, Walt De Witt, waiting for him. His coworkers had yet to arrive there. Walt was anxious himself. Just like Art, he needed a good bonus check to survive. Walt greeted Art cordially by asking him, "Are you ready?" "Of course," Art quickly replied and then Walt went over the Black Friday promotions with him. Walt was glad to have Art working for him because Art was both dependable and a good salesman. In fact, Art was still the best salesman in their department. Two of Art's four coworkers are not so enthusiastic about their jobs. Why Walt put them on the schedule to open on Black Friday Art did not know. Five minutes before the doors opened, the two stragglers, Joe and Tony, showed up on the floor. With no time for Walt to chastise them, the doors opened and an onslaught of humanity was headed their way. Three customers came right to Art, who was at the cashier's counter. All three had been in a week earlier and Art gave them information on some promotional items which would be on sale. Each of them had grabbed several different items from the displays. They knew what they wanted and Art was glad that they remembered him. It was shaping up to be a good day for him. Sales were brisk for everyone on the floor, even for Joe and Tony. Art elected to work an extended shift on Black Friday when Walt asked him since he could use the money and he knew that Walt could not rely on Joe and Tony to close the sales as fast as him.

Art was glad to be busy. It kept his mind off of things at home. His relationship with Marie was solid. His

younger son, Sean, was the light of their lives; an honor student in his freshman year of high school looking forward to becoming an engineer after college. The problem was with their older son, David. He was a junior with another year and a half until graduation. While Sean was a giving child, David was always demanding. When times were good, David always got what he wanted; a new computer and a cell phone, just to name a few. Even though he was sixteen years old and could hold down an after school job, David chose not to work. On the other hand Sean, at fourteen, hustled to make his own spending money; cutting lawns in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter. Sean even put some money aside for college. Sean knew that his parents were strapped but David kept begging them for everything even though he fully was aware of their situation. David stayed out late many nights past his curfew. Art and Marie had spoken to him and even disciplined him on more than one occasion without success. Sometimes when he came home late, Art and Marie had waited up for him and found David to be inebriated or high on something when he walked in the door. They confronted him each time and each time he denied using any alcohol or drugs. Lately, Art and Marie noticed some things missing from their home such as an antique ring, an heirloom from Marie's grandmother. Like many parents, their suspicions about David's substance abuse problems were becoming confirmed and now they were discussing what to do about it.

Marie got out of bed about an hour after Art had left. It was her usual time to get up anyway. She generally used it to make lunches, grade papers, and get ready for work. Since schools were closed for the long Thanksgiving weekend, she would be doing other things on a personal level. Marie, Art, Sean, and even David spent Thanksgiving at the home of Marie's parents. Art had no close family members in the area. His parents were deceased for some time and his

siblings were scattered across the country. David stayed for dinner but left right after when a friend called him. This led to another late night for her and Art with Art needing to get up early to be at the store. David got home about 1:00 AM but was too intoxicated to have a coherent conversation with by them. He staggered up to his room and fell asleep on top of the bedcovers where he still sleeping was when Marie got up later that morning and checked on him. Sean was also sleeping but had plans to start work later in the morning at a Christmas tree stand to make money for Christmas presents. Sean had stayed up with his parents for a time while they waited for David. Art and Marie told Sean to go to bed before it got to be too late knowing of his plans to work.

Marie sat at the kitchen table with her laptop in front of her. She was searching the internet for counseling services to help them with David. With the missing jewelry from the house, she and Art knew that rehabilitation may be David's next stop but they needed to go through some other steps first. The school district furnished her with some leads and now it was up to her and Art to find a solution even if David was resistant. Visiting the various websites made Marie cry. She asked herself, as she had done a number of times before, how could two boys raised by the same parents under the same roof be so different; Sean so kind and giving with David so selfish and demanding.

After an hour, Marie could not bear the process any longer and turned off her computer. She got dressed and came back to the kitchen to make breakfast. With the coffee pot brewing, she heard Sean behind her saying, "Good morning, Mom." She turned to him and smiled saying, "Good morning, sleepy head. What can I get you for breakfast?" Sean was beginning to show signs of growing up and with his changing voice he told Marie, "A couple of fried eggs and toast would be great." Marie fried a couple of eggs for herself along with the two she was making for Sean while he made toast for both of

them. They ate together as Sean discussed his plans for today. He asked Marie, "Can you drop me off at the tree stand by nine? I don't want to be late. Mr. Smith wants me to help him set up a display." "No problem," she replied as she was cleaning the skillet. She got Sean to the stand run by their neighbor, Bob Smith -a nursery owner, promptly at nine. As she kissed Sean on the cheek, she wished him luck on his new venture before returning home to find that David was still in bed.

With the house somewhat to herself, she called a counseling service, which happened to be open, and made an appointment for early the following week for her and Art to meet to talk about David. Her initial conversation not only confirmed that David had a substance abuse problem but that from what Marie outlined about David's recent behavior, the problem was getting worse. After she hung up with the service, Marie just sat at the kitchen table and sobbed. The thing which ran over and over again in her mind was at sixteen David was throwing his life away with her and Art almost helplessly being forced to watch. After she got her emotions in check, Marie cleaned up the kitchen and put away some serving pieces she had taken to her parents' house for Thanksgiving.

It was after 11:00 AM when David finally woke up. He came down to the kitchen to find Marie going over the monthly bills at the table. "Good morning," he said with a groggy slur to his voice. Marie turned to him and snapped, "Where were you last night? We were worried about you." "I was just out with the guys hanging out," came his vague reply. Marie just shook her head knowing that this would be the best answer she would get from him. She also knew that her and Art would need to confront David together after they saw the counselor. "What are you doing today?" Marie asked him. "I am going out to the mall with a few people to do some window shopping," was his once again vague response. "Well, I am going over to your grandparents to

help out with Grandma for a bit while Grandpa does some errands,” Marie said. Marie’s mother had Alzheimer’s disease and Marie went over as much as she could to give her father a respite. With that, Marie put on her coat and told David, “There’s leftover turkey in the refrigerator if you want something to eat.” David could only mutter okay as she walked out the door to her van. As she got into the van, Marie only hoped that nothing else would be missing from the house when she returned.

Although he was having a long day, Art was making a lot of sales. It was now noon and he called Marie on his lunch break to see how things were going. She was still on her way to her parents’ place and gave Art the rundown about appointment with the family counselor along with her conversation with David after he got out of bed. Art and Marie commiserated and made some plans for confronting David about his issues after their meeting with the counselor. “I never thought that we would have to go through something like this,” Art told her in a shaking voice. “I know,” Marie responded quietly as she pulled in front the house. “I used to wonder how parents could let their kids get hooked on drugs before this happened to us,” Marie felt the tears well up again in her eyes. “We’ll see what the counselor says next week and then we may have to drop the hammer on David,” Art resolutely said to her. Before Art could go on, Marie cut him short after seeing her father waving to her from the front door. “Art, I have to go. Daddy is waiting for me.” “I know,” Art replied. “I have to get back to work myself. I should be home about six. We’ll talk some more then.” On a lighter note to change the mood, Marie told Art, “I hope you know that we’re having leftovers for dinner.” “I wouldn’t expect anything else,” Art said with a laugh, “I love you.” “And I love you, too,” Marie responded as she hung up.

At about 5:30 PM, Marie’s father got home from his rounds and Marie told him about spending the afternoon

going through family photographs with her mother. They both sadly noted that Marie’s mother was succumbing more and more to her disease. Marie hugged her father and left. She got home to find David gone, which she expected. As she began to get things out of the refrigerator for dinner she heard a knock at the door. At the same time, Art finished up at the store for the day and was headed home. As he pulled into their block, he saw a police car parked in their driveway. His first thought was what David has done now. He hurried inside and saw Marie seated on the living room sofa crying profusely. Two officers were with her. One, a female, was sitting beside her with her male partner standing nearby.

“What happened?” Art asked in a stressed tone. “There’s been an accident,” the male officer started to say. Before the officer could finish, Art butted in, “What happened to David?” Then he heard Marie cry out, “It’s not David! It’s Sean! He’s dead!” With that Art’s knees buckled and the male officer guided him to a nearby winged back chair. “Mr. North,” the male officer continued in a calm quiet tone, “Sean was struck at the Christmas Tree stand by an elderly woman who had a stroke while driving her car down Main Street. He was hit along with a man who was there to buy a tree. They both died on impact. We are sorry for your loss.” The officers stayed for awhile giving Art and Marie the information they would need for the undertaker to claim Sean’s body. Both Art and Marie then went over to Marie’s parents to break the news to them. David was nowhere to be found and his cell phone was turned off. They left him no message. Marie’s father was devastated crying uncontrollably while her mother looked at them in a state of confusion. The rest of the weekend was spent making arrangements for Sean’s funeral and David did not make it home until Sunday night when Art and Marie gave him the news. David cried but they did not believe his tears.

Sean was buried the following Tuesday in a plot near Art’s parents’

graves. The funeral service and burial were crowded with relatives, friends, and Sean’s classmates. All deeply mourned Sean’s passing. David stayed close to home for Sean’s wake and burial but stepped out for some unexplained short periods of time returning home each time under the influence of something. After the funeral, David again disappeared but Art and Marie had too much going on to chase after him. At their home, Art and Marie graciously received the other mourners. Their neighbors, many had known Sean his whole life, brought over large servings of food for those who were there. This was viewed as quite generous by Art and Marie since some of them were also having tough economic times. Walt De Witt came to extend his condolences and told Art when he was away from the other visitors to take as much time off from work as he needed. Art thanked Walt and told him that he would be back to work the following day but would need to take some time off later in the week to attend to some other matters. Walt’s reply to Art was, “Just let me know and we will work with you at the store.”

Two days after Sean’s burial, Art and Marie got in to see the family counselor, Dr. Charles St. Clair a psychologist specializing in substance abuse. Dr. St. Clair got right to the point. “David needs in-patient treatment. His unexplained absences and under the influence behavior when he comes home both indicate that something serious is going on with him. We won’t be able to know the extent of his problems until we have the opportunity to talk with him. I know that this is hard on both of you especially with the loss of his brother, Sean. David is sixteen and you as his parents can have him hospitalized without his consent. We can help you with this by having an intervention. This will be difficult for you and, we will work with you at each step. You are not alone.” With that both Art and Marie sobbed together dreading the thought of losing two sons. Dr. St. Clair gave them information for the center and a contact

number for them to call when David finally showed up at home.

The following day as he was sleeping off another stint of partying, three large men came into David's room, woke him up, and spirited him out of the house to a waiting van passed his parents who were crying in the living room. "Where are you taking me?" screamed David at the top of his lungs. "To some place safe," said one of the men. Initial assessments at the rehabilitation center revealed that David had a serious drug problem and that he would be an in-patient for an unspecified time. Art and Marie faced this with silent resignation and hoped for the best. The good thing was that David was still a minor and could not sign himself out of the treatment program. He had to face his problems.

During the rest of the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Art and Marie grieved for the loss of Sean and prayed for David. Art worked long hours at the store while Marie spent time with her parents when she was not in school teaching. It was a long painful interlude for them. A week after the funeral, Marie went into Sean's room for the first time and the shoe box where Sean kept his extra money and valuables was empty. Marie sat down on Sean's bed and cried. David had robbed his dead brother. Art also broke down himself later when he got home from work and Marie told him. Still, they had to continue in the Holiday spirit. With Marie in charge of the school's Christmas pageant and Art putting on his best face at the store for the customers, they both felt that this was the most difficult Christmas they ever would have. Grieving for Sean and waiting for more information about David made thoughts of celebrating the Season the last things on their minds.

Dr. St. Clair told Art and Marie at a family counseling session that David was proving to be a hard case most notably in group therapy; denying he had a problem and blaming Art and Marie for his situation. Although he could not go into specifics with them

because of doctor-patient confidentiality, Dr. St. Clair told them not to give up on David yet. Their health insurance from the school board allowed for a certain amount of in-patient care so for the time being they would not be hit with huge bills from the hospital. At this point according to treatment protocol, they could not have contact with David. For the time being, Marie and Art were not anxious themselves to see David.

As the Christmas Day drew closer, Marie and Art, when he could, spent their free time with Marie's parents. Her mother's memory was fading but she still asked, "Where are David and Sean?" Marie and Art went all out and decorated her parents' house not just for her mother and father but, for themselves, as well. Lights, a train garden, and a large tree with the many ornaments her parents had collected over the years graced the living room. A festive wreath was on the front door and lighted candles were in every window of the house. Even with her declining condition, Marie's mother helped address Christmas cards and strange as it may seem, Marie's father and Marie got some sense of purpose by explaining to her who some of the people were whom she had forgotten as she addressed the envelopes. Art was glad that Walt De Witt listened to him outside of work while he vented his frustrations with David and his loss of Sean. As it turned out, Walt was that one true friend to Art, a friend most people never have and Walt continued to help Art through this most difficult time.

On Christmas morning, Art had his first day off since Sean's funeral and he went with Marie early to her parents' place. Their own home was dark and unadorned. They had no one there with whom to share the holiday. The place evoked pain. They would never get over the loss of Sean. As for David, they still had not had any direct contact with him but Dr. St. Clair had told them that David was making some progress. This was a sign of hope but Marie and

Art knew that for David there was a long way to go.

They entered Marie's parents' house to find her mother having a good day and her father upbeat. They exchanged gifts, ate a hearty breakfast, and made calls to family members living outside of the area. It was the first time that both Marie and Art had smiled and laughed in almost a month.

Indeed, this Christmas was the most difficult one Art and Marie would ever have. The best thing to come of it was a stronger bond between them and greater love for each other as they looked to the New Year. This was the best gift they could have given each other.

Serenity's Freedom by S.N. Wong

Taylor slammed the door and made her way down the mansion steps. At the end of the stairs she looked up into the sky. She was free. Her engagement to the man of her nightmares was over. She spun around a couple of times. Somehow, she could not ignore the fear of an unknown future that crept into her chest. Thunder boomed from the sky and lightning flashed. She walked down the hill and stopped midway to take off her slippers. She turned to look at the intimidating mansion. She'd walk in the rain. Anything was better than going back in that hell house. As she dug through her purse to search for her phone, she heard it beep.

LOW BATTERY. Just great she thought. Now what?

Danny swept the bakery from front to back and truth be told, he was exhausted. The last few days had been hectic. He had more customers than he ever could have imagined. He had travelled from state to state looking for the perfect small town and he had found it. He had fallen in love with the town, the people, and the atmosphere. At twenty seven he wanted a new start, a fresh beginning. College had never been for him, so he found his niche and it had been painting and baking. Danny looked over at the painting of his Aunt

Iris he had painted two years ago. She was lovely, elegant. She raised him the best way she knew how when his mother had left. He remembered the day his mother Andrea dropped him off at her older sister's house, he was only eight. She kissed him, said she'd be back in a week. She never came back.

Over the years he had given his aunt more than enough trouble. From being suspended from school to being in and out of juvenile detention centers. Sometimes he wondered if he were the reason for her bad heart. He had worked odd jobs all his life, but always dreamed of opening a business. With the money that Aunt Iris left for him, he was able to travel for a bit before settling down and opening a bakery. Aunt Iris loved to bake. She had taught him everything he knew about various pastries, cakes and buns. As a troubled teenager, baking and painting was all that interested him. Danny smiled at his aunt's painting; he knew she would have been so happy of what he had accomplished.

Some of his other paintings adorned the walls. Every day he was asked by his customers, who the famous painters were. He would flash his greatest smile and say "I am." The looks on the customer's faces were priceless.

The bakery was small. There had been two couches, thirteen tables with three wooden chairs at each of them. Each table was covered with a blue and white table cloth, with vases and lilies within them. The walls were burgundy and matched the pillows on the couch. The smooth and slippery hardwood floor could be dangerous for customers on a day like this. Perhaps that was an adjustment he would have to make. He knew if he renovated the floor, he would have to risk closing the bakery down for a couple days. Danny knew his customers would not like that one bit, especially the elderly women that came in everyday for their coffee cakes and banana bread.

Danny was glad he sent Monica and Troy home before the storm began. They were two great kids, who seemed to enjoy their afterschool job. He really

hoped they were safe. Danny peered out the window, the storm wasn't letting up and the lights continued to flicker on and off. Danny decided to go into the backroom of the bakery. He took his two fingers and made a whistling sound. He waited. He repeated the gesture again, until he saw spots in his peripheral view. He bent down and brushed his hand over Rex. He was getting old that's for sure, but Danny could never imagine life without him.

He had almost lost the dog a couple of days before in an accident. Danny thought he would have lost Rex if it were not for the gorgeous veterinarian. The Jack Russell Terrier wagged his tail from side to side. "Good boy Rex." The dog's tongue hung out from his mouth. He loved to be petted. Danny made his way around, closing the blinds of all the windows. As he did so, he could not help but notice that Rex's breathing was labored, and he was not as energetic as before. Danny felt sorry for the poor guy; he knew the ragged breathing was due to the dog's bruised ribs.

Danny sat down at a table and looked down at his clothes. He was filthy. He had dough all over his white tee shirt and blue jeans. All he wanted was a hot bath. "Well Rex I guess it's just me and you as usual." The dog wagged his tail in response before curling up underneath the table. Danny put his feet up and folded his arms and closed his eyes. As he thought about how good warm water would feel against his body, he dozed off. He could hear the thunder clap, and see the lightning flash underneath his eyelids.

He heard the tapping sound of Rex's paws against the floor. The next thing he knew Rex was scratching at the glass door and began to bark. Danny stirred from his sleep rubbing his eyes. He looked down at his watch; he had been asleep no more than twenty minutes. Even with being sick and small, Rex sure had one hell of a bark.

Danny got up from his seat, and looked out the glass door. "What's out there buddy? What do you see that I

can't?" Danny tried his best to look through the showers, but it was rather hard. He pressed his forehead to the cold glass and looked into the sky, this was some storm. Just then something caught his eye. He saw what appeared to be a dress blowing in the wind. No it can't be.

Who was crazy enough to walk in a storm like this? He had no doubt in his mind the figure he was seeing walking at a fast pace down the middle of the street was a woman. The woman was barefoot. She stopped in the middle of the road, and raised her head to the sky. The next thing he knew she was stomping her feet and talking to herself. The rain and wind whipped her from side to side violently. Rex continued to bark even louder. "Alright Rex, alright" he said trying to calm the dog down. "It appears we have a damsel in distress on our hands."

Danny opened the door, and screamed "Hey! Over here! Hey!" She turned in his direction. The lady was drenched; her dress clung to her body as she shivered. She was obviously hesitant to run over to him. But did she really have a choice? The newspaper she held over her head was destroyed. She held her purse to her as if it somehow gave her warmth. She looked from her left and then again to her right. She proceeded to run over to him, making small splashes as she went. She approached the sidewalk slowly. She looked up at the awning of the bakery confused.

It read AUNT IRIS'S BAKERY. This must have been the new bakery her mother had told her about. "I'm-m- m s-o-r-r-y sir, but can I?" She stopped abruptly. "Doc?" He said with recognition. They stared at each other for a few moments. Just a week ago she had tended to this beautiful man's dog that had gotten hit by a car. Taylor knew the dog's name. But what was his?

He pulled her in and locked the door behind him. Rex wagged his tail, his tongue hanging out. He appeared happy to see her. She bent down. "Rex was that you barking?" she ran her

hand over the dog's head. "I can hear you a mile away boy." Danny watched the exchange between the two. After exchanging greetings with Rex she stood up to face the beautiful stranger. She was visibly still shaking. Danny couldn't help but think how helpless and cute she looked. He stared at her again. Her hair appeared even longer, now that it was wet, past the middle of her back. Her lower lip quivered. "Well we meet again."

"Yes we do." He said as he raised a curious eyebrow and itched his head. "Hey, umm maybe jumping off a deep end here, but why are you walking in a storm?" Taylor opened her mouth to answer. He cut her off and looked down at her feet. He held back a laugh. "And barefoot I may add." As she went to answer him again, he noticed her teeth starting to chatter. She watched his eyes switch from teasing to concern. This fascinated her; Alan had never been this caring. "Hold that thought" he disappeared to the back with Rex on his heels.

Taylor set her drenched purse down on the table. Little did she know that a little drizzle would turn into a full on storm by the time she entered town, but that was Florida weather. She looked around the café, it was nice. Better than some of the other shops in town. The paintings on the wall were beautiful, and it made the public place seem like a home. He emerged from the back, switching a light on. He held a big towel in his hand. He wrapped it around her with familiarity, as if he had done it with her a million times.

"Listen I'm sorry doc, but unfortunately I don't keep clothes in the bakery." "It-it's okay, I'm surprised you found a towel." He wrapped it around her tighter. Danny figured it was time to back away. Rex stood in between them, wagging his tail back and forth. She sensed Danny's uneasiness. "Continue to try and warm yourself up."

She nodded.

Before Taylor could open her mouth to speak, he had disappeared to the back once again. She ran the towel through her hair, and then patted down

the rest of her body. For once she was thankful her sun dress was of cotton material, although still damp, she was sure it would dry soon. Taylor sat down, and Rex lay next to her feet. She smiled down at him. "I see someone is feeling better."

Danny watched her from the back. She spoke to Rex like he was a real person. Since he was not quite sure what Taylor liked, he handpicked an assortment of everything, from cornbread, pound cakes, to croissants. He even put his Aunt Iris's famous banana nut bread and Danishes on a tray. Danny then boiled some water and made her ginger tea.

"Here this should warm you up" he said putting the tray down in front of her. She squinted her eyes at the goodie tray. She took a sip of the tea instead. The ginger lingered on her nostrils. His hazel eyes twinkled. His smile must have been contagious because she smiled back, and then quickly looked out the window at the storm. Silence.

Taylor looked at the tray again. Her stomach growled. She reached for a piece of banana nut bread, and pulled her hand back. "Go ahead, try it."

Taylor! She yelled in her head. Did you not just end your engagement about an hour ago? Get it together!

His voice broke into her thoughts. "Try it, they're great. The chef makes a batch from scratch every single day. You having a couple won't hurt the bakery, trust me" He winked.

Taylor grabbed a piece of the banana nut bread and tasted it. At that point she did not care if a storm were outside; heaven was right inside her mouth. She closed her eyes and savored every piece. When she opened them, he was studying her with a seriousness she couldn't read. "By the way you just reacted, I have to try one" he tore off a piece and threw it in his mouth. "Yes, this is tasty if I must say so myself". He maintained eye contact as he chewed. She shivered again and cleared her throat.

"Give Aunt Iris my kudos about this banana nut bread it is heavenly!" "Aunt

Iris isn't the one who made this" Taylor stopped mid chew. "Then who did?" He was quiet. He watched her face change. "No! You didn't! You can bake? That is great!" He laughed as her eyes lit up with amazement.

"Try the pound cake" he said. "I can't have all these on this tray; a girl has to watch her figure." "What figure? Girl you are all skin and bones, here try this." He picked up the pound cake and eased it into her mouth. Even though his sentence had been simple, she could hear the southern drawl; he was definitely from the Deep South. But where? Alabama? Georgia? Texas?

Under normal circumstances, she would not let a strange man, whose name she did not know, make a jab at her weight and feed her pound cake in the middle of a storm after she broke up with her fiancé an hour ago. No, thank you she would not! But she let him get away with it. As she chewed the pound cake she found it was way better than the banana nut bread. He leaned forward as he watched her reaction.

"Now what was your name again doc?" She laughed. With her mouth still half full, she said "Taylor. Doctor Taylor Smith."

"I think I like doc better." Taylor's head shot back. The nerve of this man. He put his hands up in mock surrender. "Don't kill me doc, I can call you doc right?" She looked up to his full 6'3 frame. "Sure" she replied, trying to remain calm and cool as the butterflies fluttered in her stomach. You can call me whatever you like! She thought to herself.

"I'm going to get a glass of orange juice, want anything else?"

"Actually I do want your name." He rubbed his chin. "Daniel."

She waited for his last name.

"The name's Daniel No Last Name." He laughed as he made his way to the back of the store. Taylor turned to look out the window. What a night she had had. What were the odds she'd end up with this handsome stranger on a stormy night? Taylor

looked down at Rex, who had been sound asleep. She sighed. “Daniel No Last Name, I think I like the sound of that.” She sipped her tea and watched the storm rage outside. Everything was going to be alright.



Enjoy Some Holiday Poems!

**Holidays, Families, Friends, Oh My!
By Barbara Jean Kaufman**

I miss my family on holidays!
Most of them died. I have friends, but,
not the same.
WAIT A MINUTE! How can I miss such
Yelling! Bickering! Criticism!
Conversations like: “You were
supposed to bring this!”
Why didn’t I get that! I hate this gift!
Mom likes you better than me!
There was no REAL Dad!
Well at least the food was great!
We baked Slovakian sweet breads:
poppy seed, walnut, and cheese. All
rolled up in swirled rings!
Delicious! Ah tradition!
I like real trees -- not some plastic
colored one!
The smell of pine cones -- sweet and
fresh.
Fir trees -- rich green, moist to the
touch.
Friends are nice. And I am grateful!
But, no matter how BAD the holiday
was.
And at times, I didn’t want them.
I still MISSED my family. I Still MISS
my family!

**Have Yourself A Merry Little
Christmas: Music composed by
Hugh Martin, lyrics by Ralph Blane**

Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
Let your heart be light
From now on,
our troubles will be out of sight
Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
Make the Yule-tide gay,
From now on,
our troubles will be miles away.
Here we are as in olden days,
Happy golden days of yore.
Faithful friends who are dear to us
Gather near to us once more.
Through the years
We all will be together,
If the Fates allow
Hang a shining star upon the highest
bough.
And have yourself A merry little
Christmas now.

**'Christmas Bells'
Poem by Henry Wadsworth**

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had
come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The Carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said;
‘For hate is strong,

And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!’

Then pealed the bells more loud and
deep:
‘God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!’

Jingle Bells

Dashing through the snow
In a one horse open sleigh
O'er the fields we go
Laughing all the way
Bells on bob tails ring
Making spirits bright
What fun it is to laugh and sing
A sleighing song tonight

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one horse open sleigh
Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one horse open sleigh

A day or two ago
I thought I'd take a ride
And soon Miss Fanny Bright
Was seated by my side
The horse was lean and lank
Misfortune seemed his lot
We got into a drifted bank
And then we got upst

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one horse open sleigh
Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one horse open sleigh yeah

Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way
Oh, what fun it is to ride
In a one horse open sleigh
Jingle bells, jingle bells
Jingle all the way
Oh, what fun it is to ride

In a one horse open sleigh
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.

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Please specify the story and writer. Thanks!

*The writer's group meets the second Monday of every month from 6:00pm – 7:30pm and the fourth Thursday of every month from 1:00pm – 2:30pm. Thanks!

Remaining 2013 schedule

***Dec. 9: 6pm-7:30pm**



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