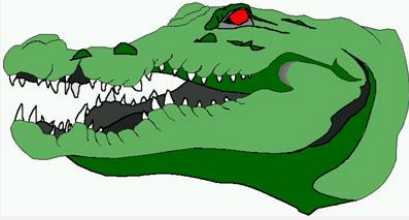


# The Portal



**Nature Center**  
**By DiVitto Kelly**

The sun was settling in nicely around the Boca Grande Nature Center, located in Port Charlotte, a sleepy, old-fashioned town just north of Fort Myers on the southwest coast of Florida. A married couple in their mid forties paddled leisurely on matching banana yellow rental kayaks.

"Maybe it wasn't such a good idea drinking beers out here," said Mark Kennedy, a bit light-headed after consuming half a six pack, his shoulders aching after nearly two hours of navigating through the mangrove-filled waterways. He waved away again at the feasting no-see-ums, this time with less vigor.

"I told you Gatorade or water, dodo," replied Jenny, his wife of fifteen years, going on divorce.

"But we're on vacation dear," Mark answered, with just the wrong hint of sarcasm. "I mean, look, it's mid-December, 75 degrees, and we're here alone enjoying the Florida Amazon." Their hometown of Indian Hill, Ohio was digging out from a pre-holiday snowstorm. Mark was hoping to repair their teetering marriage, but so far, he'd gotten off on the wrong paddle.

His wife exhaled, leaning back a bit on the non-forgiving hard plastic backing and smiled. "You're right; hand me a beer deary." Mark perked up a bit as he unzipped the small neon green cooler. The six pack of Red Stripe beer, now down to a precious three, were still nice and chilled.

At the nature center, the staff of two full time employees and one volunteer prepared to lock up shop; Saturdays were always the busiest days of the week. Carol Manning, park naturalist and manager of the distinctively quaint center for the last twelve years, was on the phone with Florida Fish and Game, who were investigating a missing fisherman.

While on hold, Carol put her hand over the receiver. "Steve, can you clean the glass on the tanks; after that school visit, they've got more fingerprints on it than the FBI has on file."

Steve Sabal, the other employee at the center, handled tank maintenance, animal care, and conducted daily boat tours. The largest of the tanks, ten feet in length by six feet wide, was home to a yard-long nurse shark. The other tank included snook, puffer fish, sheepshead, and one feisty mangrove snapper.

"Is there anything else you need me to do?" asked Susan Akins, a seventy-six-year-old woman who began volunteering at the center five months ago after her husband died. Her two passions in life now were butterfly gardens and fresh lemonade with a hefty splash of vodka.

"Give me a minute Susan," replied Carol, still on hold.

The center featured a large exhibit hall, with ecological displays throughout. Besides the two saltwater tanks housing the local marine life, there was a touch tank area where kids could pick up harmless starfish – now called sea stars, sand dollars, small shells, and a plate-sized horseshoe crab. In two separate rooms, one featured a video showcasing the natural beauty surrounding the center and its inhabitants. The other was a small office with two desks and computers. The soda vending machine just outside the office hadn't been replenished in ages; the only brand left was Fresca.

"Guys, do you want to join me tonight for pizza at Rocco's? My treat." asked Carol, now holding up her hand signaling quiet. "I'm sorry, what?"

Attacked? By what? Where? Oh jeeze. Okay, we'll keep a look out."

"What's wrong," asked Steve, placing the roll of paper towels and Windex down on a table. Susan walked over. Both could read Carol's worried face a mile away.

"A fisherman, John Garrett, I know him - been here before lots of times fishing off our dock," said Carol, in her mid-fifties with a perpetual Florida suntan. "He's missing – said they found his Boston Whaler tangled up in the mangroves about a half mile from here. And there was blood – lots of it, near the stern,"

Susan gasped; Steve hesitated then remembered the man, having fished with him before. There was something else on Steve's mind.

Mark and Jenny spent part of their two hour journey in an open area, free of the intertwining maze of red mangroves. The murky, brackish water, even in the deepest part of the pristine estuary, was no more than seven feet deep, with another two feet of muck thrown in. Both got a kick watching mullet leaping out of the water, hoping to snag a mid-air meal. Needlefish darted along the surface snatching up small fish. A lone osprey made its high-pitched call from the branch of a dead pine tree by the waters' edge. As they approached the shoreline near the entangled mangroves, a pair of great blue herons stood, spearing fish with their lethal bills.

The dissipating late afternoon sun dropped behind towering sea grapes and melaleuca trees, the latter marked for removal due to its invasive properties. The Gulf of Mexico was only a quarter-mile west. "This place is just beautiful," remarked Jenny.

"Yeah," replied Mark, "In a prehistoric kind of way."

"A far cry from the 'burbs of Cincy, isn't it?" said Jenny, sporting a slight sunburn on her nose and pronounced cheekbones. Her ponytail was threaded through the back of her pastel green Polo cap.

The Kennedy's were the last visitors at the center. They were instructed to

return by five-thirty sharp; due to the center closing, but were already fifteen minutes behind schedule. Jenny accidentally spilled beer on her lap; Mark polished off the remainder of his.

“Crapola! We better head back or they’ll charge us another fifteen bucks for being late,” said the man, glancing at his silver metal watch with glow-in-the-dark features. He spun his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap backwards and started paddling, grunting out the Hawaii Five-O music theme. Jenny laughed. A light drizzle began to fall; darkening clouds creeping in.

The two aimed for a narrow passageway that lead back to the rental area, a small sliver of land next to the center. Mark looked skyward, but something caught his eye. A large dark shape swam fast under the two, creating a powerful swell that lifted up both kayaks.

“What the hell was that?” barked Jenny, unnerved as she rested the paddle on her lap. Jenny surveyed the water, but a wave of muddy silt clouded the brownish water even more.

“Wow,” said Mark, excited he might see something other than soaring fish or wading birds. “I bet that was a manatee,” he boasted, glancing down at the soaked trifold brochure.

“See, it says it right here,” as he pointed at the back of the trifold. “They get pretty big you know; they’re supposed to be common in this place, especially during the cold weather months.” He continued to look around, but figured whatever it was, it was long gone.

Jenny led the way. It was suddenly darker, much more than before. Both paddled quietly, observing everything like they were entering a million years past.

“Kinda eerie, huh?” said Mark, looking at the thick canopy above. Jenny took out her camera and aimed at a pair of egrets standing motionless on the bank; a perfect photo opt. Tree crabs scurried as their kayaks cruised quietly by. “I think I better use the flash.”

Mark speared his paddle into the muddy depths below to see how deep the water was. “It’s barely five feet deep here.”

“What was that?” Jenny called out, preoccupied with her new digital camera, an early Christmas present from her husband.

“Nothing, I was . . . What the fudge? I think something’s got my . . . The man was pulled into the water, barely making a ripple.

“Our friends are gonna love this one,” said Jenny, who turned around only to notice the empty kayak floating towards the muddy embankment. “Oh my God, Mark, where are you! Mark!”

He surfaced, spitting water from his mouth. “Something grabbed my paddle; I guess those manatees pack a mean bite.” Jenny let out a cautious laugh, but begged her husband to get out of the water right away.

“If you read the brochure down a little farther, it also says, occasional sharks inhabit this place. He swam back to retrieve his kayak, about to climb aboard when he was pulled under again, this time with more force. “Ugh! Je . . .”

The water turned a reddish brown as the thing tore into Mark’s midsection. His wife screamed in horror. The man surfaced; his eyes wide with terror. He frantically reached up to grasp the hanging mangrove branched above. “Get it off me!” He screamed again, but went under. A dark shape with a textured back surfaced briefly then submerged. Under water, Mark screamed a line of bubbles that quickly died out.

Jenny screamed out her husband’s name, paddling around in a frantic circle. She faced the spot where her husband disappeared. Hyperventilating from sheer fright, Jenny stared at the water. “Mark?” Her lips trembled; tears cascading down her thin face as she watched her husband’s kayak now drifting away with the gentle current.

A splash caught Jenny’s attention, making the woman snap out of her horrific trance. The elongated shape surfaced; a mixture of olive drab,

golden khaki with black markings. It let out a hissing breath before sinking below the gloomy water.

The woman maneuvered the kayak in the direction of the nature center and began paddling, pulling the water hard with each stroke. She glanced back; it was approaching. She screamed for help, but could barely form the words. Whatever it was, it was streaming towards her with substantial force, creating a wake that reached both sides of the waterway. It was now a paddles’ length behind Jenny before submerging under the kayak. The woman screamed as she felt a scraping sound on the plastic craft. Jenny whirled the paddle around in self-defense holding it like a harpoon.

The waterway began to taper, no more than twelve feet wide now. The air was cooler, only shards of light penetrated through the dense mangrove forest. Jenny needed to rest, but knew she couldn’t. Her arms ached and she had blisters on both hands.

“Come on, not too far to go,” Jenny thought, maybe another hundred feet at most. She paddled hard, but quickly tired. “Pace yourself Jenny, you’re almost there!” A burst of thunder rumbled through as the rains intensified.

“What the fu . . .?” Jenny noticed large floating branches dead ahead, blocking the way back to the center. “This is the wrong way! Shit!” She screamed again for help; her situation going from bad to hopeless. She was trapped.

Jenny plunged the paddle into the water. “Not even two feet deep! Good.” She looked behind her. Nothing. The woman jumped out of the kayak still gripping the paddle in her sore hands for defense and hurried straight into the heart of the mangroves, scraping her limbs on barnacles encrusted on the sprawling mangrove roots. The saltwater made the fresh wounds sting.

The creature lunged at the kayak, clenching the yellow shape in its jaws before snapping it in two. Jenny screamed as the creature – an alligator? No, a crocodile; its

recognizable face more pointed than its rounded counterpart. The hideous teeth were dirty white and immense. The huge animal, topping out at twenty-six feet in length, stampeded towards the frightened woman. Jenny navigated her aching body through and around the dense foliage, desperately searching for solid footing.

Maybe she could at least maneuver better than a gigantic reptile. Hopefully. The crocodile kept coming, barreling through the mass of pronged growth. Jenny made a quick right leading into more dense vegetation. It was getting darker. She could hear the sounds of breaking tree limbs as the crocodile pushed forward, relentless. Jenny used the paddle to pull vault over pockets of water. From the corner of her eye, she spotted her husbands' vacant kayak caught between a perfect v-shaped wedge of roots.

Tears formed as she approached the rental; the green cooler still resting on the open seat. There, she could see the long walkway and lights coming from the center. Jenny jumped in and paddled away.

"What did Florida Fish and Game have to say?" asked Steve, age 38, blond, slender, and sporting a week-old beard. He pushed the bill of his County issued baseball cap up. "Those two kayakers never returned; I better take the boat out."

"Go, but be careful," replied Carol. "It's already dusk so take the big flashlight." Steve went back to the office and grabbed the heavy-duty flashlight and walked outside the front door, stopping just past a bench.

Jenny saw the lighted walkway leading to the center. Thankfully it was high tide, making it easier to climb up. "Help me . . . hey, over here, help me!" Steve turned to his left, peering out at the water. The rain started coming down harder followed by an ominous round of thunder.

The woman kept paddling, as fast as her exhausted limbs could muster. She looked back, hearing broken tree limbs and then a splash. "Damn you!"

Carol walked outside, glancing up at the darkening clouds; the sun almost vanished beyond the Gulf of Mexico.

"You see anything Steve?"

"Not yet, but I hear someone."

"It's after me, help me, help me!"

The frantic woman approached the walkway and tried standing up on the kayak, wobbling. Steve raced down the walkway and looked over the side. Steve followed her as she approached. He could read the terror in her face.

"There's a giant crocodile after me!" she screamed. "It killed my husband!"

Steve reached down and grabbed her arm. "I've got you; it's okay." Carol ran over and offered a hand, pulling the woman safely onto the walkway.

"A crocodile? Are you sure it was a crocodile?" asked the man. Jenny let out a primal scream. "I know I'm from freaking Ohio, but I know what the hell a crocodile looks like; I took science in school you know!"

Steve looked at Carol. "We may have an emergency situation here."

"May have?" yelled the woman. "I'm telling you . . ."

The giant reptile jettisoned its heavy body onto the walkway, crushing a large section of the recycled material like Popsicle sticks. The woman fell into the water. "Oh my God," yelled Carol.

"Help me!" Jenny screamed as she frantically reached for the walkway, reaching for the plastic beams. Steve reached down, but her hand was thrusting in every direction. Finally, he grasped her blistered hand, then her elbow.

The crocodile emerged from behind Jenny; Steve and Carol's eyes widened in disbelief; it was huge. The woman, reading their collective faces, turned her head back. The reptile quickly pounced on the victim, inhaling half her body before biting down, killing her instantly. Carol turned around and heaved; Steve, speechless, still clasped Jenny's limp hand before the croc pulled away. Worse now, there was a ten-foot section of walkway missing. They were isolated. The only way back to safety was either the

center or take the pontoon boat, now rocking from the wind and rain.

The two employees stormed back into the center out of breath. Steve locked the door. "We need something to . . ." He saw Susan looking over his shoulder.

"Oh my God!" screamed Susan as she watched the reptile approached the door. The two staggered away as the crocodile slammed into the glass, shattering it on impact. Only the door's metal frame kept the frenzied animal out.

"Run now!" yelled Carol, directing Steve and Susan to the back of the center and up the stairs leading to the second floor atrium. The narrow corridor was seldom used, mostly to change light bulbs for exhibits or to hang banners. Usually a County employee came in once a month or when needed to change bulbs. Unfortunately due to budget cuts, he'd been AWOL for months. The Boca Grande Nature Center was not top priority on anyone's list.

The crocodile fought through the metal frame, prying it loose with its massive jaws. It rumbled towards the front desk area where the phone was, steamrolling over everything in its path.

"So much for phones," said Carol, her walkie-talkies also sent flying by the creature's flailing tail. Steve covered every inch of the second floor, thinking. The massive croc let out a thunderous roar; all three gazed down below. "This is unreal."

The rainfall picked up; the lightning and thunder intensifying. The lights inside the center flickered for a moment before dying out permanently. The emergency lights came on, but provided little help. The animal thrashed about the exhibit hall, destroying anything and everything. The crocodile eyed the nurse shark in the tank and rammed its mouth against the sturdy glass, but to no avail. It then brought its tail around and shattered it to bits.

Steve, who was quite fond of the nurse shark, naming it Gus, screamed out, "You ain't eating my pet shark!"

Hearing Steve's voice, the crocodile turned and lashed out at the wall, not sure how to reach the three humans.

"What are you doing?" asked Carol, watching her co-worker walk down the steps.

"I gotta save the shark," said Steve, "I'll pick him up and toss him into the other tank."

"What in God's name is he doing?" asked Susan, dumbfounded.

"I like sharks," he replied. "Go to the other side and make a distraction."

The two followed Steve's instructions, screaming and yelling. The crocodile looked upwards, following the two women. Steve reached the hallway and tiptoed down the stairs. The croc lunged against the wall again, making two sizable holes in the cheaply made surface. Steve seized the opportunity and made a quick dash for the small shark, gulping helplessly for oxygen. As the naturalist reached down to pick up the fish, his boots made a cracking sound on a piece of glass.

"Uh oh," said Steve under his breath. The crocodile turned, eyeing the park naturalist with its mouth half open. Steve stood motionless, looking straight into the eyes of the massive reptile. The shark squirmed in his rough hands, its tail smacking Steve in the face. "Ouch."

The croc snorted and inched closer. Steve quickly pitched the shark into the other tank like a rugby player and sprinted for the stairs. The reptile dug its long claws into the wood floor and charged after him.

Steve scrambled up the stairs, throwing out expletives in between saying the word God and Christ. "Hurry up!" screamed Carol.

"That was close," said Steve, slamming the door shut, adrenaline pouring out of his ears. The croc barreled up the stairs, destroying both sides of the wall.

The reptile speared its snout through the balsa-thin door, knocking Steve to the ground. Carol and Susan clutched his arms, pulling him away just in time.

"That was closer; thanks much!" he said. The three ran down the hallway, following the u-shape corridor to the other end.

"Oh God, we're cornered here!" cried Susan, who, despite her seasoned age, was holding up well.

The croc managed the stairs but got stuck in the narrow hallway that was never meant for multiple people or oversized reptiles. Steve had an idea. "I'll jump down and bring the ladder over; stay put."

"What else would we do?" replied Susan, half joking.

"How are you going to do that?" asked Carol. "You'll break your leg!"

"I'm gonna go swimming," said Steve.

"You're going to what?" said Carol and Susan in unison.

"You can trust me; I'm a park naturalist." Steve winked and began to climb over the ledge of the corridor. Directly below was the other tank, still intact and deep enough to cushion his fall. Dangling his legs first, Steve fell into the tank, hitting his back on the artificial coral reef. The fish darted from one end of the tank to the other; the frightened nurse shark swam by and flicked its tail, slapping Steve in the face. "Again with the tail?" The man grimaced in pain, holding his lower back before spilling out of the tank.

The croc maneuvered its front legs over the side railing, observing the man staggering over to a nearby closet.

"Hurry up Steve; it's moving!" yelled Carol.

Steve reached the closet and pulled out a six-foot ladder, too short for the job. "Crap, I need to get a taller one! Give me a second!" The man ran outside the center and headed for the storage shed.

The reptile bellowed, now moving towards the two women. The hallway creaked, pieces of ceiling falling to the ground. Carol frantically looked for something, anything to fend off the croc. "What are we going to do?" asked Susan.

"We've got to wait for Steve to get back," replied Carol. "Steve, we could really use your help right about now!"

Steve trudged back with a ten-foot orange ladder, more than adequate for the job. He placed it right below and climbed up. "Alright ladies, swing your legs over and I'll help you down; Susan first – age before beauty."

"The first time my age has come in handy," said Susan. Steve stood just below the top rung and guided Susan's legs to the ladder, Carol holding her arms just in case.

"Okay Susan, you're doing fine.

Three more steps and were good.

"Carol; you're next." The crocodile floundered as more ceiling debris fell. A large crack appeared on the stucco wall.

Carol followed suit without incident. "I got it from here Steve, thanks!" Just then, the corridor collapsed; the croc landing right on its back.

Steve reached into his jean pocket and pulled out a set of keys. "The boat folks, now!"

All three dipped through the broken front door and headed straight to the moored boat. The normally mild waters encompassing the center were churning as the torrential rains raced inland off the Gulf of Mexico.

"Watch your step Susan, it's slippery here."

"Oh, and I don't count? Your favorite supervisor?" joked Carol. Steve took out three life preservers stored in a compartment near the stern. "Just in case, folks."

The three scurried aboard the twenty foot, steel-gray pontoon boat, lassoed to the dock with heavy rope. During the busy summer season, the vessel could manage two dozen people, but most of the time it was underutilized. The croc barreled through the tattered metal frame and turned towards the sound of the sputtering outboard motor.

"What's wrong Steve?" asked Carol. "I thought it was running okay this time?" The boat refused to turn over; fuel spitting out in every direction. A deep, reverberating sound came from

just beyond the dock. Steve kept trying; the motor still floundering. It coughed up more fuel then started.

“I got it!” Buckle in ladies and let’s go.” The crocodile rammed the boat causing Steve to plunge into the water. Susan, jolted from her seat, was knocked out cold. Carol banged her knee against a blunt, metal support pole, tumbling over in agony. Lying on the floor of the boat, she heard a horrible scream, then silence. She lifted herself up, clutching the railing of the boat. The driving rainstorm made visibility a nightmare. Carol moved up to the bow and peered over the edge in total darkness. “Steve?” She called again, but no answer. The croc surfaced, snatching the woman from the boat, mauling her in blackened surf.

The next morning, Susan awoke, still aboard the pontoon boat, with a throbbing headache. She had a deep bruise on her leg and a streak of dried blood across her cheek and forehead. She slumped into the nearest seat, still damp from last night’s storm. The bright sunlight reflected off the aluminum craft forcing Susan to squint her eyes.

The sound of a motorboat approached. Susan gained her footing and stood up, now realizing the pontoon boat was floating aimlessly in the estuary, but how? A Florida Fish and Game boat pulled up alongside the straying craft. A short, stocky man with a mustache, wearing tan shorts and white shirt appeared.

“I found the tour boat, over.” The man grabbed the railing, trying to hold the two vessels steady. “Are you okay Ma’am?”

A voice called out on the two-way radio. “Anyone on board? Over.”

The man surveyed the boat back and forth. “Was anyone else with you Ma’am?” he asked. Susan gave a blank stare, still feeling the effects of being knocked unconscious. The man answered the radio voice. “No, just an elderly woman. Better call a medic, she looks like she’s in shock. Over.”

The man helped Susan aboard his boat. He rummaged for a blanket and gave her a bottle of water. She took a

sip and gazed upon the rustic scenery. The man tied a line to the empty vessel to tow it in. In the far distance of the estuary, a large shape reached up and devoured a great blue heron standing near shore. Susan blinked, but said nothing.



**The Doll maker**  
By Etheridge G. Lovett

“Good afternoon, Mr. Garrison... I thought you forgot all about the doll you ordered,” said Felix Klein, an old doll maker.

“I’m sorry for being late, but I had to settle a few matters on the job before leaving, but I’m here to pick up the doll I ordered,” Peter Garrison said, entering the cluttered antique doll store. Handcrafted dolls of various shapes, sizes and colors, sat upon rows of wooden shelves like children sitting at a sporting event.

I’ve been sitting by this window waiting hours for you to arrive... I just put the finishing touches on your doll... I think you’ll like it,” Felix said.

“Mr. Klein, I sure appreciate your fine craftsmanship... This gift is far too special for me to forget,” Peter said, approaching the box on the table near the doll maker.

“You can open it... Go on, it won’t bite... It’s only a toy doll,” Felix said, pointing at the box.

“With much pleasure,” Peter replied as a warm smile crested across his face. When he lifted the lid of the box and pulled back the soft wrapping paper, Peter’s eyes fell upon a well-crafted doll made in the image of a clown. The clown was chubby with a wide smile, painted up blink-less green

eyes that seemed real, forever staring. Centered on its nose was a bright red ball. Its cheeks were round, plump and reddened; the same color as its lips. Its eyebrows were thin and arched higher than normal. Light red puffs of hair surrounded his balding head. He wore black and white striped overalls and small black shoes that widened at the toes. His shirt was bright red with white polka dots.

“Wow—this is definitely the work of a master doll maker.” Peter praised. “Mr. Klein, I must admit, your work is remarkably superb. The doll looks so real,” Peter said, picking up the doll from the box, holding it up close to a small light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

“I thought you’d fall in love with my precious doll. I put my heart and soul into that one... That will be the last doll these old wrinkled hands will ever make here in the United States. It’s time to move on, especially after hearing about the recent rash of robberies and murders in this town,” Felix said.

“The sad part about it is that police still haven’t caught up with the killers. That’s somewhat of a mystery in itself. The police don’t know what to make of the bloody murders. All they know is that it’s the work of three robbers, breaking into homes and killing those inside before making off with their valuable belongings. Whoever’s behind it, they’re as sick as the day they were born,” Peter said.

“Well, all I know is that it’s time to close down this old doll shop and leave this town behind me before things get worse. I’m quite sure the robbers will get what’s coming to them soon. I swear if it wasn’t for you telling me that your son was sickly and crippled, I probably would have packed up by now. Only for your son’s sake did I hang around to create this final special doll,” Felix revealed.

Peter placed the doll back inside the box as he replied, “I truly thank you for your kindness towards my son, Mr. Klein. I sure hate to hear that you’re leaving us. This town will

certainly miss your presence if you were to leave, especially around the holidays. What will you do once you close down your shop?”

“Don’t worry about me young man... I’ll be just fine. I saved a few dollars over the years so I guess I’ll head back home to Frankfurt Germany to be near my family and settle down there. Perhaps I’ll teach some young child the skills I’ve learned over the years as a doll maker so my talent won’t go to the grave with me,” Felix explained.

“Well, just to know that your doll making skills will live on is good enough for me. I’m sure going to miss your shop regardless. This store is like a cornerstone in the community. I pass by this old shop each time I leave work just to get a quick glance at your latest dolls in the window,” Peter said. He was about to place the top back on the box, but the doll maker stopped him.

“Hold on a second son— I forgot one final thing!” shouted Felix, startling Peter. He approached the toy clown sitting inside the box and stretched out his hand over the clown’s jubilant face. Felix closed his aged eyes and whispered a few words in Latin. He then opened his eyes and smiled at Peter saying, “Now he’s ready to go with you.”

Peter was confused over Felix’s sudden Latin chant, but the doll maker made him feel more at ease when he said, “Don’t worry about my little prayer over my doll... It’s nothing serious... I see each doll that I make as my own blood child. It’s my way of blessing and empowering each of them as they go off into the world on their life’s journey.”

“That’s unusual, but understandable... Here’s the remainder of the money I owe you for the doll. I wish you much success on your future retirement plans,” Peter said, handing Felix one hundred dollars. He shut the top down on the box and hurried out of the store. As Peter left the store, he heard Felix laughing aloud then shouting out, “Remember this, my doll

is special... It will heal and protect you and your family!”

Paying very little attention to what Felix was saying, Peter hastened to his vehicle with the doll. He hopped into his car as he watched Felix approach the front door of the store. The doll maker stared at Peter with a look of contentment on his face. He smiled then closed the front door to his doll shop, putting an *OUT OF BUSINESS* sign up in the window.

Peter sped off down the highway dodging slow motorists along the way as he drove home from a long days work. He kept gazing out of his driver side window at the ominous clouds forming over the town. When Peter turned onto his street corner he heard his name called, then a slight giggle come from the box.

“What?” Peter questioned in a whisper. He snatched the lid off the box. The doll sat silent, smiling, watching Peter as if it personally knew him. “I swear if it wasn’t for my son loving clowns, you certainly wouldn’t be sitting in my vehicle... You can bet your pretty little cherry lips on that one,” Peter said. He placed the lid back over the doll. Peter turned onto his street, then into his driveway and shut off his vehicle. Head-splitting thunder and bright flashes of lightning greeted him when he opened his car door. Peter grabbed the box and ran to his front door. The moment he opened the door, his wife, Karen Garrison, met him. Her brown eyes were innocent to look upon. Her golden blonde hair and voluptuous figure was attractive. Karen hugged her husband tight, saying, “I’m so glad to see you made it home before the storm struck... The thunder was so loud that it rattled the house a few times.”

“I don’t know where this freak storm came from, but I’m glad to be home out of it,” Peter said, kissing his wife on the cheek.

“Is that the toy doll you spoke of purchasing?” Karen asked.

“Yes... it’s for Eric’s birthday... Where is he?” Peter asked.

“He’s upstairs in bed. He had another bout with his asthma and diabetes earlier today, but he seems to be feeling a little better now,” Karen explained, tears rising in the wells of her eyes.

“Listen honey, cheer up... I know the doctors said he’d never walk again, but let’s keep the faith for his sake. The more we remain positive around him, the more he smiles and his spirit is lifted,” Peter said, comforting his wife.

“You’re absolutely right... he no doubt draws his positive energy from us so we must maintain a smile, although his deteriorating health condition is literally destroying us inside,” Karen said. They went upstairs with the gift in hand. Peter opened his son’s bedroom door and noticed his child sitting up in bed, staring aimlessly out of the window as the rain began to fall.

“Hey there handsome young man, how are you feeling?” Peter asked, sitting beside his son, stroking his disheveled red hair.

“I feel a little better Dad after Mom gave me some medicine, but my body is still aching inside,” Eric replied.

“Listen, I think I have something that just might make you feel a whole lot better,” Peter said, placing the box in front of his son.

Eric’s green eyes widened with excitement when he saw the box.

“Go ahead—you can open it,” Peter encouraged.

Eric lifted the lid and saw the clown doll lying in the box. He picked it up and was taken by the clown’s jolly smile.

“Wow—it’s a clown doll and he looks just like the clowns at the circus we visited last week... I love him so much... I think I’ll call him Charlie,” Eric said, beaming with joy.

“Okay son—you can call him Charlie,” Peter said.

“Karen kissed her husband on the cheek, saying, “You sure know how to make our son feel happy.”

“And you sure know how to keep both of us happy,” Peter replied, embracing his wife and Eric in a family

hug. The moment he kissed and released them, the lights to their home blinked out.

“Darn it—I knew it would happen... It’s that freak storm brewing up outside. Let me call the power company to get to the bottom of this. We have a birthday celebration to enjoy tonight and nothing will stand in our way. Not even a storm,” Peter said, picking up the phone. However, the phone was dead. “That is highly unusual for the phone and the lights to go off at the same time. I’ll grab my cell phone out of my briefcase in the car and use it to call the power company out here to fix the problem,” Peter said, bolting down the stairs. When he opened the front door to his home, three men were standing at the door grinning. Two of the men were holding sawed off shotguns in hand.

“Good evening neighbor,” One of the men said, sending a quick hard punch to Peter’s midsection. He buckled over in excruciating pain. The men laughed while pushing Peter inside the home on the floor. The men entered the home and slammed the door shut, locking it.

When Peter re-gained his composure he yelled, “Get the hell out of my house!” He bravely lunged from his knees, running towards the burglars when one of them struck Peter from behind with the butt end of his weapon, knocking him unconscious.

“Tie him up and toss him behind the couch. We’ll deal with him later... One of you go and search the home to see if anyone else is here,” the leader of the robbers ordered.

“I’ll take care of it,” one of the men said. He walked throughout the first floor of the home, knocking things about, searching every nook and cranny for anyone hiding.

Hearing the loud commotion, Karen emerged from her son’s bedroom to check on her husband. As she stood at the top of the stairs, she was shocked to see several men standing in her home with weapons in hand and her husband lying on the floor behind the couch; bound and gagged.

Karen hurried back into her son’s bedroom, closing the door and locking it.

Seeing the frightened expression upon his mother’s distraught face, Eric asked, “Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Come with me—hurry—and keep your voice down,” Karen said, tears forming in the rim of her eyes. She struggled to pick her son up from his bed and carried him to the closet as he clung to the doll. Karen gently placed her child inside the closet and sat down beside him, closing the door, locking it.

“Eric, several men have broken into our home so you must keep quiet while in here or they’ll find us... okay?” Karen whispered.

“Where’s Dad, Mom... Where’s my Dad?” Eric asked in a panicky tone. He became upset, tears welling up in his eyes. Karen refused to answer. She simply held her son tight in her arms. She heard a loud kick against the room door, then another and another... The final kick gave the robbers access into Eric’s bedroom.

Karen heard someone walking around, rummaging about; tossing things all around the room. There was a slight moment of dead silence. Then she heard the sound of someone attempting to open the closet door. Karen held her son’s mouth tight to prevent him from screaming as her heart pounded in terror. Loud blows were administered to the locked doorknob until the knob dangled inside the door’s socket. The stranger yanked the closet door open as Karen shouted, “Go away and leave me and my child alone!”

The man with a thick scraggly beard and a cavity filled grin only chuckled then shouted, “Hot damn—you’re a sexy looking one... this is my lucky day!” he reached into the closet, grabbing Karen by the arm, saying, “Come on out of there sweetie.” He pulled Karen out of the closet. Her son fell out of her arms to the floor with the clown doll in his grasp.

“Stop it—my son is sick... His legs are weak and he cannot walk!” Karen shouted as she fought to get loose. The man swung with a strong backhand, striking Karen in the mouth, knocking her to the ground.

“Mom!” Eric shouted, reaching for his mother, but she was too dazed to understand his cries.

“I’ll come back and get you later—boy,” the man said in a harsh tone. He grabbed Karen by the arm again and dragged her out of the room down the stairwell like one would drag a sack of potatoes.

“Well-well-well—look at the great trophy you’ve found,” the leader said, approaching Karen and the man coming down the stairs. “Tie her up, gag her mouth and toss her beside her sorry husband until we finish gathering the goods. We’ll have a little fun with her before we leave.”

“You got it boss,” the man holding Karen said, tossing her beside her husband, then tying her up and gagging her mouth. “Boss—I almost forgot— there’s a scrawny little kid upstairs in his bedroom, but he won’t be causing us any problems because he’s crippled and sickly. The kid crawls around on his hands and knees like a baby. I left him on the floor of his bedroom holding some antique clown doll for comfort,” the man shared.

“Antique clown doll you said? Are you mad? Don’t just stand there, bring that doll down here and let me take a look at it. If it’s an antique doll, I’m almost sure it’ll fetch a good price on ebay,” the leader said.

The other robbers laughed over their leader’s statement. The man who dragged Karen down the stairs stormed back upstairs to grab the doll. When he reached Eric’s bedroom, he noticed Eric was sitting up in bed with the doll in his arms and a strange and piercing stare upon his face. The man was stunned to see that Eric had somehow climbed into bed, although the boy couldn’t walk.

“Hey boy, I thought your Mom said you were crippled... How did you climb into that bed without help?” the

man asked. Eric didn't respond. He only stared at the man.

"Look, I came to get that little doll you got there in your hand, so hand it over—kid," the man said, approaching the expressionless child. Eric suddenly tossed the doll at the man. The man staggered about, fumbling around with the doll in his hands. Eric exploded in laughter as he watched the man's clumsiness.

"Hey kid—you think that was funny... I swear I'll deal with you personally when I get back, that's a promise—boy!" the man shouted, exiting the room. He hurried down the stairs to show his boss the doll.

"Here's the clown doll I spoke of," the man said, handing the doll to his boss. The leader studied the doll, front and back as he said, "Man, this clown doll looks real...and creepy... This is not your average doll. This doll was well-crafted and no doubt custom made by some master craftsman... see the doll maker's name on the back of the doll's neck, **Felix Klein – the Master Doll Maker**. His name sounds German to me, and I heard they're fine craftsman. Go on and put this doll inside your bag, we'll definitely sell it on ebay," the leader said. He tossed the doll over to one of the men holding a bag of valuable items they gathered from the home. When the man caught the doll, he felt a sharp pinch on his hand.

"Damn it!" the man shouted. He tossed the doll from his grasp behind the couch where Peter and Karen were tied up. He looked at his hand and noticed a tiny bite mark. Blood drained from the open wound.

"I can't believe this—Guys come over here and look at this!" the man shouted to the others as he held up his bleeding hand.

"What happened to you?" the leader asked.

"Something bit my hand, that's what happened to me, and it look as if it was that weird little clown doll you tossed to me," the man said. The other robbers laughed aloud at their friend's statement, but their laughter was soon

cut short by giggling sounds coming from behind the couch where the clown landed. One of the men went to see what was behind the couch with his weapon aimed high.

"The doll... it's gone as if it stood up and ran away like a kid!" the man shouted with his eyes stretched.

"What do you mean it stood up and ran away?" the leader of the gang asked. He looked behind the couch and also noticed that the clown was gone, only Peter and Karen remained. At that moment, another giggle was heard coming from underneath the couch.

"Bring me a flashlight—quick!" the leader shouted. One of the other robbers handed him a flashlight. He dropped to his knees and lifted the bottom cover of the couch, shining his flashlight underneath. He noticed the doll lying on its back, maintaining its jovial smile.

"Relax... It's over here—I found the doll... It probably tumbled underneath the couch when you got all spooked and dropped it," the leader said, reaching underneath the couch to grab the doll. "This doll will be my money maker," the leader said, picking up the doll, gazing at the face of the clown doll. The man panicked when the wooden doll turned his head and frowned at him, clutching the man's arms tight. The man yelled aloud in great pain as the clown's touch drained the life right out of the man, causing him to fall backwards, flat on his back with his eyes stretched wide in a blank death stare.

The clown giggled again as he hopped from the corpse and disappeared in the shadows of the living room. Seeing this, one of the men dropped everything in a sudden panic and ran towards the front door in a mad dash to escape. The doll ran from the shadows of the room and dashed underneath the fleeing man's feet, causing him to trip. When the man fell to the floor, the doll hopped upon his chest and grabbed the man's neck, draining the life right out of the terrified man. The doll ran back into the shadows of the living room.

"Frank—Harold!" the last robber called out as he ran to check on his friends, but learned they had no pulse. He then heard another giggling sound come from all areas of the dimly lit room.

"Damn you, little doll!" the robber yelled. He grabbed the bag of stolen goods and tried to leave, but he froze in his tracks when he saw the clown doll standing near the front door, barring his way as it giggled.

"No way—you're not real!" the man shouted, dropping the bag.

"I am very—very real—Now you will learn exactly how real I am!" the clown doll replied in a disembodied, child-like voice. The doll lunged towards the man, grabbing his throat. The doll's eyes glowed as it drained the life right out of the last robber. Once his life force abated, the man dropped face down to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Peter and Karen, still bound and gagged, were spellbound to see the clown doll running around, alive like a human. The clown grabbed the thick cords that held Karen and Peter bound and snapped them as if they were strands of thread. Peter removed the tape from his wife's mouth, then his own.

"I saw what you did to those men... What the hell are you?" Peter asked the clown. The clown only stood staring at Peter and Karen for a moment then it bolted up the stairs, darting into Eric's bedroom.

"No you don't—come out of my son's bedroom you little wooden devil!" Peter shouted. He and his wife stormed up the stairs. When they entered their son's bedroom, they were stunned to see the doll holding their son by his feeble legs as the child stood beside his bed, trembling as if in great pain. Through a miraculous touch, the doll drained the sickness right out of Eric's body into its own wooden body. The doll's eyes grew dim as it dropped to the carpeted floor.

Still sweating from the experience, Eric ran over to his parents

as if he'd never had health problems in his life.

"What?—How is this possible? This is unbelievable!" Peter shouted, examining his son from head to toe. "Eric, you're healed."

Peter and Karen were dumbfounded... their minds and hearts were filled with many mixed emotions. Peter approached the silent doll, picking it up from the floor. The doll appeared limp, lifeless, still. Its jolly smile was gone, replaced by the expressionless look of death. Peter placed the doll gently back inside the box, sitting the box upon his son's bed. He sat on the bed trying to make sense of the strange encounter.

"That doll healed our son and saved us," Karen said in a whisper, hugging her son tight.

"No Karen... It wasn't the doll... It was the old doll maker, Felix Klein, who healed our son and saved us," Peter said in a calm voice. He gazed over at the doll, then out of the window at the subsiding storm.



## Moonlight Eclipse

By Edward White/CP Bialois

<http://cpbialois.wordpress.com/>

The soft grass felt good under his feet. The blades of grass tickled the soft inner portion of his toes when he wiggled them. Thomas let out a deep breath, nothing tasted or felt as good old mother earth. He wasn't sure why, but he felt that he'd been away for a long time and nothing could make him leave it. Thomas 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 its warmth penetrated through him, filling his heart and soul. This was the way to live, there could be no doubt about it. Thunder could be heard in the distance, but he didn't pay it any attention as 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.

Thomas 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. Thomas looked around in a panic, 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, Thomas 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 its creator. "I'll be right there, BOB." He rubbed his eyes once more and looked around. 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. When he approached it, BOB signaled him. "Doctor Jones, my sensors indicate that you are not dressed. Should you not put on proper attire?"

Thomas 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 human in the station's population.

Thomas reached out and pressed a button next to the door; 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 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. Thomas held onto their smell until he thought his lungs would explode. When he let out the breath, a smile spread across his face. 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, Thomas spun around with his chair. 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 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 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 circumstance, 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 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, 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 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." The movie began in the grainy texture of primitive films on the screen in front of him, 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 thought it best to have a skeleton crew on the base to test out its botanical, hydroponic, and atmospheric capabilities. The ironic thing being, the rest of the crew had suffered radiation poisoning and 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 been 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 moonbase's 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 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 survived, but if they did, the chances they could communicate with him were astronomical. “Nice choice of words, Doc.” He mumbled to himself. He then turned his attention to the readouts on the main control panel. Thomas 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.”



### The letter

By Jamie White

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

The breeze blew Amanda’s hair, causing several strands to cover her eyes. She brushed them aside as she

ran into the apartment building she’d called home for the past two years. The young girl rubbed her arms in an effort to warm up before walking up to the mailbox.

She walked past the rows of metal boxes stretching the entire length of the wall, stopping at the halfway mark. She sighed as she reached up for her designated mail slot; it was a little bit too far up for her. She grabbed the stack of envelopes she hadn’t bothered to check in days and hurried up to her floor. All she wanted at the moment was get off her shoes and jacket and relax with a book and something to snack on.

As soon as she reached her apartment and was safely inside, she kicked the heels she’d been wearing off and slung her jacket over the back of her favorite chair. She dumped the pile of mail on the coffee table and busied herself in the kitchen, preparing a snack.

Amanda carried her snack into the bedroom, glancing at the small stack of books she had sitting on the nightstand. She was currently in the middle of three very different books and wasn’t sure which one to read that night. A thoughtful expression crossed her features as she bit her lip. She decided to grab the one in the middle, a mystery story. She was almost done with it anyway, so it seemed like the logical choice.

Amanda carried the plate and book back to the living room and took a seat in her chair. She opened the book and began flipping through the pages, trying to find her spot. Before she could start reading, she happened to notice the envelope sitting on the top of her mail pile. She didn’t recognize the writing and there was no return address on it. She sighed, rolling her eyes. It was most likely junk mail. She decided to ignore it for now.

Turning her attention back to the book, she flipped back to the proper page and reached for the sandwich she’d made. She took a bite and began reading, but her gaze quickly diverted back to the mystery envelope. Amanda

didn’t understand why, but she had a sudden overwhelming desire to open it and see what was inside. She set the book aside and grabbed the letter opener she kept on the table.

The letter opener sliced through the paper, her curiosity growing by the second. She pulled the paper out and unfolded the sheet inside, setting the envelope aside. Amanda scanned the paper, her eyes widening in surprise.

*Dear Amanda,*

*I apologize in advance for any incoherent rambling in this letter. I really don’t know where to start, and I’m not sure you’ll want to hear from me or not. My name is Susan...*

Amanda scanned the rest of the letter, her heart pounding in her chest. She set the letter aside and reached for the envelope again, examining it more carefully. It was mailed locally, only a few days ago. The sender hadn’t left an address in the letter either, but there was a phone number.

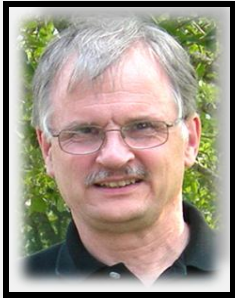
Ever since she found out about her adoption ten years ago, she’d been wondering about her biological family. She’d tried every avenue she could think of to find her real family and the sister she’d been told she had. Could this be true? Had her real family been looking for her all this time as well?

Amanda put aside the envelope again, staring down at the letter in her lap. The more she looked at it, the more she saw how similar the sender’s handwriting was to her own. It was almost spooky to see the bold cursive script on the page. Why hadn’t she noticed it right off? It seemed so obvious now.

There hadn’t been a picture or anything else in the envelope and, for a moment, Amanda entertained the idea this was all a big hoax. A couple of her family members had been less than supportive of her search and she could think of at least one that could be nasty enough to play such a trick. Then again, there was always the possibility that a stranger was pulling a scam as well. There were stories all over the news about people being tricked by con artists and psychos. Amanda gazed off

into the distance, thinking it over a while.

*No*, she decided. *This is definitely for real*. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, her entire body tingled with excitement. All the questions she'd carried around for the past decade ran through her mind so fast, she felt dizzy. As she glanced back at the paper and studied the ten digits in front of her, she smiled. She was finally going to get the answers.



**Joe's Story**  
By Rick Weber

In June Joe Pearson's wife, Adele, passed away following a long bout with cancer. They had been married for 37 years, and Joe retired from the Post Office three years earlier to care for her. Now, in December, he was in no mood to celebrate. Driving to the airport two days before Christmas in the morning rush hour was brutal, and only made him more depressed. He could have gone with his children and their families to Orlando for the Holidays instead of driving them to the airport, but he chose to stick it out at home this year. He was still in this darkest stage of grief, and those closest to him were well aware of it.

Joe's son, Ted and his daughter Margie planned the trip to Disney World shortly after their mother died, and they begged Joe to come along. Margie was able to rent a large house in Lake Kissimmee where he would have had his own room with a separate bath. It would have cost him nothing, but Joe would hear nothing of it. They left the

door open for him to come along up until the night before when they had to check in with the airline on line. Yet, Joe still turned down their request telling them that he had to be home to plant flowers on Adele's grave Christmas Day.

Joe had everything to be proud of. His kids had done well for themselves. Ted was a CPA with a good practice. His wife Julie was an attorney in a big law firm, and they had two sons. Margie was a stay at home mom with three daughters. Her husband, Bill, was a computer engineer who made this possible, and he even bought her a large passenger van for her duties as a Girl Scout leader. Joe used it to get everyone to the airport. Now, he was glad to be parking it in his garage. It reminded him too much of the mail truck he used to drive.

Inside the foyer of his quiet residence Joe looked around. Not a single decoration was up. No tree, no wreaths, no lights; nothing to show it was Yuletide. It was the first moment of total silence Joe had in years, and he had no plans. In stark contrast to past Christmases celebrated in this home when the decorations outside made it the biggest attraction in the neighborhood; the lights outlining the entire frame of the house, the Nativity display on the lawn, and Santa's sled on the roof could not be outdone. Last year, Joe had gone all out by laying out a train garden throughout the first floor inside the house passing by the bay window in the living room for the entire world to see. It brought the biggest smile to Adele's face that Joe had ever seen. Those decorations now were in boxes in the basement, attic, and garage.

Joe remembered going to church last Christmas Eve with Adele and begging God to spare her, but it did not happen. In March, she had her last round of chemotherapy which only made her feel worse with Joe by her side during all of it. In May, Adele went into Hospice Care when Joe could no longer tend to all of her needs. Joe, standing at her bedside when she

finally succumbed to the dreaded disease, found himself numb by the doctor's pronouncement.

After the funeral, he sent out thank you notes to people for their expressions of sympathy. With the help of Margie and Julie, he cleaned the house and donated Adele's clothing and other personal items to charity. He ordered and took delivery of her headstone. Alone and looking at the granite marker for the first time, Joe broke down in tears and cried out, "Where was God when you needed him?" After prodding from his kids, Joe had his will re-written. Now in December, he realized he was alone, and asked himself, "Now, what am I gonna do?" Before he could decide, Joe heard a knock at the front door. It was Michael, the next door neighbor's teenage son, holding a covered dish in front of him. "Come on in," Joe beckoned.

Stepping inside Michael said, "My mother just made a batch of those cookies you like, and she wanted you to have them while they're still hot out of the oven."

Joe closed the door. "Well, tell your mom, thanks. You got me at a good time. I just came back from dropping Ted, Margie, and their broods off at the airport. They're going to the Magic Kingdom. What are you doing for Christmas?"

Handing Joe the cookie dish, Michael let out a sigh and his shoulders drooped. "I'm doing community service hours for school at the church mission both on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Not my idea of fun."

"What will they have you doing at the mission?"

"Christmas Eve, I'm one of Santa's Elves giving out presents to the kids, and on Christmas Day, I'll be serving dinner to the families."

"Michael, that's great! You'll be helping out a lot of less fortunate people."

Michael shuffled his feet and let out a groan, "That's what my parents said. If you think it's so good, why don't you try it?"

Without hesitating, Joe answered, “I might. What time do the festivities start tomorrow night?”

“Things kick off at seven,” Michael grumbled.

On Christmas Eve, Joe arrived early at the mission to see some people already lined up outside the front door. Looking down at the far end of the building, Joe saw Michael standing by a side door with some of his friends.

Michael’s face lit up when he saw Joe and he said, “I didn’t think you’d show up.”

“Well, I’m here. I’ve known you since you were in diapers. Have I ever let you down? Now, what can I do to help?”

“Let’s go inside. I want you to meet Brother Paul. He runs the place. He’ll get you squared away.”

Michael and Joe made their way back into the kitchen where a tall beefy man in a red flannel shirt and blue jeans about Joe’s age stood with his back to them talking to a couple. “Brother Paul,” Michael interrupted. “I have someone I want you to meet.”

Brother Paul turned, and Joe saw a San Damiano cross around his neck and an infectious broad smile on his face. “And who would that be, Michael?”

Without any further help, Joe spoke up with an outstretched hand, “Brother Paul, I’m Joe Pearson, Michael’s neighbor. I understand you could use some help here tonight and tomorrow.”

Brother Paul pumped Joe’s hand firmly. “We can always use some help. What brings you out on Christmas Eve?”

Joe quickly replied. “My kids are out of town with their families, and it got kind a lonely at home.”

Brother Paul loosened his grip. “If you don’t mind working in the kitchen, we’ll be glad to have you. We’ll be serving a light dinner, soup and sandwiches, before the pageant starts. Some of these folks haven’t eaten all day and that includes the kids.”

“Let me hang up my coat,” Joe said as Brother Paul took him back and

introduced him to the other volunteers while Michael went off with his friends to don their elf hats.

Joe helped get the serving line ready just in time for the doors to open. Over the next two hours, he worked with the others serving food to a couple hundred people who had no place else to go. The grateful looks on their faces was all Joe needed to see.

Brother Paul watched the food line dwindle down to only a couple of adults waiting, and he walked to the front of the dining room picking up a microphone. “Merry Christmas, everyone! Have you all had something to eat?” Every head in the room nodded, “Good, since we didn’t have a chance to say Grace, let’s bow our heads now to give thanks.” The room fell quiet as Brother Paul gave a quick invocation. After he finished, the sound of bells jingling could be heard from the back of the room followed by the booming words, “HO! HO! HO!”

Santa appeared at the door and walked down the main aisle waving to the families seated at tables on either side. Making his way up to Brother Paul, they shook hands and Brother Paul handed him the microphone. Santa asked, “Have you all been good boys and girls?”

“YES!” came the loud unified response.

“GOOD! Let’s get started. I have a lot of others places to visit tonight.”

Santa sat on a large chair at the end of the aisle. With the help of his elves, he read a child’s name from the tag on the first gift, and asked if that child was in the dining room. A shy little girl about three or four years old stood up next to her mother, who took her by the hand down the aisle to see Santa.

In the back of the dining hall while Santa passed out gifts, Brother Paul joined Joe who was stacking trays by the kitchen door. “You have quite an operation here, Brother Paul.”

“I know. I hope we can keep it going.”

“Why is that?” Joe asked the cleric in a pressing tone.

“Over the past year, some of our benefactors had to cut back on their support. The economy has been tough on everyone. To boot, we have more people asking for help this year than in the past. The factory closing in town last month right before Thanksgiving put a lot of people out of work. Some, who worked in the plant and helped out last year, were in line for turkeys this time. We didn’t have to turn anyone down, but I knew we really had to pull out all the stops if we wanted Christmas to be a success. After New Year’s it’s going to get tougher with all the local agencies going after fewer resources.”

“Maybe, I can give you a hand, Brother Paul. I used to have a mail route near here. I might be able to reach out to some of my old business customers to see what they can do.”

“Like I told you, we can always use help, but right now it looks like Santa wants mine,” Brother Paul told Joe pointing to Santa who finished passing out gifts and was waving the friar up to the front of the room to conclude the program.

Joe finished up a little after midnight and walked out of the building with Michael and his friends. Before getting into his car, he told them, “See you tomorrow.”

Early the next morning Joe called Ted and Margie to wishing all of them in Orlando, a Merry Christmas. “You’re up early,” Margie said to her father when she answered the phone.

“I wanted wish all of you a Merry Christmas before you took off for Cinderella’s Castle,” Joe retorted hearing laughter in the background.

“You’re sounding chipper. What have you been up to?” Margie asked.

“I was over at the mission last night with Michael from next door. I served food, and it looks like I’ll be doing the same today. They sure need support.” Joe outlined to Margie, and later during the same call to Ted, his conversation with Brother Paul and his plans to help the mission.

Ted listened quietly to what his father had to say before speaking.

“Dad, they do a lot of good work. I may be able to give you a hand finding donors when we get back, but right now, I’ve got an appointment to see the Seven Dwarfs.” Hearing his grandchildren yelling in the background for his son to hurry up, Joe thanked Ted for his interest and hung up before the cries got any louder.

Joe returned to the mission and saw many of the same people who were there the night before in line for Christmas dinner. He joined Michael and his friends in the kitchen to lay out the feast. It was another great day for Joe, who enjoyed giving to those in need. As the day was winding down, he was able to sit down with Brother Paul to eat. Joe promised to be back in touch after he contacted his old mail customers.

Between the Holidays, Joe went over his old route. He was surprised to see that some of the smaller businesses had folded, along with a couple of larger ones. A market was Joe’s first potential prospect. He found the place still run by Lionel, a gregarious old man who was the fourth generation of his family in the grocery business.

“Joe, I thought you were retired. I wish I were in your shoes,” Lionel shouted when he saw Joe at the customer service desk.

“I am, but I’m volunteering at the mission. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“For you, old friend, yes.”

Lionel took Joe back into his office for a private discussion. “Lionel, I chipped in at the mission on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They’re in a tight situation and could use a hand. I know you get hit up all the time by different groups, especially at this time of year...”

Before he could go on, Lionel broke in. “Joe, you’re right. I get solicited a lot for donations, and I do what can. That mission, from what I’ve seen, does a lot of good work. So, what do they need?”

“They definitely need food. They have a lot of mouths to feed. As for the

other things, I’m not quite sure. I just started looking around to see what resources are available. If don’t mind, I can bring Brother Paul, who oversees the place, here to see you. He’s the best person to talk to.”

“That sounds good. Give me a call sometime next week so we can meet one day before I open up,” Lionel told his friend. “That will give me time to talk to some of the other business owners in town to see what they can do.”

“Lionel, that’s great!” Joe said in a loud voice as he stood up to shake Lionel’s hand before leaving.

Joe put in more time between the holidays working in the food line and touching base with potential sponsors. He met every day with Brother Paul, to discuss the results of those contacts. Brother Paul was impressed with Joe’s work. But one day during a briefing, Brother Paul looked at his watch and asked Joe, “Don’t you have to be someplace now?”

Joe, a bit befuddled, replied, “No, I don’t think so. My appointments are all done for today.”

Brother Paul smiled, looked Joe in the eye, and softly whispered to him, “The airport.” Without making any comments, Joe ran out of the mission, and after switching vehicles at his house, he sped to the airport in Margie’s van. He pulled up to the baggage claim area just in time to see everyone walking out of the terminal, each wearing a pair of Mickey Mouse ears.

As winter became spring, Joe learned, not only, more about working at a charity, but also, more about himself. In June on the first anniversary of Adele’s passing, he visited the cemetery.

Standing over the freshly mown grass at Adele’s grave, he began his usual out loud conversation when visited the cemetery. “I still miss you, Kid. I’m doing okay. I told you about helping out at the mission. It’s going pretty good there. I’m meeting a lot of

good people. They’re in bad shape; no jobs, nothing to eat. I thought it was tough with your cancer, but when I see so many people with so little, I’m glad to be there. I wish you were with me to be part of it all. I know it’s not possible. Here’s look-in’ at you, Kid. I gotta run. I have to meet Brother Paul. We’re setting up a fund raiser.” Joe, with a spring in his step, made it back to his car and waved good-bye to Adele from inside it before driving off.



In Celebration of National Poetry Month, SR/BC Poetry Club is inviting you to submit your poem for a **poetry contest** (Ages 16 and up). Submissions are open until Sat. April 6. The winners & participants will read their poems at an award ceremony from 6:30 to 7:30 pm, Tuesday April 16. (1st Floor Audit).

**Guidelines:** Contest participants may submit one poem each. Poems can be in any style, but no longer than two pages in length. Type/Print your full name and contact information (phone number/email) at the bottom of each page.

**Prizes:** 1<sup>st</sup> place \$25 gift card  
2<sup>nd</sup> place \$15 gift card  
3<sup>rd</sup> place \$10 gift Card

**All the winning poems will be published in the SR monthly Portal!**

**\*Sponsored by Friends of the South Regional/BC Library**

**Submissions:** Send your poems to Sadiq Alkoriji [salkoriji@broward.org](mailto:salkoriji@broward.org)  
OR submit them at the Adult Reference desk. Thank you.

**Join the Writer's Portal today!**

Meetings are held the second and fourth Thursday of every month from 1-3pm 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! All communications with the editors and all inquiries concerning this publication should be addressed to:

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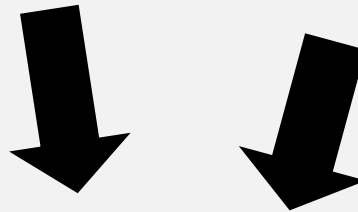
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