

# The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



## Two Chairs By DiVitto Kelly

Every morning the young couple, both in their early thirties, strode by the two-story Victorian style home on their block, admiring its architectural beauty and landscape. Painted in mauve with eggplant purple shutters, the home was a landmark in the quiet neighborhood of Stonington, Georgia. And the owners, Angelo and Roberta Scalia, just celebrated their fifty-seventh anniversary.

As custom, the retired couple spent most of the time tweaking their half-acre property. The front yard offered a splendid collection of native southern plants and flowers; their fragrances would put a perfume boutique to shame. Butterflies fluttered just above the cropped grass. A neighborhood orange tabby routinely snoozed on the circular stone pavers leading to the back yard.

Mia and husband Carlos were newbies to the established neighborhood. The Lopez's recently

purchased a mid-1930s three/two, complete with encompassing trees and a basement prone to seepage. Some of the older homes had been torn down despite their historical charm, the newer homeowners preferring the architecturally-challenged McMansions adorned in various shades of poopie colors.

At least the Lopez home had personality, albeit with an insufferable case of the creaks. After conversing with the always gracious and friendly Scalia's, they were itching to start a garden, someday. Their first child wouldn't be born until early spring so it gave them ample time to prepare.

"Morning Angelo," said the plumpified Mia, starting to show a serious baby bump at six months.

Hi sweetheart," said Angelo, always a fresh egg even at the seasoned age of 81. "Still waiting to see that garden of yours."

"Oh stop it you," said Roberta, gently tapping her husband's shoulder with her vibrant blue gardening gloves. "These things can't be rushed; it takes time and nurturing. I'm sure you'll have a terrific garden."

"I know, I know," she said. "Things have been so hectic with Carlos's new job, the traveling and all. After the baby is born, we promise."

"All in due time," replied Roberta. Both she and Angelo sat down in their favorite pale yellow metal chairs. They leaned back, always enjoying the slight rocking motion. Angelo had surprised his wife with the chairs as a wedding anniversary gift two decades ago. He maintained them yearly, covering them up on that rare occasional snowfall in the Peach

State. He spray-painted them with rustproof paint what seemed like every other year. Angelo was afraid the manufacturer might run out of his favorite color so he stockpiled up on a dozen cans of the sunny pastel hue.

Months later, the Lopez family leisurely stepped along the familiar sidewalk; husband Carlos pushing the stroller with their newborn son, Miguel. They approach the corner Victorian house. Like clockwork, both Roberta and Angelo rushed over to greet their 'grandson,' as they liked to jest. The Scalia's only son, Giovanni, was a real jerk and a third, a classic low-life slip and fall lawyer. They weren't expecting grandchildren from him any time soon.

The truth was the guy was a class-A pant weasel. He hardly ever visited. And when the 43-year-old did, it was to try and persuade his elderly parents to sign over their beloved property and move into an assisted living facility. It always led to heated arguments with Angelo threatening to cut him out of his will. Giovanni always laughed it off.

"You are cute as a sunflower," cooed Roberta at baby Miguel, who enjoyed employing garden similes. Dumb as a stump was always a favorite one too; usually reserved for the absent-minded postal worker. "In no time he'll be in school and then out of the house and on his own." She sighed.

Angelo gathered a collection of flowers and presented them to Mia. "Mums for a mum, Enjoy!"

Mia blushed. "They're so . . ."

"Beautiful," said Angelo, who appreciated how much the Lopez

family enjoyed their garden. “You know most people your age could give a rat’s rear about flowers, except on Valentine’s Day. And that’s nothing but a money-making scam, right honey?”

Roberta paused. “Roses are always a special treat every February 14, although I must admit, dark chocolate does the trick for me, yum,” she replied with a wink.

“Sounds good to me too,” said Mia, a sweet-tooth maven herself. The couple waved goodbye and continued on their walk, taking advantage of the crisp fall-like weather.

The following evening, the Lopez family strolled by the Scalia’s colorful home, always standing out like a vintage, picture-perfect movie prop. “Not chilling out today, I guess,” mused Carlos, to his wife. He’d finished up work early for a change.

Most times, weather permitting, the happy retired couple sat in their chairs, sipping tea, or even downing an adult beverage. Both were originally from New York, but migrated south in the early eighties. They hated snow like Kryptonite. North Georgia seemed like a perfect place to still enjoy all the seasons, but not to any extreme. They missed New York pizza the most. The Scalia’s earned their collective green thumbs through lots of trial and error, sometimes planting flowers requiring loads of sun in shady areas and vice-versa, but their persistence paid off. Their garden could rival the English variety any day. They even won awards issued by the city for best yard. Carlos was even thinking of doing a feature for the magazine he worked for, *Southern Hospitality*.

Two weeks passed. Carlos was on the road once again, this time in South Carolina, working on a story. Mia, with son Miguel in tow, was visiting friends in nearby Jekyll Island. When they returned home, the family revved up the behemoth navy blue stroller and made the familiar neighborhood rounds.

“Guess the Scalia’s must be cooking dinner,” said Mia, thinking she caught a whiff of homemade spaghetti sauce. Leaves had gathered on the two chairs. While still pristine, the garden started carrying a look of unkemptness.

Another week passed; another routine road-trip around the neighborhood with son, Miguel. Carlos and Mia reached the end of the block.

“What’s happening here?” asked Mia. “Do you think they’re okay?”

“Um, maybe I should go check on them,” said Carlos.

The thirty-three year old ambled up to the waist high white picket fence and unlocked the brass hinge. The curved shaped cobblestone walkway led to a rustic Mexican tiled porch, two steps up. The front white-trimmed door was made up of yellow, blue, and green rectangular stained glass. Carlos lunged up the steps and rang the bell.

“Hello? Mr. and Mrs. Scalia? Is anyone home?”

Mia looked on anxiously. “Well?” Her husband nodded, no.

Carlos rang the doorbell again, knocking as well. He called out their names with more urgency. “Maybe they went on vacation or something. He reached for the doorknob.

There was a screech of tires and an eruption of thrashing heavy metal guitar music. Giovanni Scalia slithered out of his late nineties gloss red Trans Am, trimmed with narrow green and white painted pinstripes. He appeared sleazy as ever. He wore a black suit and white dress shirt, no tie, with his black hair greased back in a ponytail.

“Get away from that door,” he yapped. The man rushed over, barking the same line again.

Carlos backed off, observing the man as he darted up the walkway. “We were just checking up on your parents.”

“Usually they’re outside working on the garden or sitting in their favorite chairs,” added Mia.

“Hell with their stupid garden,” said Giovanni, a budding Guido-type who couldn’t have been more than five-foot six and a hundred and thirty pounds sopping wet.

Carlos, a shade over six feet tall and seventy pounds heavier, had met the Scalia’s son on one other occasion. He didn’t care for him then, and definitely didn’t at the present moment. Carlos remained on the porch, wanting to know if their friends were okay. And they were good friends with the retirees. Both Mia and Carlos had lost their grandparents at an early age, barely remembering them at all. The elderly Scalia’s had become surrogates, already spoiling their son with clothes and toys.

You two can get off my property now,” huffed Giovanni. He pulled out a key and opened the door.

“Your house?” asked Carlos. “Your parents still own this house, don’t they?”

“Owned,” snarked Giovanni.  
“Past tense, my non friends,”

“So where are they?” called out Mia.

“I persuaded them to travel the world for a while,” he replied, unconvincingly. “And the deed . . .”

“And you’re just going to move in?” growled Mia. She hated that Giovanni character worse than daytime television.

“First of all, it’s none your God damn business and second, this old fossil is gonna come down,” he gestured at the vintage structure.

“But it’s a historical home,” said Carlos, a weekend do-it-yourselfer and frequent visitor to Home Depot. He even bought stock in the company. “The craftsmanship in this house alone . . .”

Giovanni didn’t let him finish. “I don’t give a rat’s ass about no Flintstone craftsmanship. I’m gonna build me a sweet three thousand foot, three-story spread with a home theater and man cave. Oh, and I’m getting rid of that garden and adding a kickass pool, complete with a cascading waterfall. And when it’s all done, I’ll make sure NOT to invite you, unless of course I need someone to cut the grass. So if you don’t mind.”

Carlos stepped towards Giovanni and glared at the smarmy little weasel. “YOU better tread lightly, my non friend.” He pressed closer. Giovanni gulped. He fidgeted with the doorknob before slinking inside the house.

Carlos seethed as he met his wife at the front gate. He turned, locking it before continuing with their stroll. “He did something to his parents, I just know it.”

Mia, a media specialist at the local elementary school, tugged at her husband’s shirt sleeve. “Maybe it’s time you take the cobwebs off your investigative reporting skills.”

The Scalia’s were still a no show at their property. After making a few phone calls, Carlos discovered that Angelo had suffered a stroke while on vacation with Roberta in Italy. The elderly couple was indeed on a European holiday; at least the son didn’t lie about that. Roberta called and spoke with Mia giving her the details. She was told the doctors strongly advised against moving the sick man. They had a distant relative in a city just outside of Rome so Roberta at least had a place to stay for a while. She asked if she and Carlos could look after the garden while they were away. Unfortunately Mia explained that Giovanni would cite them for trespassing in a heartbeat.

As time passed, Giovanni’s grand plan of erecting Mc Taj Mahal fell apart at the seams. The house fell into ragged looking territory. Rather than living in the purple palace as he dubbed it, he chose to remain in his condo. He was strictly a nouveau riche kind of guy: out with the refined, in with the tasteless.

It’s so sad about the Scalia’s,” said Mia, sitting on the front porch of their house. She took a sip of red wine and nibbled away on some oyster crackers. “And I can’t stand watching that beautiful garden just wither away.”

Carlos shook his head. “You know what we need to do?”

“What?”

“We should finally get our garden off the ground,” he suggested. “They’ve been so kind

to us. Maybe when they return, we can surprise them.” Mia smiled.

For the next few weeks, Mia and Carlos spent countless hours on the weekend cultivating their garden. They made numerous trips to garden centers and mom and pop nurseries, buying the appropriate flowers and plants. The Scalia’s gave the couple tons of advice on what to buy and what not to buy. “Learn from our mistakes,” they always said. Carlos hired a handyman friend to help construct a wood trellis mirroring the one the Scalia’s had in their back yard. They added a stone border and created rustic walkways.

One Saturday early evening after dinner, Carlos and Mia sat on the white metal bench set under the blossoming peach tree. Miguel frolicked in the turtle-shaped sand box. They sipped their red wine and savored all the hard work they’d done.

“Forgot one thing,” said Carlos. He jumped up and lit the four Tiki torches positioned around the garden. “Now we’re good.”

The phone rang. “I got it,” said Mia. She walked over to the glass table and picked up the cordless phone.

“Hello? No. Oh God. When? We’re so sorry.” Mia looked over to her husband. “Please let us know if there’s anything we can do for you, okay? I understand. Take care.”

“Who was that?”

“Roberta,” replied Mia, who had stayed in touch with her for months. “Angelo passed away. She’s flying home tomorrow and staying with a close friend.”

Carlos teared up. “Damn it.” He shook his head. “He was such a nice, decent man too.”

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Days later, Roberta finally returned to their once pristine home. She stood at the padlocked front gate, cradling the urn filled with her husband’s ashes. Weeds and tall grass choked out anything with color. The birdbath was filled with dead leaves and murky brown water.

“I know you wanted to be here one last time,” she cried, lips trembling. Her eyes gazed upon their once pristine garden, usually bustling with wildlife. “Our poor home.”

The Lopez family turned the corner and spotted the widow. Mia rushed over and gave her a big hug. She felt slight in her embrace.

“You know, we both wanted to have our ashes spread out here. We just loved our garden – so tranquil and full of life. And now I can’t even get in!” She stiffened up, thinking about how much she despised what their only son had schemed.

Carlos tugged at the lock but couldn’t budge it. “I have an idea.” He raised his boot and kicked in the door. “Be our guest.”

“Thank you,” quipped Roberta, offering up an appreciative smile. “You know for the longest times we thought you were both Italian.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” smiled Mia. “You remember we’re from Mexico.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” grinned the fragile

woman, patting Mia on her cheek. “Not everyone can be Italian.”

“Although we both love the food,” chimed Carlos, who had shared many a lasagna dinner with the Scalia’s.

The old woman walked the familiar stone path, now overgrown, and reached for the yellow chairs, now dirty and covered in fallen leaves. She pried open the urn and spoke out of earshot of the couple. She made the sign of the cross then carefully scattered the grounds with ashes and placed the top back on. She touched the chair her late husband used to sit in and sat down, not caring if it dirtied her dress. Carlos took Mia’s hand and clutched it.

Roberta sat there, soaking in the moments she’d had with her husband of nearly sixty years. She looked so frail now. A cardinal, bright red, perched on a branch at eye level with her. As Mrs. Scalia stood up from the chair, she fell to the ground. Carlos rushed over in a flash but it was too late.

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 After Roberta’s funeral, the Lopez’s followed the son back to his late parent’s home. He got out of the car, crappy rock music playing as usual. He walked up to the white picket fence and was about to dump the urn on some shrubs when Mia called out.

“No, no. Not there! Not there!” screamed Mia.

Startled, Giovanni placed the top back on. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Your mom specifically wanted the ashes to be scattered by the garden, next to their favorite chairs.”

“And where’s that?”

“Give me that you careless bastard.”

Giovanni was about to raise his hand when Carlos intervened, clutching the man’s pencil tin forearm. “Let her do it.” Giovanni could tell he was inches away from getting pummeled.

Mia strode up the same path. She said a prayer, made the sign of the cross, and sprinkled the ashes around the chairs and what was left of the decaying flowers. She bowed her head and walked back to the gate. Mia slammed the urn into Giovanni’s narrow chest, took her husband’s hand, and headed home.

A day later, a demolition crew was out setting up a chain-link fence around the Scalia property. Arriving back from the grocery store, Mia slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car. “That heartless little mierda.”

She waited for her husband to get back home from work. He called, saying he was running late.

The car pulled up wipers brushing aside the light drizzle. Mia stormed outside holding an umbrella and rushed towards the car door.

Carlos looked up, hoping there wasn’t an emergency. Their son had a slight fever last night. “Is everything alright? Is Miguel okay?” asked Carlos.

“Everything’s fine honey, but guess what that cucaracha is going to do?”

“Who’s that?” asked Carlos, juggling a bag of fast food in one hand while holding his briefcase with the other. “You mean?”

“Yep. Nine AM manana, that beautiful home is coming down.”

“He must have won a big slip and fall case,” shrugged her husband in disappointment. “What a shame. I wish we could have done something, anything.”

After dinner, Mia and Carlos tucked their son in bed. The parents went into the living room and slumped down onto the soft leather sofa and turned on the television and watched in silence. An hour later both trudged upstairs and fell asleep.

A thunderous rain storm erupted out of nowhere, waking up Mia. She turned over like a slug. “Three in the morning, ugh.” Not able to get back to sleep, she went over to the reading nook of their bedroom and sat down in one of the two cozy chairs.

“What is it,” said Carlos. He got up and joined his wife, unable to sleep as well. He asked again.

Mia sighed.

Her husband sat down, observing the sheets of rain tattering against the window and said nothing. A moment later, Carlos shook his head then arched his thick black eyebrows. He suddenly jettisoned out of the chair. “Get changed.”

“What?” she replied, nearly falling asleep.

“You heard me, get on your sweats; we’ve got a garden to steal.”

The two went into the garage and took out the wheelbarrow, gathered up work gloves, pruning shears, and shovels. Mia made sure the doors were locked before venturing out. Armed with their

gardening gear, Mr. and Mrs. Lopez trekked to the end of the block and snuck into the Scalia’s back yard courtesy of wire cutters.

“We’re really doing this, huh?” said Mia, through the downpour.

“Damn straight,” Carlos replied, fixing the bill of his baseball cap. “Let’s roll.”

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The next morning, bulldozers showed up like tanks eager to go into battle. A crew of a dozen men, all dressed in jeans and matching red long sleeve t-shirts, looked jacked for demolition work. In a matter of hours, the once neighborhood centerpiece was reduced into an eyesore.

Carlos and Mia spent the next two days recovering, battling nagging colds. By Friday, both were feeling a world better. After an early dinner of homemade pizza, Carlos walked outside and hosed off the yellow metal chairs, strategically planting them between a plump rose bush. He felt sad, thinking the last time anyone had actually sat in them was when Barbara died.

“Take care chairs, I hope you like your new home.” Carlos started heading inside when he heard a sneeze. “Bless you.”

Carlos paused. He turned slowly, surveying the back yard. “Who’s there?”

His wife came out the back door with a couple of cold beers. “Here, I thought you could use one of these,” as she tossed a can of Modelo to her sure-handed husband.

“Did you just sneeze a second ago?”

“No, I was inside finishing up the dishes. Why, is something wrong?”

“I swear I heard a sneeze, clear as day.”

“Maybe a squirrel?” said Mia. “You know how crazy they sound when they’re fighting over nuts.” Carlos offered up a half smile.

The two walked over to the white metal bench and clanged their beers together. “Ah-choo!”

“Okay, tell me you didn’t hear that,” said Carlos.

“I did and it sounded like it came from near the roses.” The two got up and slowly walked over but didn’t see anything.

“Let’s go inside before we do see something,” said Mia, getting antsy.

Later after midnight, Carlos awoke. He swore he heard people talking. He sauntered over to the open bedroom window and peered out. There was little wind, no rain or thunder to speak of. He put on his robe and trudged downstairs. As usual, the wood creaked with every step.

Mia sprang out of bed. “What’s going on? Is it a burglar?”

“I heard voices outside. I’m just gonna take a quick look.”

Mia put on her robe and trudged downstairs. “Should we call the police?”

“Grab the phone just in case.” Carlos walked over to the kitchen and reached under the sink to grab a flashlight. “You coming?”

“Right behind you.” Mia picked up the cordless phone and her favorite walking stick by the back door and followed her husband into the back yard.

“Okay this is just weird,” said Carlos.

“What?”

Carlos stood still and shined the light. “The chairs – they’ve moved.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. See?” He pointed at their former location, the imprints easily visible. The two chairs now sandwiched the white bench seat under the peach tree.

The two walked over and looked at each other. “Very strange,” said Mia.

A female voice suddenly spoke up. “I hope we didn’t wake you.”

Both peered into the darkness. “Who said that?” asked Mia, raising her stick. “I’m armed and dangerous.”

Carlos called out too, placing his hand on one of the yellow chairs. His hand felt a tingling sensation. Mia saw her husband’s face. She placed her hand on the other chair.

“Well, are you two going to just stand there? Take a seat, take a seat!” said the man. The couple got chills; their bodies suddenly consumed with goose bumps.

Mia fainted first; Carlos a close second. Moments later they awoke. “Are we dreaming?” asked Mia, shaking her head. Carlos helped her up from the soft grass and plopped themselves on the bench.

“We’re allergic to roses, I thought you knew that,” said the woman’s voice. The young couple leaped off the bench like it was electrified.

Mia stuttered. “That sounded like . . .”

“We absolutely love your garden,” said the female voice.

“Nice job on the trellis, you do this by yourself?” asked the man.

“I kinda helped out,” replied Carlos, hesitating. “Honey, I think the chairs are talking to us.”

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, please don’t let us chairs rust!” giggled the female voice. “Pretty catchy wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m going to scream very very loudly right about now,” said Mia.

“Please don’t,” said Roberta. “Both you and Carlos have given us a chance to be together, at home in this wonderful garden. I knew you could do it, right honey?”

“To be honest, it was touch and go,” said Angelo. “But you followed through. And if it’s okay, the misses and I would like to stay here awhile.”

“Our garden . . . is your garden,” replied Mia, perplexed, still trying to make sense of the situation.

“Uh, absolutely,” added Carlos, arms folded, bewildered.

“Thank you both so much,” said Roberta.

Just one thing,” said Angelo.

“What’s that?” replied Mia, anxious.

“You gotta promise us, and I mean it, honey,” persisted Angelo.

“Anything, anything” answered Mia. “What is it?”

“Please make sure Miguel doesn’t grow up to be a lawyer.”



## Tulpa By Jaime White

It was just an innocent joke. At least, that’s how it started. Chris had only been in town for two weeks and already, the boredom was getting to him. Since he was new in school, he didn’t know anyone and the other kids weren’t exactly going out of their way to make him feel welcome.

He figured it was just the curse of being the new kid until he overheard some classmates talking about him. Actually, they were talking about his house. Leave it to his parents to buy the one house in the area all the kids were convinced was haunted. Some strange old lady used to live there and scare anyone stupid enough to come near her door. Some even said she made one of those people disappear.

Chris just rolled his eyes and walked away. “Who’s dumb enough to believe that?” he mumbled to himself. He stopped believing in ghosts and witches years ago. Still, it gave him an idea.

The following Monday, he walked into his first period class and strode over to one of the kids he overheard talking about the house. “Hi, I’m Chris.”

The other boy raised an eyebrow at him. “Yeah?”

Chris resisted the urge to punch the smug look off the kid’s face. “You’re Steve, right?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

Chris shrugged. “I heard you and some of the other guys talking about my house last week. Whatever happened to that old lady?”

“No one knows. She just didn’t wake up one day. Wanna know what I think?”

“Sure.” Chris struggled to keep a straight face at the serious tone in Steve’s voice.

“I think someone got her. No one will say, but someone totally got revenge on her for all the stuff she did.”

“What, you think she’s haunting my house because of it?”

Steve nodded enthusiastically. “You bet.”

Chris nodded and muttered, “That makes sense.”

“What does?”

“Nothing,” Chris said. I gotta get to class. See ya.” He turned and walked away, trying not to smile at the look on Steve’s face. The game was off to a great start.

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The next morning, Chris arrived at school to find Steve and some other kid whose name he couldn’t remember waiting outside.

“Hey, Parker,” Steve called out as Chris passed him.

“What?” Chris asked.

“I told Miller what you said yesterday.” Excitement colored his

words as Steve pointed to his friend. “We gotta ask you, have you seen anything weird in your house?”

Adrenaline coursed through Chris’ body as he took in the boys’ excited faces. I’ve got them now, he thought. Chris nodded, taking on a causal tone. “A couple things.”

“Like what?” Miller asked. His eyes were wide with excitement.

“Last night, I heard this strange thud in my room, but there was nothing there. It happened the night before too.”

“Wow,” Steve chimed in. “You’re serious? Didn’t that freak you out?”

Chris waved off the comment, “Man, I’m not afraid of some ghost.”

The bell rang, interrupting their conversation. The boys all went their separate ways as Chris tried to conceal the satisfied smirk on his face. He couldn’t believe they bought that story.

At lunch, Chris had a bunch of the guys from his class firing questions at him. They all wanted to know what it was like living in a haunted house. They all wanted to know about the strange things he saw and he was happy to oblige.

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Over the next few days, he had more and more people asking about life in a haunted house. Some of the younger kids looked at him like a hero for being so casual about dealing with a ghost. Chris could hardly stand it, he was so excited. Finally, people wanted to hang out with him.

He was still buzzing with excitement when he got home one afternoon after yet again thrilling some kids with tall tales. He

dumped his books on the kitchen table and opened the fridge to get a snack. Chris scanned the contents of the fridge as he considered what story he’d tell next. He settled on a bag of chips, stuffing a huge handful in his mouth before collecting his books from the kitchen counter. “Hmm, maybe I’ll tell them the ghost stole one of my hats,” he mused as he walked to the living room.

Chris set his books on the coffee table and plopped down on the floor. He stuffed another handful of chips in his mouth, then flipped open his math book. He riffled through the pages until he got to the one he needed. He half-heartedly read over the assignment while flipping through the TV channels.

He settled on a superhero movie and dropped the remote. Just as the movie was getting to a good part, the channel changed to some old game show. He frowned, then reached for the remote. Once he had the channel he wanted, Chris set the remote on the table.

He set to work on his assignment, half-listening to the movie. He almost jumped when the sound changed again. He looked up to see a slasher movie on the screen. The victim screamed as the killer lumbered over her.

“What the?” he asked. Chris picked up the remote up again and smacked it against the palm of his hand. “Stupid thing.”

Chris decided to turn off the TV and focus on his homework instead. He finished quickly, slamming the book shut with a flourish. At the same time, the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and said, “Hello?”

Silence greeted him over the line. He waited a minute before repeating, “Hello?” The silence turned to static, then a high-pitched squeal. Chris slammed the receiver down. He wondered what smartass from school was messing with him. He thought this one kid named Dave was giving him a weird look earlier that day at lunch. Or maybe it was Johnny. He didn’t look happy about all the attention Chris was getting.

The phone rang again and Chris snatched the receiver off its cradle. “What?”

Once again, the weird static sound came over the line. A creepy voice growled, “Chris.”

“Who is this?” Chris demanded.

“You know,” the voice replied.

“Dave, if this is you—”

“Not even close,” the voice responded. A deep, gravelly laugh carried over the line.

Before Chris could respond, the line went dead and a loud *thud* shook the room. He jumped so high, he was sure he could have cleared the couch easily.

“What the hell is going on?”

As if in answer to his question, all the lights flicked on at once. They flashed brightly a moment before shutting off again. His eyes widened as he realized this couldn’t be part of a joke. “Who’s doing this?” he wondered aloud.

*You should know. You made me.*

The voice sent chills up Chris’ spine. He hurried for the door and almost ran into his parents as they returned from some business meeting.

“Chris, are you okay?” His mom regarded him with concern.

“Yeah, just heard a weird sound. It was nothing...”

Maybe being the cool kid with the haunted house wasn’t as good as it seemed.



## Romancing the Dream By CP Bialois/Ed White

Duncan Weiss couldn’t help watching Denise Dixon as she twirled some of her hair around with her right index finger as she read one of her text books. The way her hair moved across her skin was both alluring and intimidating for him.

He shook himself to break the spell and focus on his sandwich.

*How is it I managed to make it all the way to college without asking a girl out,* he wondered. Throughout high school he’d always been the nice kid, the pleasant kid, the he’s-safe-for-your-daughters-to-be-alone-with kid. It was the last one he hated with a passion. He was smart enough to know he wasn’t the only one like him in his school, but the distinction of *all* the girls knowing was just too much.

Now, he here was. All grown up in his early twenties and he had yet to ask anyone out for a date. It wasn’t that he would settle, oh no, not Duncan Weiss. If there was a way to complicate things, he would find it. In this case, it had to do with his crush on the hottest girl on campus.

Duncan lost track of how many times his friends told him he shouldn’t focus on the gold. There was nothing wrong with aiming for the bronze or silver medals. Each time he tried to rebuff their arguments, and each time they trounced him with phrases like, “Dude, you’re cool and all... but Denise? She’s out of everyone’s league!” or “It’d take winning the lottery for her to even look at you, and that’s what it’d take!” The most disheartening was what his best friend, Phil, told him the previous day, “Bro, I love you like a brother, but you’re too ordinary for Denise Dixon. Maybe Jenny Cullen?”

Duncan didn’t know how he didn’t haul off and clock Phil for that one. It wasn’t that Jenny Cullen wasn’t pretty or cute, she was, but she was also his childhood friend. And that was one friendship he valued enough not to chance messing it up. The one with Phil, well, he’d have to think on that.

Who am I kidding, he thought, Phil’s right. She doesn’t even know my name.

“Excuse me, Duncan. Mind if I ask you something?” Duncan’s voice caught in his throat at hearing Denise’s voice carry to him as though guided by angels.

After a second, he realized he was staring and motioned to the chair next to him. “Sure, by all means. Have a seat if you’d like.”

He hurried to push his books to the other side of the table to make room. The act was a clumsy one, but it earned him a smile of gratitude.

Denise took the offered seat with a grace Duncan didn't think a human being should be capable of. "Thank you."

*My God! She smiled at me! Wait. She asked me a question! Oh my freaking God! Don't screw this up, Duncan. Don't you dare screw this up...*

He forced himself to smile to hide the goofy look he was sure was etched on his face. "How can I help you?" He offered silent thanks to whomever helped his voice not to crack when he spoke.

Denise remained quiet for a moment. "I'm having some problem with Ancient Civilizations. Susie said you're pretty good and may be interested in helping me."

In a flash, Duncan forgave Phil for his earlier comment. Susie was Phil's girlfriend and knowing Phil must've said something to her meant the universe wasn't against him. Duncan just hoped he didn't do something to screw it up.

Duncan tried to ignore the sound of his heart pounding in his ears and his breath catching in his throat. "Sure, I'd be happy to help. What do you need help in?"

Denise's smile widened even more. It gave Duncan the impression a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Oh, thank you! It's the Greeks. I can't keep their names and events straight during the Persian War."

Duncan nodded with a slight smile. It was his favorite part of Greek history. He considered

himself an expert on the subject. "Awesome! I love that time period. When would you like to start?" He couldn't believe how easy it was to talk to her, even if it was about schoolwork.

Her eyes focused on the table for a second in thought. When she looked back up, her eyes seemed to glow. "How about tonight? We can meet anywhere you'd like."

*Tonight? A nervous voice squeaked in his head. Anywhere I'd like? Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.* Duncan tried to remain calm as every scenario he'd ever imagined flooded his thoughts. After a few seconds, he shrugged and offered the one place he felt he'd be able to focus. "We can meet at the library or coffee shop at seven o'clock. Whichever you think you'd be more comfortable at." He felt himself smile, but he was more caught up with trying to figure out where this calm demeanor and smooth dialogue came from. *Maybe I'm having a stroke?*

Denise reached out and rested her hand on his. Her touch sent sparks shooting through him like fireworks. "The coffee shop it is. Thanks, Duncan."

Just as the sparkling of the fireworks left his eyes, he felt like he'd put his hand in a bowl of warm water. The feeling spread through his hand and arm making him smile. "You're welcome. I'm happy to be here for you." *WHAT?* He tried to keep the surprise of his own words from showing, but he knew he failed when she chuckled. *You idiot! I have to fix this! Crap, what can I say?* "Uh, I mean... um..."

Denise shook her head. "It's all right. Glad to see I'm not the only one nervous." Her face flushed as

she bit her bottom lip. "See you tonight." With that, she stood to leave, but her hand stayed on his for a couple of extra seconds.

When she left, Duncan could only sit there dumbstruck and watch as she glanced back at him before leaving the cafeteria. Her smile looked even more beautiful with the added red in her cheeks. It wasn't until a few seconds later that he realized she asked him out for a date. He had a date with Denise Dixon!

It took everything he had to keep from leaping up and shouting to the heavens. Instead, he tried to busy himself by figuring out why she asked him out. All he could think of was the need to thank Phil and bestow a knighthood or something on his friend for whatever he said to Susie.

Taking out his cell phone, he pressed the call button next to his friend's picture. When Phil answered, Duncan didn't give him a chance to speak. "Dude, you are the freaking best. The best!"

Phil laughed on the other end. "No need to tell me something I already know, Bro."

"Dude, whatever you said to Susie about me, thank you! I mean it. I really owe you one."

Phil remained quiet for a few seconds before answering, "Oh, right. Guess she asked you out, huh?"

"Man, why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know if she was going to or not. She's as nervous as you."

Duncan paused in thought. "Wait. You mean, she was nervous about talking to *me*?"

“Yep. Apparently, she thinks you’re cute and nice. Go figure. Guess she sees a part of you we miss, huh?”

Laughter burst out of him, but Duncan quickly suppressed it and gave a sheepish grin to a couple of students off to the side. Lowering his voice, he said, “I can’t believe it. Why didn’t she ask me before now?”

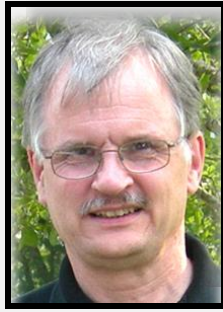
Phil laughed again, this time it took him a few minutes to stop. “Bro, she thought you were gay.”

“What? Are you freaking kidding me?”

“No man. You hang out with Melvin and never talk with girls. Most of the school thinks you’re gay.”

Shaking his head, Duncan let out a laugh. “But... ah hell. Can’t have everything.” He glanced at the clock on the wall and saw it was five-thirty. “Look, man, I gotta go. Talk to you later.”

After closing his phone, Duncan tossed his trash into the waste bin and hurried out of the cafeteria. He didn’t have a lot of time to get ready, but he couldn’t stop shaking his head at his apparent reputation. After a few seconds it was forgotten as his thoughts returned to his upcoming study-date with the woman of his dreams. So much for dreams not coming true.



**Jack Capricorn**  
**By Rick Weber**

I don’t know where to begin with this story or how to tell it, except that I was part of it. I am still afraid of what happened and the repercussions which may follow because I let this story be made known.

I am a member of the local media here in South Florida. The name of my parent organization is irrelevant and to disclose it may cause harm to others.

This started on a bright all too common sunny day in this part of the country. I had just dropped off my kids at daycare and was headed to work southbound on the Florida turnpike in my mini-van. I had deadlines to meet and although I am ashamed to admit it now, I was busy, no make that arguing, with my boss on the cell phone while in traffic. Going through the Sunpass lane at the Cypress Creek toll plaza several drivers honked their horns at me as they cut in front of my mini-van while passing me. I was just under posted speed and ignored their gestures. *I’m a safer driver than you, Buddy*, I thought.

As I moved past the Commercial Boulevard exit, it happened. My car quit running and worse yet, my cell phone died, too. I managed to coast off to the right

shoulder and stopped without getting hit by other vehicles. I tried to restart the min-van without getting any response. My smartphone was also a dark unresponsive plastic mass in my hand. I was too angry to cry. *What do I do now?* I thought, and my prayer was answered. A Florida Highway Patrol trooper pulled up behind me with emergency light flashing.

The trooper, a tall lean mean with graying temples showing under the brim of his Stetson hat, walked around to the passenger side of my car where he tapped on the glass. I was unable to lower any windows since my battery had no juice. My Honda had truly become an Odyssey. I slid over to the passenger seat and, after some fumbling, was able to open the door.

“Having trouble?” the trooper asked in a rhetorical but professional tone.

Then the tears came running down my face before I got my first word out. “Yes,” I managed to spout. “My car died. It just quit on me, and I have to get to work. I’m late, and my cell phone died, too.”

The last statement caused the trooper to raise his eyebrows. “Were you on it when the motor stopped running?”

I could only snuffle and nod in reply.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to write you a ticket. That’s only a secondary violation here in Florida and I didn’t see you driving in traffic. Can you tell me what else happened before you ended up here on the birm?”

A strange request, I thought, but the trooper, whom I will call Trooper Smith, appeared genuinely interested. I guessed that it had to do with traffic safety so I confessed my sins.

After hearing me out, Trooper Smith asked, “Could you please try your cell phone again?”

I complied, but it still did not turn on. It was beyond resurrection.

Trooper Smith then said, “Well, we’re going to get you and your car out of here to a safer place. A Road Ranger is on the way.”

A few minutes later, a red and white Road Ranger truck pulled up in front of my mini-van and Trooper Smith went up to it and spoke to the operator before coming back to me, still sitting shotgun in my kaput car.

“He’s going to tow your car down to our old FHP building at the Sunrise Boulevard toll plaza. Grab your things and get into my car. We’ll follow him there.”

I gathered my purse and my work satchel containing my laptop and other junk off the back seat. On the ride I finally composed enough to ask, “You’re going to a lot of trouble for a disabled vehicle?”

Turning off the emergency lights as we pulled into traffic Trooper Smith told me, “We had a bulletin come out about a week ago telling us to report any vehicles that suddenly became disabled for no apparent reason. One of our troopers in Miami-Dade put it out. He wants to know in particular about events where both the vehicle’s electrical systems and driver cell phones are affected at the same time. What happened to you fits those criteria.”

My feelings of self-pity ended and my reporter’s nose was piqued by this revelation. “How many situations like mine happened?”

“From what the bulletin said, about eight in the past six weeks. No other known reason other than the drivers were on their cell phones in traffic at the time of the incidents. The trooper working on this is on his way. He’s coming from Golden Glades to meet us here,” Trooper Smith said pointing to a shuttered building next to the Sunrise Boulevard toll plaza with the FHP logo on it.

Pulling around to the back of the building, the Road Ranger got out of his truck, took a key ring off of his belt, and unlocked a chain link gate to what was once a parking lot. After gingerly letting my mini-van down from his tow lift, he waved us into the lot. Trooper Smith parked next to my car and handed me his cell phone telling me I should call my husband, obviously seeing the wedding ringer on my left hand, to let him know what happened. He got out of the patrol car to finish up with the Road Ranger. I called my husband, and the tears returned as I blurted out one more time what happened.

While Trooper Smith was taking with the Road Ranger a second FHP car pulled into the lot. A short, well-built trooper with thick dark hair got out and walked over to Trooper Smith as I continued to bawl into my husband’s understanding ear. After listening to me, my husband told me that he was on the way from his office in Fort Lauderdale. I ended the call as both troopers headed over to Trooper Smith’s car. I got out and met them. Handing his cell phone back to him, I thanked Trooper Smith and was introduced

to his colleague, whom I will call Trooper Cervantes, who initiated the bulletin and would be following up on my case.

“What happened?” Trooper Cervantes asked, and for the umpteenth time that day I recounted my ordeal.

After I finished, Trooper Cervantes asked, “Did you notice anyone suspicious around you in traffic?”

“No,” I answered. “I was too busy fighting with my boss on the phone. Is there something I should know?”

“We’re trying to see what else these incidents may have in common. So far, nothing besides all the drivers being on their cell phones stands out. You’re the ninth incident we’ve documented thus far. I’ve reached out to other agencies in the area to see if they had any similar incidents.”

With my reporter’s fedora back on I asked, “Do you think these incidents are connected?”

“It’s hard to say. Can I take a look at your car and your cell phone?”

“Sure,” I replied and Trooper Cervantes walked over to the driver’s side of my van. He got in, and I could see him turning the ignition key without success. He exited and opened the hood, and after a cursory inspection closed it. Coming back to me, I handed him my cell phone without him asking. He hit its power button without any response from the device.

He asked me where I took my car for repairs, and I gave him the name of the dealership as my husband pulled onto what was becoming a crowded lot. I

introduced my husband to the troopers.

“This is like the other eight incidents,” Trooper Cervantes told us. “The electrical systems on all the vehicles and their drivers’ cell phones were fried.” Then turning to me he asked, “Do you happen to have a computer with you?”

I nodded and retrieved my satchel and purse from Trooper Smith’s car. I set them both on the hood of my husband’s car as everyone gathered around. I pulled out my laptop and powered up right away. I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God, it’s working. My whole life is on that thing.”

“That’s because it was off at the time of your incident,” Trooper Cervantes commented. “Another thing I found out was that other electrical items, which were off in the cars at the times of these incidents, were not damaged. It’s almost as if a power surge happened. Please let your mechanic know I will be stopping by his shop to get his assessment.”

“Do you think the same guy is involved in all of these things?” my husband asked.

“I don’t know,” Trooper Cervantes responded as a call came out over Trooper Smith’s portable radio.

“Sorry folks, but I have to leave,” Trooper Smith interrupted. “I got an accident on I-95 to handle.” Then turning to me, he asked, “Did you have all your property from my car?” After I nodded, he added, “Well, I’ll be off,” as he headed to his vehicle.

As Trooper Smith drove off with lights and sirens on, I turned to

Trooper Cervantes and asked, “What’s next?”

“After talking to your mechanic, I’ll put this all into one report with the other cases, and hope to make some sense out of it. There has to be a common root, either human or mechanical.”

“Mechanical?” my husband asked. “I thought someone was involved.”

“We have to look at all of the possibilities. Do you remember hearing about airbags being deployed in cars without a collision? Those were the result of vehicles being in hot climates for prolonged periods of time. I’m not saying that’s the case here, but we have to examine the mechanical matters first before moving on.”

“Trooper Cervantes,” I interjected. “Do you mind if I follow up with you on your investigation? I’m a reporter and this might be a good lead on a story.”

“No problem. I’ll let our Public Affairs Officer know. If this develops into something bigger, FHP will want to get the word out.”

I talked with Trooper Cervantes in more detail about his investigation as my husband gave the AAA tow truck driver, who just arrived, the information about what happened to my car and where to take it. My conversation with Trooper Cervantes ended with us exchanging business cards before he left to handle a call for service.

I got into my husband’s car, and he asked, “Where to?” I was a bit overwhelmed but said, “The cell phone store, first. I can’t be without communication. Then I have to get a loaner car from the dealership. I

also have to let my boss know where I am....”

“Already done,” my husband interrupted. “He wants you to give him a call,” as he passed me his cell phone. “I filled him in on the way out here.”

The rest of the day went smoother than I thought. The extra insurance my husband insisted on taking out when we bought our cell phones paid off. They gave me a new one without any hassle. The SIM card from my old phone was undamaged so I didn’t lose any of my contacts. I made it to work just after noon.

My boss had forgotten about our earlier spat and was concerned about my well-being. After laying out what happened to me and Trooper Cervantes investigation, he said, “You got a story. Stay on top of it!”

I met my deadlines for my other assignments by the end of the day when my new phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number but took the call anyway.

“Hi,” from the voice I knew it was Trooper Cervantes. “I think I got something for you. Remember, I told you I reached out to other law enforcement agencies. I was found out about four more cases in Miami-Dade and Broward.”

“Really?” I asked with renewed interest.

“All came out of calls about disabled vehicles blocking traffic. Officers didn’t think anything about it until I got the word out about drivers being on their phones at the same time.”

“Which makes me ‘Unlucky 13’,” I added. “Is there anything else in common with these cases?”

“No, the drivers were from all different backgrounds, driving different types of vehicles, but they were all near expressways when those things happened.”

“Interesting, can we get a better handle on this?”

“Yes, if I had some help,” Trooper Cervantes said. “I can only work on this when I’m not busy on the road. With the way people drive here in South Florida, that’s not too often.”

My mind started churning. “Let me see what I can do. Do you think there may have been other incidents that went unreported to the police?”

“That’s a fair assumption. Since no accidents happened, some people may not have even reported it to their insurance companies and paid for their repairs out of pocket.”

“I can’t do anything today. I have to pick up my kids at daycare, but tomorrow I’ll check with AAA to see if they had other towing jobs similar to mine recently. I’ll let you know what I find out.

“Likewise, and one more thing, no more cell phone calls while you’re driving.”

“Understood. I’ll be in touch when I’m not in traffic.”

Over the next week I found out from AAA about another five incidents in which cars died on the road while their drivers were on cell phones with nothing else in common. I was pondering what to do when my office phone rang. I picked it up, and Trooper Cervantes was on the other end.

“Hey, I wanted to let you know I picked up another four of these

occurrences from other agencies in Miami-Dade.”

“Anything different about them?”

“Yes, a driver was hurt in one of them. A man got hit from behind by a dump truck after his car cut out. He was going southbound on the Palmetto in the center lane just below 836 during last night’s rush hour. He couldn’t make it off to the shoulder and the trucker couldn’t stop. He took a hard hit a hard hit from behind but was able to steer away from other cars before crashing into a Jersey barrier in a construction zone there.”

“Oh my God! How is he?”

“He’s in serious but stable condition at Kendall Regional Medical Center. His car was totaled but did not catch fire so, I was able to look at it. It was like all the others. The electrical system was fried. What’s new on your end?”

“Five more from AAA. Same scenario, but no accidents nor injuries.”

“Were the drivers alone in their vehicles at the time?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, they were. Why?”

“It looks like we can add one more commonality to these cases. All of the drivers involved were alone at the time when these things happened.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I’m going down to Kendall Regional today to talk with the driver from last night’s Palmetto crash to see what he has to say. What do you have planned?”

“I’m going to talk to my boss. It may be time to put out something

about these events to see if there are other cases out there.”

“I’ll let our Public Affairs Officer know. Look, I got to go. I have a call to handle.”

After hanging up, I leaned back in my chair and thought, *How am I going to do this?*

I went into my boss’s office. Turning his head away from his computer screen, he looked at me and said in the form of a question, “Yes?”

“Remember the incidents like mine with cars cutting out in traffic while their drivers were on their cells?”

“Yes,” he answered. His terse style always worked me up, but I kept my cool.

“I just got off the phone with my FHP contact. We’re up to twenty-two, so far in the last six weeks.”

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me with serious interest and asked, “What do you want to do?”

“I want to run a short piece to get the word out to the public with FHP Public Affairs on board, of course.”

“Of course,” he said with his usual crispness adding, “Just do an overview putting in the number of incidents and that no particular make, model, or type of vehicle was directly targeted. Also, stress that the drivers were from all different backgrounds.”

“That may be more than just an overview to put out. Some other outlets may want to horn in on this story.”

“Look, I’ve been a member of the Press Club a lot longer than

you. The only thing the competition wants to focus on are bank heists with car chases and shoot outs. Right now, this is too far under their radar.

“Go over what you want to report with FHP. They may want to add some things since they’re fielding the calls. Stay in touch with your trooper contact. I don’t want us to get scooped.”

The change in wording from “you” to “us” was not lost on me. After getting back to my desk, I started jotting down bullets about what I wanted to include in my report before I talked to the FHP Public Affairs Officer.

Trooper Broderick, the local Public Affairs Officer, answered his phone on the second ring. After identifying myself, he said with some enthusiasm, “I’ve been expecting your call. Cervantes gave me the rundown. Twenty-two incidents like these in a relatively short time is no coincidence. What can we do for you?”

After going over my points, he said, “It looks like you got it all covered. You may want to add that anyone wishing to report similar incidents to call our station in Doral, anytime 24/7. Do you need the number?”

“No, I have it. Off the record, what do you think about these events?”

“Like I said, there are too many to be coincidences. As far as the causes, we’re looking into it. Cervantes has been put on a special assignment to do it.”

“You mean he’s going to be working solely on this?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking. At this point filtering this all through

one investigator makes the most sense. He has the most knowledge making him the best one for the job. Since the two of you have been comparing notes, he has permission to contact you directly. We hope by doing this we can get to the root of the problem sooner, rather than, later.”

The ominous tone of his last statement sent a chill up my spine. *This is getting serious*, I thought.

After my initial report went out I got a couple of calls from people not wanting to go to the police because they were undocumented immigrants. As such, they had no drivers’ licenses nor car insurance. However, they all thought someone in authority should know. I passed on what they gave me to Trooper Cervantes who was glad to have it.

“I’m doing a spread sheet,” he told me. “Every little bit helps. I’m also plotting the cases out on a map. Still the only common denominators are; drivers alone on their cell phones and being on or near expressways.

“I went to a number of repair shop, including your dealership. Damage has been limited to electrical components, in addition to, cell phones. No damage to any power trains, motors and transmissions. Some of the electrical parts showed more damage than others pointing to some sort of power surge. None of the mechanics even wanted to guess at any possible root cause.”

“Sounds like all the vehicles were struck by lightning.”

“Yes, but there were no storms around at the time.”

“How about if I do a story pointing out the electrical damage?”

“Sounds good to me. Just keep Trooper Broderick in the loop.”

“Will do,” I said, and the next day I put out a piece about it with Trooper Broderick’s blessing. Little did I know what grief this innocuous follow up story would cause me.

I received feedback on it, mostly through emails and social media. Some new incidents came up. One email, however, gave me a scare. It simply said:

“You got it wrong. It was me. Jack Capricorn”

I knew thought it was a crank email and did not respond to it. Still, it left me queasy, but I did not dwell on it. I did not mention it to my boss or to Trooper Cervantes.

More incidents were being reported with some injuries being incurred, none serious. Trooper Cervantes started grilling mechanics in more detail about possible sources of these issues without any luck.

Other media outlets started to show some interest but offered little insight in their reports. I put out a follow up story citing the increase in accidents and possible component problems similar to the unexpected deployment of airbags, which garnered more public interest.

This last piece initiated some chatter including another eerie email:

“Don’t you get it? I told you before it was me. What’s it gonna take for you to believe me. Jack Capricorn”

This one caused me to go to my boss. “Scary,” he told me. “If this guy is behind all this, things could escalate dramatically. You said this was the second one you got from

him. You better let Cervantes know and be ready for something more serious. If ‘Jack Capricorn’ is for real, it’s only going to get worse.”

“But, what’s with this name ‘Jack Capricorn?’” I asked.

“Well,” my boss began. “If I were to guess, it may be from some sort of messed up hero worship. He’s not only using a pseudonym to hide his identity, he’s taunting us, also.”

“That’s not comforting. Do you think a lunatic is behind this?”

“Possibly, find out from Cervantes if FHP had any communication with a “

‘Jack Capricorn’. It may give them a lead.”

In what was becoming a daily phone ritual, Trooper Cervantes advised that no person calling himself, “Jack Capricorn” contacted FHP. However, he came up with a new theory and wanted my take on it.

“I asked around from our own radio people to engineers to see if someone could use a gadget to boost power in electrical devices. Surprisingly, I learned it could be done through what is called ‘Electromagnetic Pulse or EMP’.” There are devices out there that use microwaves to destroy commercial off the shelf products, but they’re large military grade items still under development.”

Trying to absorb what I just heard, I could only ask, “Does this mean that if ‘Jack Capricorn’ does exist he’s some kind of a whiz kid?”

“I suppose so. This kind of equipment, if that’s what he is using, is big. It would have to be mounted on a vehicle the size of a

flatbed truck and be highly visible, unless he built a smaller version.”

“If ‘Jack Capricorn’ is for real, what’s his real goal? What’s he getting out of this?” I asked.

“Good question,” the trooper said. “We’ll have to wait to hear back from him. Do you plan to get another story out soon?”

“No, not right now, there’s nothing new to report. What do you have on tap?”

“I’m going to look over some traffic cam videos from FDOT to see if there was a common vehicle around during these events. Maybe, we’ll get lucky.”

“I hope so,” I said before hanging up.

The next day I was running a bit late when I got to the office. I had to stop by the dealership to drop off the loaner car and pick up my minivan. The repairs were finished. It felt good getting back into something roomier than the Honda Civic the dealer lent me. Before leaving I asked the service manager how much damage was done. He simply told me that I was lucky that only the electrical system was involved and fortunate that the car’s entertainment system was off at the time of my incident. Otherwise, it would have been more expensive and taken more time to fix. Counting my blessings, I hopped in my Odyssey and headed to work.

Logging on to my computer, I saw my inbox was loaded with fifty new unread emails. Scanning the list of senders, I saw one from my tormentor, “Jack Capricorn”. It had no subject and read:

“Still don’t think it’s me. Give EMP a try.”

Thanks to my talk with Trooper Cervantes, I knew about EMP. *What to do?* I asked myself. This was becoming a one-sided chess game with “Jack Capricorn” as the grandmaster. I could only groan.

Passing by my cubicle at the time, my boss poked his head in and asked, “Trouble?”

I let out a litany of profanity doubting everything from “Jack Capricorn’s” legitimacy to his parentage closing with, “...and he thinks he’s cute by dropping off that tidbit about EMP.”

“EMP?” my boss asked.

“Electromagnetic Pulse, that’s what Trooper Cervantes told me yesterday it might be. EMP weapons can fry electronic hardware.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah and the ones that are out there are being developed by the military and they are huge. They can’t be packed into a suitcase.”

Standing silent rapt in thought, my boss spoke a moment later saying, “Give Cervantes a shout and tell him you’ll be calling Public Affairs about putting out a story concerning your own personal experience with your car also citing ‘source information’ about EMP. This will let people know what to look for.”

“You want me not to name ‘Jack Capricorn’ in the report only calling him a ‘source?’”

“That’s right. I also want you to leave out anything you got from Cervantes. We still don’t know if ‘Capricorn’ is at the bottom of this. For all we know, he may only be a wacked out fifteen year old nerd with hormone problems. I’ll see if

our IT people can run down his email address.”

I was impressed. For the first time, I saw my boss, usually a Woody Allen type giving minimalist direction to his cast, finally acting as a leader. As he walked over to his office, I gave Trooper Cervantes a call.

“Wow!” he let out. “This guy is brazen. Sounds like he wants to get caught. I’ll let Broderick and my bosses know about your upcoming report. It shouldn’t be a problem. I’m also going to advise FDLE. If this guy truly is a nut case, I want them onboard now should this become a criminal investigation. As an aside, I’d still like to know where the ‘Jack Capricorn’ moniker came from.”

“Tell Trooper Broderick I’ll give him a call this afternoon. This will allow you to run it up your chain of command.”

Trooper Cervantes thanked me and after I hung up, I told my boss that the wheels had been set in motion no pun intended.

My call with Trooper Broderick went according to plan with him giving me a quote to use. “FHP is following up on all leads with public safety on our roads being the top priority.” I told him that my piece would go out the day after tomorrow to allow them to coordinate their efforts with FDLE. He advised me that FDLE already assigned an agent to work with Trooper Cervantes. Knowing that made it easier for me to work on my story.

The next day as I was finishing it, Trooper Cervantes called me that FDLE also had nothing on any person of interest by the name of “Jack Capricorn.” He added with a sincere tone, “Just be careful.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one saying that to you?”

“You know what I mean. Let me know if you get any feedback from ‘our friend’.”

“Yes, sir,” I said with my own note of candor.

My piece went out as planned, and it didn’t take too long to get an answer. The reply was strange:

“You don’t believe me. You think I’m kidding. Well, take a look at this.....”

The rest of his email was a sequence of letters and numbers with no spaces taking up three lines of text. I didn’t know what to make of it and forwarded it to my boss for review and comment, which did not take long.

He marched out of his office and directly to my desk saying, “I think I know who ‘Jack Capricorn’ is.”

With me staring blankly at his face, he continued, “He must be a fan of serial killers. It came to me when I saw the last three lines of his email.”

“You mean that jumble?”

“It’s not a jumble. It’s a cipher.”

“How did you arrive at that?”

“When I was an undergrad at Berkley during the late sixties, a number of people were shot or stabbed in the Bay Area. The suspect sent letters containing cryptograms to newspapers there claiming responsibility putting in details about the crimes which had not been made public. He ended of one letter with a 400+ word cipher, which a couple of local readers were partially able to crack. The part they unscrambled was the ranting of a madman.

“Every letter was signed with the same symbol, the Zodiac, and he was dubbed ‘The Zodiac Killer’. Capricorn, as you know, is part of the Zodiac.”

I was totally stressed out but was able to ask, “What about his first name, ‘Jack’?”

“That’s easy, ‘Jack the Ripper’. What both ‘Jack the Ripper’ and ‘The Zodiac Killer’ have in common, besides being proactive killers for a relatively short period of time, is that neither one of them was ever caught.

“Both got a lot of play in the press during their respective tenures, but in reality, authorities in both Britain and the U.S. could only attribute a limited number of killings to these perpetrators. London police could only say five killings were done by ‘Jack the Ripper’ while California law enforcement could only state ‘The Zodiac Killer’ had seven victims, five of whom died.

“‘Jack Capricorn’ is raising the stakes. Let Cervantes know right away before this becomes more costly.”

I knew what my boss meant by “costly” and called Trooper Cervantes immediately.

Amazed at what I told him, he calmly said, “I’ll get a hold of FDLE right away. They’ll want to see your emails, especially, the last one. I know you didn’t respond to any of them. Let’s keep it that way. He’s probably waiting for some kind of answer in one of your reports. Sit tight. I’m sure FDLE will contact you ASAP.”

He was right. About ten minutes later, an FDLE agent called me to say that he would be at my

office in less than thirty minutes. It was a long wait.

The agent, whose name I don't recall, sat down with me and my boss to go over my contacts with "Jack Capricorn". With my boss's consent, I gave him hard copies of all three emails. The agent's eyes opened wide when my boss gave him his "Jack the Ripper" and "Zodiac Killer" assessment.

"You very well could be right," the agent said in a southern drawl indicating that he was from North Florida. "I'm going to notify both the FBI and Secret Service to see what they can do with that email address. I hope the FBI has luck cracking that code. Only part of one from 'The Zodiac Killer' was ever decrypted.

The agent then briefed us on the precautions we should take both at work and at home. He gave us his contact information and advised that he would be briefing local police on the situation.

On the way to pick up my kids from daycare, I looked into my rearview mirror as much as I looked in front of me. The only thing I noticed was the number of people yakking on their cell phones oblivious to everything around them. I got my kids and arrived home without incident. When my husband showed up, I gave him the lowdown, and he gave me a big hug. Boy, if I ever needed one, it was then.

After a fitful night's sleep, I made it to work on time with no new emails from 'Jack Capricorn' waiting for me. My phone rang. It was Trooper Cervantes. He had a busy night. Four more incidents going from South Miami-Dade to North

Broward with no changes in modus operandi.

"What about you? How are you doing?" he asked.

"Doing okay. Hanging in there," I said then informed him about the meeting with FDLE.

"I hope we nail this guy before someone gets killed," the trooper said. "I'd also like to see the gadgets he's using."

"I'd also like to know what's in the cipher he sent me. It may clue us in about him."

"FDLE gave the FBI copies of your emails. The Bureau said they would put a rush on it. With all the focus on terrorism, I'm sure they will."

A few weeks passed and the FBI was able to decode the whole cipher revealing the rants of a lunatic. The case escalated and more resources were brought to bear from the federal government, but without any luck tracking down "Jack Capricorn".

Trooper Cervantes called me one morning. This time his tone was grim. "He finally did it. Last night a guy on the way home in traffic on the Dolphin was on the phone with his wife. His daughter was with him as part of 'Take your Kid to Work' day. His car cut out along with his phone. They were hit from behind by a semi. He was pronounced dead at the scene, but his daughter survived. She was taken to Ryder Trauma Center, but was able to give troopers an account of what transpired."

Later that day, "Jack Capricorn" sent me an email which only said, "*Au revoir*". That was my last contact with him. The investigation continued, but nothing new

developed. I did a follow up story, but no new incidents were reported.

Every so often, I touch base with Trooper Cervantes, but the trail has gone cold. I never disclosed the name "Jack Capricorn" in any of my reports, but I'm doing it now hoping it may lead to closure for a little girl who lost her Daddy.

As for me, I am not afraid. "Jack Capricorn", or whatever your name is, you're a COWARD. I hope someday you get caught, and that you rot in hell.

One final note, I want to thank my boss for pushing me to do this. He broadened my horizons.

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## A Day at the Library No One Cared to Repeat

By Marjorie Clark

Morning dawned crisp and clear on the multi-paned glass structure that housed the South Central Library in West Brook, Florida. The birds on the leafy green trees awoke and started their daily morning chorus while the brown grey foxes went to bed after a night of egg and lizard hunting, tucked under the roughly manicured bushes around and in back of the building itself.

Next came the branch librarian, Vioris Nichols, a woman from Trinidad, with hair pulled tightly back into a bun, in a dark blue suit with a white frilly blouse, with hose and dark blue sensible pumps to match. She quickly parked her aged Mercedes Benz in her spot next to the loading dock on the building's west side, pulled out her large key

ring to find the correct back door key and turned the alarm system off so everyone else could enter after her when the doors officially opened at 10:00 am sharp.

Soon, five or six cars of varying ages, models, and makes were arriving at the creaking automatic gate around quarter to ten, vying for the best parking spaces, opening their driver's sides at different intervals, and striding towards the back staff entrance, eager to punch their time clock to avoid excuses later to their respective supervisors. Even so, as human nature asserts itself in similar situations, there were the few stragglers making their presence known a few minutes after ten, juggling keys, lunches, and bags so not to be really late and get into real trouble with their superiors.

By this time almost all the computers were taken by the regular patrons and the students upstairs around the Reference desk, where the phone was ringing every thirty seconds, and a line had begun to form in front of it, mostly of folks with website issues or printing concerns or a few true reference questions that could not be solved with the electronic card catalog downstairs. Two harried staff members were sitting at this desk, a somewhat older thin woman librarian with curly blond hair and vintage reading glasses, and a library trainee, a much younger Latin male, both trying to direct each patron in the front of this line while answering phone questions as quickly as possible.

Unbeknownst to any of the staff, a former patron who had been permanently suspended of all library use at this branch and several others in the Oleander

County library system due to disruptive behavior of a political nature, had quietly entered the building with a fully loaded and loaded M-16 tucked into a long canvas bag, along two sharp kitchen knives inside his nylon dark green jacket for good measure. He wore dark aviator glasses and a dark blue ball cap to hide his steely blue eyes and spiked, blue black hair. His medium and wiry, yet muscular medium brown frame housed a person of quick impulses and calm authority.

Swiftly and silently, he removed the machine gun from the bag and fired a round of bullets directly into the first floor ceiling in the lobby, the noise slightly echoing up to the open area in front of the second floor reference desk. He then dropped his gun temporarily, grabbing a 16 year old girl in the checkout line in front of the Circulation desk and whipped out one of the knives in his jacket and holding it on her neck, barking "Any one calls the police and I will finish both her and all of you in two minutes." Dragging the girl into a chair in the lobby, he put the knife back into his jacket, retrieved his firearm, and trained it on the girl, who was weeping silently.

Almost everyone who had heard him and the shots fired were either shrieking and/or ducking into corners, between shelves or under desks, but no one was using their cell phones or even LAN line phones at that moment, except for one library aide who had managed to yank her purse out of her locker in the back and race out the back door. Aware of the gravity of the situation, she, out of breath and sweating heavily from unaccustomed exertion, banged

heavily on the door of the Security Office until the door was opened by Pedro, a Panamanian who took his job too seriously, at least in the eyes of his boss and the rest of the guards in his shift around the South Central Community College campus. Because the students also used the library next door, the library was also considered part of the school as well.

"Mama, que pasa?" asked Pedro.

"You won't believe this, but a nut job is holding everyone in the library right now as hostages. We can't call the police or he'll start shooting again, this time at people inside!"

"Mama, no one takes me seriously here, even though I believe you," replied Pedro. He rubbed his chin a minute and suggested, "Perhaps a sniper might be a better idea than the SWAT team, chica."

Seconds later, Pedro called the police with the suggestion of a sniper detail instead of a SWAT team approach. Much to the aide's and Pedro's relief and satisfaction, the head Lieutenant of the West Brooke Police department agreed as well. A team of five people unannounced would park in the school lot instead of the library's front lot. They were to remain completely silent. Two persons would head for the roof, one for the front entrance, and one for the back entrance, and the fifth person would be the sniper who would shoot to kill the assailant if necessary, hidden behind the two cars and/or bushes near the structure's front. This way they could secure the building in case the man tried to escape.

Meanwhile, the situation was getting really intense inside the library. Ole' "Steely Eyes" had ordered that no one could get in or out without him finding out. If anyone did, he countered, he would shoot the girl first, next whoever he could aim at until he ran out of bullets. Truth be told, that might have taken a while, since he had stashed several rounds in his baggy khaki cargo pants. No one dared move from where they were at, in fear for their lives.

Under cover of gathering night, the team of five arrived at the nearby school parking lot, and signaling to each other, proceeded to their positions at the two entrances, the roof, and the building's front lot. The assailant heard the soft cheers of some staff and patrons who saw the sniper peek around the bush. At once there was ordered chaos. "Steely Eyes" started to shoot, but before he could reload, the sniper bore a hole in the back of his head, killing him instantly. Patrons ran out both entrances, while the teen ran to the Information desk, where her mother had hidden herself, both overjoyed with relief.

Vioris, the branch librarian, had closed the building right after that, preparing an incident report with the help of the five-person police team. The school maintenance department came next and cleaned the gore that had spattered on the floor and the wall next to the restrooms in the lobby. Tomorrow definitely would be a better day, she thought, because this was a day she never ever wanted to repeat.

## Portal Poetry Corner

### Thank you Alexander By Barbara Jean Kaufman

Thanks to you I want to date again  
You are too young -- I am too old  
Thirty years younger than me  
You aren't really attractive either  
Tall, thin, and head shaven. No  
hair anywhere?  
You are respectful. Your mom  
taught you well!

But she missed the part about  
loving yourself  
About being strong and positive  
Loathing yourself just won't cut it  
Not in our negative, depraved  
society  
Maybe you have the so-called  
ADHD?  
You had such a hard time keeping  
still, staying in your seat  
You can't keep a job. A Chronic  
cigarette smoker too

But I felt attracted to you, none the  
less.  
Maybe it's me  
Am I that lonely?  
Was it because you gave me  
attention?  
Was it that you actually liked me?  
You remind me of my 18-year-old  
nephew, Jeremy.  
Jeremy died of a drug overdose.

Whatever the reason, thank you  
Alexander  
AND Thanks for NOT calling  
Hello Brett, Michael, and Jay

**The Writer's Group meetings  
are held the second Monday  
of every month in the second  
floor conference room from  
6:00 – 7:30pm.**

### Upcoming dates 2015:

**Feb. 9, Mar. 9, April 13,  
May 11, June 8, July 13,  
Aug 10, Sept 14, Oct 12,  
Nov 9, and Dec 14.**  
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stop by and discuss your  
ideas.**

Submit your short story or poem  
to be published in the monthly  
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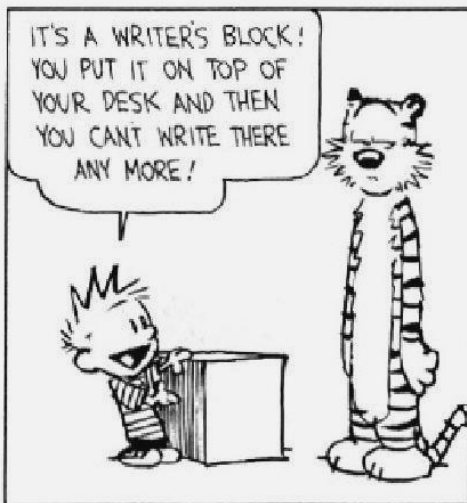
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## **FEEDBACK CORNER**

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



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