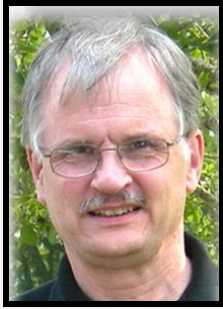


The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



Dawn Patrol
By Rick Weber

There was a slight chill in the air as Dave and Bonnie got out of the car. In front of them was the object which awaited them. On its side, the sound of a propane burner being turned on illuminated the inside of what those in the trade called the envelope. It was four stories long. The inside light revealed a multi-color shell. As they took sight of the growing object near their feet, a voice cried out to them, “Dave? Bonnie?” Hearing their names, they turned to a man in a bright red varsity jacket with “Lead Balloon Tours” on the left breast.

“Yes,” Dave responded extending his hand.

“I’m Bill, your pilot. It looks like we’ll be having a great morning for a dawn patrol.”

“I’m sure we will. This is my daughter, Bonnie, whose been after me for a balloon ride.”

“Are you ready, Bonnie?” Bill asked as he looked down at the pint sized passenger.

“Yes,” came her timid response..

“Very well, I’ll go over some safety procedures with you and your Dad before we lift off on our journey.”

As Bill went over the features of his hot air balloon, Dave drifted off in thought as to how he got caught up in going on this hot air balloon ride with Bonnie. He didn’t like going up in passenger airplanes when he had to for business or vacation and did so grudgingly. “Oh, well,” he thought to himself, “In a few hours, it’ll be over. I just have to tough it out until then.”

With the help of some others on the ground, Bonnie and Dave were helped into the gondola or basket. With a hearty tug on a chain overhead, the burner came to life and roared filling the envelope with hot air causing it to rise in the early New Mexico sky.

It was the first week of October and the start of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, the largest hot air balloon event of its kind in the world. Over seven hundred entries would participate. None of this mattered to Dave. He would have preferred to have both of his feet planted on *terra firma*, but this outing was for Bonnie, not him.

Their balloon was not alone. Others filled the sky. Each having its envelope lit up inside by a propane burner. It was a magnificent sight even though Dave viewed it with trepidation. Bill explained the sights below them to Bonnie as she looked on in amazement listening to everything their host was saying. Dave managed a smile and also took in Bill’s lessons.

“They call this the Albuquerque Box,” Bill explained. “The winds are predictable here this time of year. At low levels they push to the south causing us to head towards downtown. At higher levels they blow north which will push us up toward Rio Rancho. So, by adding heat and letting warm air out at the right intervals, we’ll be able to stay inside the box. Pretty cool!”

Bonnie smiled and looked up at the sun coming up in the east, a bright start to a magnificent day. The sun warmed the sky around them. Although he was nervous, Dave managed a smile and took pictures of Bonnie as Bill pointed things out to her on the balloon. He was even able to switch over to his video camera at the appropriate intervals.

The sun came up brilliantly over the horizon, and Dave captured Bonnie on the camcorder as she pulled on the propane lever, causing a deafening noise and the balloon to rise up even farther above the northern ridges of the Chihuahuan Desert. Bonnie smiled, lost her shyness, and peppered Bill with a lot questions.

“How long will we be up?”

“We should be up about an hour.”

“How much fuel will we use?”

“We should burn between twenty to thirty gallons of propane.”

“How do you steer the balloon?”

“You don’t. Balloons are classified as non-steerable aircraft. We’re subject to direction of the wind.”

“Does that mean we won’t land where we took off?” That question caught Dave off guard and made him a little concerned.

“In general, that’s true, but we’ll be working the ‘Box’ I told you about which should bring us back near to where we took off. I have a chase car, in this case my truck, ready to pick us up. Hopefully, we won’t be too far off.” Dave was relieved to hear that as they came close to downtown and Bill turned on the burner causing them to ascend and move north.

This hot air balloon ride was something Bonnie wanted to do for a long time. She planned it all out, even down to contacting Bill prior to the event. Dave had never seen her so excited. Now the day had come and Dave hoped she would not be disappointed.

Bonnie always liked balloons, even the little ones she got at birthday parties as a toddler.

As Dave looked at her, any misgivings he had about the adventure evaporated. The day belonged to Bonnie.

The view from the gondola was fantastic. “Bill, this gauge says we’re at six thousand feet. Is that right?”

“No, Bonnie, the altimeter is showing how high we are above sea level. Given the altitude of the city, we’re about a thousand feet above ground level.”

Bonnie’s questions kept on coming and Bill answered all of them patiently and completely. Before Dave knew it, their ride was over and Bill had radioed the chase car to pick them up in Rio Rancho. The balloon descended to a smooth landing. Dave helped Bonnie out of the basket, and they assisted the crew with folding up the balloon. On the ride back to their car, they thanked Bill and his team for their

hospitality. It had been a perfect day.

A year later, Dave was home alone going through some things when he found the video he shot that day. He played it, and he broke down in tears. He remembered the trip to Albuquerque, the last outing that he and Bonnie had together. It was made possible by the Make a Wish Foundation. Her medical condition deteriorated quickly after the trip. Bonnie did not make it to see Christmas. Dave was grateful for that time they spent together in New Mexico.



Priceless
By CP Bialois/Ed White

Enjoy some Flash Fiction!

The flowers glistened as Susan sprayed them with her water bottle. It wasn’t through fear of their demise that she did so, for they were plastic. The act was meant to keep them looking as new as the day they were handed to her at the grocer’s.

In the years since, the glossy covering faded and some of the petals barely held on. None of that mattered as they had endured with her for thirty years.

They were the final thing she purchased before her husband was struck and killed by a car. They lasted until she could join him.

First Bite
By CP Bialois/Ed White

One bite is all it would take. Just one. Those flailing things you throw out are too disorganized and random. I prefer the smooth, sleek elegant design of my fellow fish to your... whatever you call them.

Look, I’m hungry and just want a taste. If I don’t like you, I’ll throw you back. What do you say? Come on, I can’t keep circling you all day.

Tell you what. If you think it’s okay, keep swimming straight. Sound fair? Good.

Okay, here I come, ready or not...

Oh, stop screaming shark attack! It wasn’t a big bite, you baby...



The Purge By Jamie White

“Now that moment has come at hand,

To purge the darkness from this land.

With the words I speak this night,

Their darkness is snuffed like candle light.”

Mary spoke the incantation with shaking hands, adding the final ingredients to her cauldron. She watched the window as she worked, half afraid she would be interrupted before completing the ritual.

For years, she watched as people were hung for crimes they never committed. She thought the people of Salem fools for being so arrogant as to believe a real witch could be discovered-- unless she wanted to be. Lord knew Mary had no intention of being found out.

She supposed she could have acted much sooner, but her people did not normally interfere in mortal matters. They thought it better to let humans deal with their own problems. Besides that, each situation taught lessons and who was she to deny people the chance to learn and grow? Watching them turn on each other like rabid dogs for so long had worn her patience thin. No one was learning! Why

could they not see they were doing the evil themselves?

Once the incantation was complete, Mary finished sprinkling some herbs into her mixture and lit a white candle. She set the candle in its proper place at the top of her cauldron. She took a second candle and lit with the flame of the first, setting the new candle at the top right side of the cauldron. She thought of Amanda Brown. She'd watched the girl scream as she was dragged from her home the day before. Within hours, her head was in a noose as she begged for mercy. The snapping of her neck echoed through Mary's mind as she fought to block the image of her lifeless body swinging in the air from her mind.

She lit the third candle and set it directly below the second, the image of Samuel Matthews' smug grin flitting through her mind. That man was the worst of them all. She would take pleasure in seeing him hang; he deserved far more in her opinion. How many had he sentenced? She lost count long ago.

Mary picked up the fourth candle and touched the wick to the third. The flame danced in her vision, bringing to mind the terrible things she heard had happened in far-off lands. She shuddered at the images. She supposed that was one thing she could say for the people of Salem-- hanging seemed to be a far more humane punishment than the fate others had met. She set the candle to the left of the third one.

Mary picked up the final candle, touching the wick to the flame of the previous one. She set it above the fourth candle, making the five points

of the pentacle. To complete the design, she took some more herbs and scattered them on the ground, creating a circle around her candles.

As she worked, she thought of old Mrs. Hendricks. Her warm smile and gentle manner had made quite an impression on Mary. She was the one Mary went to when she needed a garment mended. The woman was better with a needle and thread than anyone Mary had ever met.

For all the kindness and warmth Mrs. Hendricks exuded, she could be firm as the most fire-and-brimstone preacher. The woman had no patience for childish antics and demanded nothing less than the respect she felt an elder deserved. She also had a razor tongue, which proved to be her downfall. Some beast of a child had accused her only days after getting scolded for trampling her garden.

The flames rose as she completed the pentacle. Mary walked over to her kitchen table, returning with a sheet of paper. Hastily scrawled names sat one above the other, starting at the top and moving all the way down the page.

She walked back to the cauldron, holding the paper over the flames. The edge ignited and Mary watched as the sheet burned. Before the flame reached her finger, Mary dropped what was left of the paper into the cauldron. The sheet disintegrated in the mixture until Mary couldn't tell the ashes apart from the herbs floating in the boiling liquid.

*“With the spell this night I weave,
Their evil is ended. So mote it be.”*

Smoke puffed up from the cauldron, making her vision hazy. Once it settled enough to allow her to see again, Mary bowed and gave thanks to the elements. She snuffed each candle out one at a time, then set about cleaning the room.

The following days brought peace, although she was the only one who seemed to acknowledge the change. The rest of the town went about its business, never mentioning those who had disappeared. Better to let them pretend the horrors never happened. Maybe it was the only way they could live with themselves. God knew the guilt had the power to cripple-- it nearly drove her mad.

Still, it had been necessary.



Fishing with Miguel By DiVitto Kelly

The two men approached the dock, both looking disheveled and twitchy. If not for the twenty thousand dollars stashed in a midsize black nylon suitcase, they could be perceived as homeless.

The taller man leading the way had wavy black hair a two week-old dark brown beard. The other, a past his prime weightlifting type, must have had an extended encounter with a tanning bed, his skin sporting

an all-encompassing carrot-hue. He called out to the man hosing down a charter fishing boat.

“Hey buddy.” The elder gentleman didn’t respond.

“Yo, old man,” called the shorter man again. Still no response.

The seasoned citizen turned off the hose and looked up. “It’s Sir.”

The two men looked at each other. “Uh, sir, we need a boat to do some . . . shark fishing.”

“That’s better,” the man replied, thoroughly entrenched in his sixties. He was a shade under six feet tall with bleached white hair, slender yet muscular. His celery green t-shirt read Miguel’s Reel ‘em and Weep Fishing Tours in bold red lettering. On the back was a gregarious cartoon shark sporting sunglasses and a toothy grin.

The taller man whispered to the other. “This dude looks like he’s straight otta Old Man and the Sea.”

“What sea?” asked the other, a GED type and smart as a bobber. “Like Gulf of Mexico, sea?”

The other shook his head. “Just hold onto the suitcase.” Johnny, the taller man, was centimeters from ditching his friend Eddie for good, but when his shorter sidekick got an inside scoop on a bank job, he reconsidered.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” asked Miguel Hernandez, a seasoned fisherman for nearly half a century. He gave up working at his father’s auto repair business to a life on the ocean. He’d been offering up charter fishing tours since the mid-seventies, specializing in sharks. The Jaws movie craze had been excellent for business, but he

always made it a point to release the fish. His ‘take pictures, leave the fish’ mantra was well known among local charter fishermen. Slaughtering God’s creatures was a major taboo in his libro.

“We both wanna do some shark fishing. You take cash?” asked Eddie.

It was five in the afternoon. Normally Miguel was ready to pack it in for the day and down a couple of chilled Presidente beers, but he decided some cash under the table would be a nice right about now. Besides, business had been in the tank since Hurricane Harry rumbled ashore almost a month ago. Thankfully, his paid off 1968 Striker 44 aluminum hulled twin diesel boat christened Senor Tiburon was spared of any damage.

“Yeah, cash is always a good thing,” smiled the boat captain.

Miguel quietly sized up the two men, thinking the last time these two clown fish went fishing was probably at the seafood section at Publix. “It’s \$200 per hour and that includes the use of a rod and reel, bait, sandwiches, and all the free ice cold beer I got in the cooler. We have a deal?”

“Money ain’t no problem,” grinned Eddie, looking at his business partner. He unzipped the case and dug out a stack of fifties. “And here’s an extra fifty bucks if you bait our lines; I an’t touching no stinkin fish.” The craggy fisherman always baited the lines for free, but conveniently failed to disclose that.

“How’s that for starters?” asked Johnny.

Miguel took the cash, counting it. “You just bought yourselves five hours with the best charter boat

captain this side of Tampa Bay. Alright folks, come aboard and make yourselves comfortable.”

The two men grasped the wood pylon draped in pelican poop, carefully boarding the forty-plus foot boat. They settled in the back bench as Miguel cast off from the dock. He surveyed the rest of the boats in the marina. Most of the skippers had already called it quits.

“Weather should be good for fishing,” said Miguel. “After a big storm, water likes to lay low. Still, I hope you got your sea legs on.”

Eddie gulped. “Sea legs? Why do we need sea legs? What are sea legs for Christ sake!” Eddie was already looking ill. The fumes coming from the twin diesel were churning his gut like a boat propeller. “I think I’ll go to the front of the boat.”

“Bow,” said Miguel.

“Bow? I ain’t bowing to you, old man.”

“No, no, the front of the boat is called the bow, the back is called the stern,” replied Miguel. “You also get a crash course on boating at no extra charge.”

“Thanks Gilligan, I’ll try and remember that.” Miguel squinted his eyes at the dissipating sun and shook his head.

“So how far do we need to go, you know, to catch a great white or something?” inquired Johnny, cracking open a can of Budweiser.

“Very rare to catch a white shark in the Gulf of Mexico, but that’s what I like about saltwater fishing; you never know what you’ll catch,” replied Miguel, who estimated another hour or two. “We might land

a hammerhead, tiger, or bull shark; those are more common out here.”

“Tiger sharks?” asked Eddie. “They ain’t orange and black, are they?”

Miguel couldn’t believe the ignorance, or sheer stupidity of the shorter man. “The adults got a dash of light orange, but the youngsters are the ones with all the color; beautiful creatures.”

“Are they dangerous?” asked Johnny.

“Oh yeah,” answered Miguel. “In fact, where we’re going, all the sharks are dangerous; wouldn’t want to be out here in the water alone at night. You’d be dead meat.”

Eddie glanced up at Johnny and winked. “We’ll keep that in mind.”

The boat cruised on the placid waters for another hour and a half. The two men polished off another can of beer and chucked them in the water without the boat captain knowing.

Miguel slowed the weathered craft to a crawl and then cut the engine. He was about to drop anchor but decided the waters were so calm it wasn’t needed. “Okay folks, let’s do some sharking.”

The charter boat captain pried opened the large white cooler marked bait in big black letters. He took out a pair of nice sized mullet and pierced each one onto the hand-sized J-shaped stainless steel hooks. Miguel cast out the lines on opposite sides of the boat, hoping the two dunderheads wouldn’t snag their lines together. He handed the poles to each man and popped open a ginger ale.

“What, no beer for you?” asked Johnny.

Miguel tipped the bill of his baseball cap. “I never drink on the job. Cheers.”

Nearly an hour passed. Eddie kept glancing at his watch. He looked over at Johnny mouthing the words, where are they?

Johnny saw Miguel heading towards both men with a bowl of pretzels. “These will help settle your stomachs if you’re feeling seasick,” said the boat captain. “Everything okay guys?”

“Uh yeah,” hesitated Eddie. “Just wondering if we’re gonna catch something.”

“Oh, we’ll catch something. I promise or your money back,” said Miguel, who started chumming up baitfish and dumping it into the warm gulf water. “You just gotta use the right bait.”

A churn of water lifted the boat slightly. “Did you feel that?” asked Eddie. Johnny stepped back, feeling uneasy. It was dark now with only the floodlights providing visibility.

A sudden boom came from the stern. “Alright boys, it’s feeding time,” smiled Miguel, catching a glimpse of a large slate gray colored tail slapping the aluminum vessel.

The two men scoured the lightened waters. The captain noticed the tip of Johnny fishing pole quivering. The novice felt a slight tug.

“Make sure you don’t jerk the line,” explained Miguel. “Let ‘em swallow that bait. Sometimes they like to play around with it. Sharks aren’t stupid.” A light appeared

about a mile off starboard side of the Senor Tiburon. Miguel didn't seem concerned, probably just another charter boat.

The line took off from the heavy Penn wide spool reel like string on a runaway kite. "Holy mother, I got a bite; I got a bite!" yelled Johnny, sounding like a school kid.

Miguel glanced at the approaching vessel then tended to his client. "Alright now, start reeling. Remember, keep the tip of the rod up and reel it in slowly."

"By the way, what pound test are we using," asked Johnny, about the only tech lingo he knew about fishing.

"I got about a thousand yards of hundred-pound test on these reels. If played right, you could bring in a quarter ton of shark," replied Miguel. He saw the newbie struggling. "Here, let me see what we're dealing with." Johnny stepped behind the boat captain and peered over his shoulder. Miguel grabbed the fishing pole and could tell it was a big one.

Johnny looked over to his partner, getting antsy. "Shit, that's not our rendezvous," he whispered.

"For your information, his name ain't Ron DeView, whoever the hell that is," answered Eddie in a low tone. "It's Phil DeGrave. And don't worry, he'll be here in that hot red speed boat I told you about."

There was click sound and a cold sensation pressing against the back of his neck. "Don't move," uttered Johnny, sweating. A tip top 27-foot white Boston Whaler 270 Dauntless approached along side the Senor Tiburon. An off yellow interior light shined on the bearded man as he stood up in the cockpit.

"Ahoy, everything okay?" called out a voice, a slight accent, possibly Cuban Spanish. Before Miguel could answer, Eddie pulled a glock from his back jeans pocket and fired, killing the man instantly. He slumped forward onto the center console, pressing on the throttle. The boat sped off in seconds.

"Damn it, we coulda used that boat to escape," barked Johnny. "Where the hell's our contact?"

"Screw that man, I'd rather have this baby. It's got beds and even a lovely stove," said Eddie. "It's like riding in an RV . . . only we're . . . on the water."

"Look folks, I don't want no trouble," said Miguel, still holding the fishing pole.

"Well, you found it pops," said Eddie, who ordered the captain to sit down in the teak wood fighting chair. Johnny grabbed the pole from Miguel's hands. "So what do we do now Johnny, make him walk the plank?"

"Pulpit. It's called a pulpit," said Miguel.

"Shut up," shot Eddie, pointing the gun at his face. "We don't need no nautical education!"

The taller man tried to focus, but was excited as Christmas day as he battled the great fish. "Just keep tabs on the skipper, snapper head," said Johnny. "I'm gonna land this monster son of a bitch." Johnny's eyes grew bigger as he sensed the shark getting closer.

"Be careful son, you don't know what's attached to that line."

"I'll figure it out. Now shut the hell up and stay in the chair," scoffed Johnny. "Eddie, find something to tie him up."

"I guess we'll be taking back our hard earned money if you don't mind," boasted Eddie, standing directly in front of the boat captain. Miguel slowly reached into his front khaki pocket and pulled out the cash.

"I don't want your stolen money anyways," said Miguel, who 'accidentally' dropped it on the deck. "I suspect you boys don't value hard work, am I right?"

Eddie suddenly pistol-whipped the boat captain across the side of his head, knocking him out of the chair. Blood trickled down just above the ear.

"Now hand me the money properly, okay?" barked Eddie.

Miguel grimaced and righted himself back into the chair. Johnny ordered Eddie to turn the floodlight towards the port side of the boat.

"Which one's that again?" he asked.

"Haven't you been listening to him? My God, he's told us a million times! Over here numb nuts," pointed Johnny. Eddie didn't like being belittled; most of the time he didn't even realize his friend was busting his balls.

Suddenly there was a thunderous whack against the aluminum hull. The sound vibrated throughout the length of the boat.

"What the hell was that?" quivered Eddie. He aimed the gun in the water. "I say we dump salty dog here into the ocean and head to Jamaica, now!"

"It's the Gulf of Mexico, not an ocean," corrected Miguel, his head now throbbing in pain.

"You're a glutton for punishment aren't you, old man?" Eddie slapped

Miguel with the back of his hand. The gaudy rings on his sausage-link fingers caused a bloody gash on his cheek. “Now shut up or we’ll be chumming with you, old fart.”

“I don’t like cursing on my vessel,” angered Miguel. “Show some respect.”

“Jesus, will you tape his freaking mouth up,” yelled Johnny, who turned his attention back to fishing. “Man, it feels like I hooked a Beemer.”

Eddie raised the gun, posed to hit Miguel again. “Where’s the tape, Quint?”

“It’s in the cockpit up top,” answered the boat captain.

“Cockpit? Oh, so now we’re on an airplane; what a dumbass.” Miguel pointed up towards the steering wheel. He glanced back as the ogre trolled up the ladder. I don’t see it, old man!”

“It’s near the helm.”

Eddie scoffed. “Yeah, like that helps!”

The heavy-duty rod bowed as Johnny continued fighting with the fish. “Come to daddy!”

The shark emerged from the water, its conical snout breaking water. The hook was lodged in the corner of its crescent-shaped mouth. “Holy shit, it’s a great . . .”

Miguel charged out of the chair and pushed the unsuspecting man into the water. Before he had a chance to scream, the fish was upon him, snatching the thief around the waist and pulling him under. The serrated teeth sawed away at Johnny’s midsection.

Hearing the commotion, Eddie raced down the ladder only to find

his partner in crime missing. “Where the hell is Johnny? You bastard, speak up or you’re a dead man!”

There was a ear-piercing cry at the stern. A hand reached up. Eddie rushed over and grabbed his friend’s arm. It was barely hanging by a thread of flesh. He could see the gaping wound on his side; a ham-size bite taken near his torso. “Oh my God -- holy shit!”

“Help me, please,” wailed Johnny. The floodlights illuminated the blood stained waters. The massive shark emerged just below the tattered man. In slow motion, like a rising submarine, the maw opened wide. Rows of porcelain white triangular teeth gleamed at Eddie, the round black eye as big as his fist. He turned milk white as the shark engulfed his friend. It bit down hard, severing the rest of his arm completely. Eddie was still clutching Johnny’s throbbing forearm before dropping it in the water.

He stammered to the starboard side of the boat and puked whatever he could muster. He sat crunched on his knees, hyperventilating. Trying to regain his composure, the stout man wiped his mouth and picked himself off the damp boat surface.

“You!” His eyes swelled with hate, his teeth clenched in anger. “You did this to him.” Eddie raised the gun. “You’re toast.”

Miguel inched back with his hands up. He spotted the suitcase near his feet. Thinking quickly, he snagged the handle with his shoe and flung it into the air. Eddie freaked. He instinctively reached for the case like an outfielder in midair, snatching the case, but the

momentum carried him straight into the water.

It happened so fast. His crazed grin quickly vanished as he saw the shark surface. The huge dorsal fin glimmered in the artificial light, standing out like a sail. It submerged then seized the man’s lower limbs in its mouth. Eddie disappeared into the night water without a sound.

Miguel peered out. Even with the dimming floodlights he could notice the large slick of human blood in the water. He picked up a clean rag from the cushioned bench and doused it in the melting ice of the cooler. The boat captain slumped back into the fighting chair and wiped the blood from his face then gently pressed it against his aching head.

“Not the best of fisherman, but they did make good bait.”

From the corner of his eye, Miguel spotted something floating on the surface just past the stern. He picked up the long gaff pole resting on the floor of the boat and reached out as far as he could. A wave pushed the object closer, enabling the boat captain to snag it. Miguel pulled up the waterlogged object and plopped it down on the fighting chair. He unzipped the suitcase filled with neatly stacked damp twenties and fifties.

The shark appeared. It thrashed its crescent tail, providing Miguel with a briny shower before torpedoing into deeper water. Miguel waved. “Goodbye my friend.”

“I think it’s safe to say this is the best catch I’ve ever made,” mused the fisherman. He scaled the ladder up to the cockpit, popped open a Presidente beer from the small

refrigerator tucked under the helm and headed back to the marina.

The Estuary 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 Ciny, 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 splash.

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, barley topping two feet deep. 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 it!”

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 stranded. The only way back to safety now was the pontoon boat, now rocking from the heavy 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 approach 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. "Holy shit, look at that thing."

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 drywall 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, adrenalin 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 hopefully deep enough to cushion his fall, or at least part of it. 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.

“We don’t have a second!” yelled Carol.

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 raged inland off the Gulf of Mexico.

“Watch your step Susan, it’s slippery here.”

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

The three scurried aboard the twenty-four 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.” 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 in a heartbeat, mauling her in the 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.”

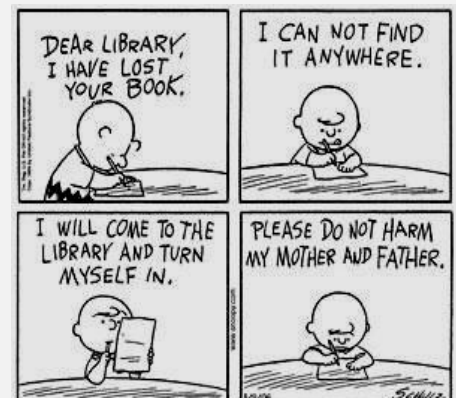
The man helped Susan aboard his boat. He rummaged for a blanket and gave her a bottle of water. She took a sip and gazed upon the rustic scenery. The man tied a line to the empty vessel to tow it in. In

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.

Portal Poetry Corner

Muse problems By Jamie White

She lurks over my shoulder,
A well of inspiration flows free.
Frustrations never stop her,
from showing new worlds to me.
Her job is lonely and thankless,
Many obstacles in her way.
but no matter what she has to do,
She'll break through the noise
today.



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:

Jan. 12, Feb. 9, Mar. 9, April 13, May 11, June 8, July 13, Aug 10, Sept 14, Oct 12, Nov 9, and Dec 14.
From picture books to novels, stop by and discuss your ideas.

Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal to Michael DiVitto Kelly at mkelly@broward.org.

All communications with the editor and all inquiries concerning this publication should be addressed to:

Michael Kelly, Portal Editor

South Regional/BC Library
7300 Pines Blvd.
Pembroke Pines, FL. 33024.
Telephone: 954-201-8870

mkelly@broward.org

The **PORTAL** was designed, produced, and edited solely by the instructor and students of the South Regional / Broward College Writer's Club for non-profit.

The opinions expressed are those of the members of the Writer's Group, and does not necessarily represent those of the staff, administrators, or trustees of the Broward County Libraries Division.

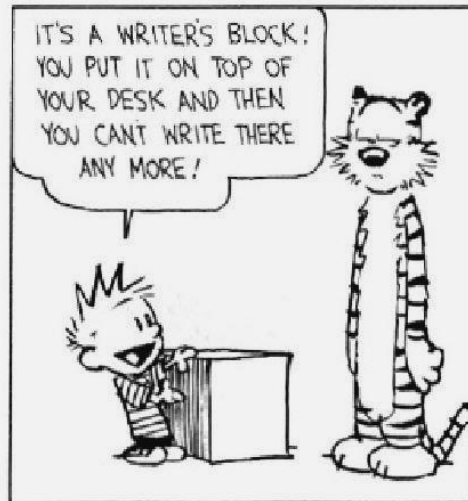
*The **PORTAL** pamphlet is not to be duplicated or used for commercial purposes.

*All copyrights revert back to the original artist and authors after publication.

Copyright 2015 –

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 or call (954) 201-8870.



Check out our website at www.thewritersportal.yolasite.com to view back issues and more.