

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems

***We now have stories/poems in Spanish!**

Dog Days of August Edition



Solitary Companionship By Jamie White

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A musty odor assaulted Rachel's lungs as she pulled herself up into the attic of her parent's house. She wrinkled her nose and sighed at the mess of cobwebs and dust that awaited her. For years,

she'd been meaning to go through the many boxes up there and get some of her things out of their way. The new apartment she'd rented last week gave her the perfect excuse to do so.

"Why didn't I do this a long time ago," she wondered aloud to the cluttered space. Rachel began to worry this would take much longer than anticipated. Boxes and furniture were piled high everywhere, making it difficult to move through the space, much less sort anything. Rachel glanced around, smiling as she spotted the window. She made her way over to it and pulled the shade up, blinking against the sudden brightness.

That's better.

Now that she could get around a little easier, Rachel grabbed the closest box and reached inside. To her disappointment, it was a bunch of old receipts that her parents should have thrown away years ago. Why they kept stuff like that, she'd never understand. Still, she supposed their packrat tendencies could work out to her advantage now that she had a bigger place to live. While she liked a neat, organized space, a near-empty one drove her crazy. It just didn't feel like home.

Rachel set the box aside and reached for another. This one, she was pleased to see housed a bunch of her old awards. That would look good in the spare bedroom in the spare bedroom she planned to use as an office. If she remembered correctly, her old desk would be up there as well.

At the bottom of the next box, she came across something she didn't recall ever seeing before. It was a long, thin gold necklace with a large red stone attached. It wasn't her normal style, but something

about it intrigued her. Rachel opened the clasp and put it on. She reached for her purse and pulled the small compact she kept in there out. As she examined her image in the mirror, she had to admit it was a nice stone. It actually looked good on her.

Satisfied, she put the compact away and resumed her work. By the end of the afternoon, she'd gathered several boxes worth of stuff, plus some furniture and a couple of rugs. Rachel couldn't wait to get to work on her apartment.

That evening, Rachel stood and surveyed the living room of her new place with a critical eye. The rug in the center of the room made a nice contrast to the plain beige walls she wasn't allowed to paint over. She'd secured a few pictures with the help of some product she found at the mall that promised easy hanging without messing up the walls. Rachel was pleased to see the pictures helped distract from the color a little more.

She went through the rest of the apartment, making sure everything was just as she wanted it. Satisfied with her work, she decided to take a bath and relax a while before turning in for the evening. She took off the necklace and hung it on the jewelry tree sitting on the windowsill. Moonlight shone through the glass and illuminated the stone a minute before Rachel pulled the shade down and prepared for her bath.

The next morning, Rachel rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she inspected herself in the mirror. She sighed at the rat's nest of a mane and made a mental note to get a haircut before running a brush through the tangles. She set the brush down and smoothed her skirt,

about to leave for work until she remembered something.

The necklace.

Rachel eased the chain off of its holder and undid the clasp to put it on. The moment the necklace was secured around her neck, a strange sensation overcame her. She felt as if she were free-falling from an airplane. Suddenly, her vision blurred and she fell to the ground.

When Rachel came to, she was standing in a place she'd never seen before—or so she thought. She couldn't be sure, because her mind was foggy and even remembering her own name seemed like an impossible task.

"Hello?" Her voice came quiet and timid, suddenly doubting the wisdom in announcing her presence. Didn't people do that in those trashy movies she hated and usually pay for it? Rachel waited a minute or two, but got no response, so she tried again. When yet more silence greeted her words, she gave up and began searching for an exit.

Old paintings lined the walls and the only light came from torches hanging beside them, making it hard to find her way. Relief flooded through her when she came across one on a stand she could take with her. She continued calling out for anyone who might be nearby, but the silence persisted.

"Isn't anyone here?" she yelled, her voice rising in pitch with each word. None of this made any sense. Her stomach did flip-flops as she tried to figure out where she was and how she'd ended up there. The more she walked, the more her head cleared and she was happy to discover she did, in fact, remember her name and where she came from. No, this was definitely a place she'd never been to before. She

doubted anyone had; it looked like it belonged to another time.

Rachel navigated the narrow hallways in search of anyone who might be able to help her get home again. A few feet away, the hall made a sharp turn to the left and she peeked cautiously around the corner, her hand gripping the torch so tight she feared she'd break it. Rachel had to clasp her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming.

Standing a few short feet away was a man who didn't look much older than she was. He was tall and well-built and carried what appeared to be a weapon he'd clearly fashioned from whatever he'd found nearby. She ducked back behind the wall and closed her eyes a moment. Given he was the only person she'd come across so far, she supposed she had no choice but to approach him or wander around aimlessly for who knew how long.

What if he's dangerous?

It wasn't that far-fetched to imagine so, especially given the fact he was armed. He could be crazy or something. She swallowed hard and forced herself to step out into the open, keeping her hands up.

"Excuse me..."

He whirled to face her, his weapon drawn. "Stay back, whoever you are."

Rachel kept her hands up as she stood there watching him. "Take it easy, would you? Where am I?"

"You don't know, either?"

"No," she replied. "One minute I was getting ready for work, and the next thing I know, I'm here." She hesitated a moment before inching closer. "My name is Rachel. Who are you?"

"John." He eyed her suspiciously a minute before

lowering his weapon. "You really have no idea how you got here?"

"Not a clue," she confirmed. "I didn't even think such a thing was possible... I thought teleporting to places was something that only happened in those sci-fi shows on TV." She paused before asking, "Do you know how long you've been here?"

He gestured to the wall behind him. Rachel stepped closer and examined the surface, frowning as she saw all the lines carved into it. "Oh." She fought to keep a panic attack at bay as she reached for the necklace she'd put on that morning. Rachel fingered the stone as she thought about their situation and what to do. Based on how he'd behaved, she figured he hadn't come across anyone else in all that time so there was little-to-no hope of coming across anyone who could help.

"What are you doing?"

Rachel snapped to attention and let go of her necklace. "What are you talking about?"

"That thing you're wearing. What the hell were you just doing?" His eyes flashed in anger and his voice hardened.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about. Haven't you ever seen someone play with their jewelry before?" She took a couple of steps back, her gaze never leaving him.

He reached into the pocket of his jeans, then held his hand out to her. She glanced down and saw a large gold ring with a similar stone in the center. "That looks like my necklace.... So?"

"So, you don't think that's a little coincidental? How'd you get that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know where it came from; I just know it was in a box at my parent's house. I

thought it looked interesting, so I took it home with me. You don't really think this has anything to do with us being here?"

"It wouldn't be any stranger than what's already happened."

"True. But if that thing brought me here, then yours should've brought you here right? When you took it off, shouldn't you have gone right back to where you came from?"

He glared. "What do I look like, a psychic or something? How the hell should I know how stuff like this would work?"

"Fair enough," she conceded. Just to make sure, she decided to take the necklace off and set it down on the ground. Her shoulders sagged after a few minutes passed without her appearing back in her apartment. *So much for that idea. Now what?*

The days dragged on, bleeding into the next as Rachel did her best to adapt to life wherever she was. John had warmed to her a little more each day and he actually helped her find food and drink, although he never entirely lost that stand-offish nature from when they first met. The pair had tried everything they could think off to get free of this strange place but had no luck.

She'd smashed her necklace, buried it, built a fire to try and melt it, but if the jewel had anything to do with her predicament, her methods failed to break its power. She could never quite get free of it, though—the thing wouldn't even melt in the fire. It lay in the dimming embers, mocking her with its very existence. How had something like that ended up in her parent's house in the first place?

The more they tried to escape their new surroundings, the more

they found. The once small and creepy space seemed to expand more each day. Just thinking about the situation made her head hurt, so eventually she just stopped. It seemed futile to bother. Her family and friends had probably written her off a long time ago and she was sure there would be no apartment or job waiting for her if she managed to get back. All she could do was just get through each day and try not to go mad from boredom. She supposed it could be worse. At least she had someone there to talk to... sometimes. Mostly, he spent his days finding food and water or sleeping. She supposed she couldn't blame him; she often did the same. Especially when he was in one of his moods. They didn't come often, but when they did she learned quickly the best way to deal was to pretend he wasn't even there.

Despite the fact she'd given up on ever returning home in her waking state, she did occasionally have dreams of her old life; Dreams where everything was exactly as it had been before that morning in her bathroom when her whole world turned upside down. She tried not to think about them much during the day, but she had to admit they gave her a measure of comfort.

"How are they?" The woman raised an eyebrow at the assistant who'd just walked in as she awaited his answer.

"They appear to be fine, ma'am, although the girl seems to have given up hope of returning home. The man remains stubborn."

"Hmm... I guess that will be fine for the time being. If he gets too close to finding a way out, though, you are to inform me immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." The assistant bowed and left.

The woman stared at the crystal in front of her, allowing herself to get lost in the details of it. Slowly, a picture came into focus, showing the pair as they could've been—all the good works they could've done, all the suffering they could have eased. She felt a momentary stab of pity, but it didn't sway her. There was a balance to be maintained and they were a threat to it.



Justice

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

The light from the dying fire illuminated the room and Lyssa's target in an eerie orange glow. The knife's blade gleamed as it reflected the light. After years of searching, she finally found the man responsible for her family being sold to slave traders and murdered. Her grip on the knife tightened as she approached the sleeping figure.

Memories flooded her mind with each leather padded step she took. First was her mother, so kind and gentle with her pale skin and fire-red hair. Then her father, whose sun-tanned skin creased on his face when he laughed and felt so soft when he took her in his arms. The

last image was that of her twin brother, who died with her father while trying to fight off the slave traders as they descended on their village. The last memory stuck with her as she paused to watch the snoring man.

Both father and son had been in the fields helping with the harvest while she'd been with her mother preparing the bread and meat for supper that night. It was her task to knead the bread before setting it on the flat stone next to the hearth to bake. Her hands ached and her shoulders screamed for her to stop, to take a moment to rest, but she dared not. Though gentle, her mother was a taskmaster when it came to their household chores. The last time Lyssa had complained, her mother reacted in a way fitting one having a tantrum. It wasn't the first time she had witnessed her mother throwing out curses like a drunken Dwarf, but it marked the first time such an event was directed towards her.

Not wishing to bear the brunt of her mother's verbal assaults again, and still not knowing what a confused lily-wart was, she kept silent as the pain turned to a burn and then an ache.

"There, you see? It's not so bad when you push through the pain, now is it, Lyssa?" Her mother's green eyes sparkled as she smiled while peering over Lyssa's shoulder.

Lyssa wanted to agree with her, but the only sound she could make was a half grunt and half whimper sound as a quick shot of pain popped in her hand.

Her mother rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. "It will pass. You have it easy. This is your brother's first time helping in the fields. He'll

be lucky if he can move come the morrow."

Lyssa hadn't thought about that before, but she was sure it wouldn't be that bad. After all, she and Brandon used to run around outside all day long without having endured any hardships. What's the worst that working in the fields could do? That train of thought must have shown on her face for her mother shook her head and smiled.

"Oh, to be young and full of doubt again." Her laughter filled the small house and caused Lyssa to join in. There was an infectious quality about her mother's laugh that no one could resist. They were so caught up in what they were doing that they didn't notice the young man run into the house.

"Where's Marlo?"

Lyssa's mother turned, her laughter was all forgotten at seeing the look on the boy's face. "Why, he's out in the fields. What is it, Yacor?"

The boy's chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. He pointed towards the south part of the village, which was also the furthest point from the fields. "Men in armor are coming!"

Lyssa's mother stood frozen for a moment as various thoughts flew through her mind. After a moment's hesitation, she nodded and hurried Yacor from the door. "Go, fetch Marlo and the men back. Be quick about it!" The boy nodded and ran off in the direction of the fields.

Lyssa had stopped kneading the dough and stood watching her mother during the exchange. As the eldest woman in the village, her mother was the one the villagers came to until the men returned from their work. Now, Lyssa could see a look of panic she had never seen before. "Mother..."

Her mother turned at the sound of her voice and shook her head. "There's only one reason armored men would come here... Quick! Hurry!" She dashed across the room to an old chest with a faded crest on the front that Lyssa and her brother were forbidden to touch. With a quick flick of her hand, her mother opened the lock and threw the lid open, revealing a pack, water skin, and a knife. "Here, take this! You have to go now, before they see you!"

Lyssa watched as her mother strapped the knife to her waist, the pack to her back, and draped the water skin over her shoulder without uttering a sound of protest. When she did find her voice and tried to speak, her mother shushed her.

"Lyssa, please. I don't know why these men are here, but you need to hide and don't come out until they leave. Understand?"

Lyssa nodded, but she didn't understand what was happening. "But why—"

"Listen to me. Remember the cave further up the hill where we used to take you and your brother?" Lyssa nodded and her mother continued. "Go there and stay out of sight. Hurry. If they find you here... Go! And keep out of sight." She half shoved, half carried Lyssa out the door and around to the back of the house. "Remember we'll always love you, no matter what. Now please, hurry!"

Lyssa's head swam with her mother's instructions and her own questions, but she did as she was instructed. It didn't take her long to climb the hill behind the village and reach the old cave. When she paused to catch her breath, a scream from the village forced her to turn back around. The armored men dragged women and their

children from their homes and threw them into the back of a wagon and a large wooden cage.

The scene looked unreal, as though it was nothing more than a dream. Some of the women fought back and a few managed to break free along with their children, but the armored men were prepared as each carried a bolo that wrapped around the fleeing person's leg or head when thrown, sometimes rendering them unconscious. Others that couldn't outrun their captors were struck by gauntleted fists or the flat blade of swords, knocking them senseless so they could be loaded onto the wagon.

Lyssa's breath came in quick gasps as she fought against the growing terror within her at seeing the scene below. Then she saw who she assumed to be the leader of the armored men, as he was the only one dressed in a full set of black leather armor, leading her mother to the wagon. Like the other women, her mother must have put up a fight for she walked in slow, deliberate steps as though she were drunk.

Lyssa wanted to call out, but fear gripped her throat and chest so tight no sound would come out. More shouts coming from the other side of the village caught her attention and filled her with hope at seeing her father and the other men returning from the fields armed with scythes or anything else they could find.

Yacor found them!

A laugh escaped Lyssa as she expected the armored men to falter before her father just as she and her brother had when they made him angry. Her brother! She searched from him among the throng before spying him a few feet behind her father. Her heart swelled

with pride at the image of him about to rain justice on those daring to come to their village.

Lyssa's hope died when the armored men saw the coming wave in time and drove into them with their horses and swords. In a matter of seconds, the men were cut down as their meager weapons proved no match for the cold steel of the armored men. Even her father and brother, both of whom fought valiantly, fell to the armored men. She could only watch as tears ran down her face. Her legs lost their strength and she collapsed where she stood, the whole time her eyes remained locked on the image of her father and brother as they had fallen one on top of the other.

Victorious, the armored men ransacked the small houses the people had lived in for generations. Taking what they wished with no regards for the value they had for the people they either captured or slaughtered.

Lyssa didn't know how long she remained by the cave after the men left with the wagon and their horses weighted down with the spoils of their conquest, but she hurried back when she thought it was safe. She prayed to the Gods to allow her to find some of her fellow villagers still alive.

Maybe they were knocked unconscious? She knew that wasn't the case, but she refused to allow the hope to die. She could see the truth before she was twenty feet away from where the men had fallen. Until then, she had refused to accept that she was alone, but at seeing her family and friends covered in blood and slashed to pieces. Body parts lay strewn about the village center as carelessly as though someone had tossed them from the back of a wagon to wolves.

Unmindful of the blood-soaked ground, Lyssa dropped to her knees next to the bodies of her father and brother. There she remained until nightfall and the call of wolves in the forest brought her from the depths of her depression.

Her mother was alive and someone had to find her. Lyssa couldn't allow herself to fall, otherwise no one would ever know about their village.

The memories were as fresh to her as she stood over the leader of the armored men as they were three years earlier. During that time, she had learned a great deal about the darker side of humanity as she searched for the man responsible for destroying her village and family. If it hadn't been for the blind luck of recognizing her father's chest when the man arrived at the inn earlier that night, she doubted this opportunity would have ever presented itself.

Though she still had no idea what had happened to her mother, Lyssa would see to it that justice was done, one way or another. And to think, all it took was a few bottles of wine and the promise of a good time to get him to lower his defenses. Feeling dirty was something she had grown accustomed to. Now it was his time to share her suffering.





My Journey By Rick Weber

Da “Dad, Dad,” someone called from inside the house. I never heard this voice before and did not reply. “Dad, Dad,” the voice got louder.

“Oh, there you are. Mom said you were here in the family room.” I looked up to see a tall, thin young man wearing blue jeans and a yellow rugby shirt. “Come on, you don’t want to be late for the doctor’s appointment.” Not knowing what to say, I looked at him and smiled.

“John,” a familiar voice called my name. It was my wife, Ann. She was standing behind me smiling with a dish towel in her hands. “Bill is taking you to see Doctor Bridges. Don’t worry. You’ll be back in time for your TV show, but you have to get moving.”

“That’s good. I don’t want to miss my soap opera,” I glanced up at the ceiling trying to recall who Doctor Bridges was and not remembering if I had any children. I let out a heavy sigh. It was one of those days.

Bill walked me outside and opened the passenger door of a nice white Ford pickup truck. It had a fancy multi-colored logo and the name John Powers Engineering on the door. I got inside and Bill closed the door after buckling my seat belt. The truck smelled new. Bill got in on the driver’s side. I ran

my hand over the leather seats and said, “Nice truck.”

He smiled and started the engine. We pulled out of the driveway and into the neighborhood.

A couple of minutes later I didn’t know where we were. “Don’t get us lost,” I warned him.

“I won’t, Dad,” he replied with the same smile I had seen before.

We rode around aimlessly. I don’t know for how long when Bill made a sharp turn off the street and up to a building with a sign, “Doctors’ Offices”, in front. We went inside to a suite which had “Andrew Bridges MD” on the door.

Bill showed me a chair. “Have a seat, Dad, while I talk to the receptionist.” They had a TV on in the waiting room showing a car ad.

Bill sat down next to me and said, “You’re next. It shouldn’t be long.”

Before the commercial was over, a nurse with a chart in her hands called, “John Powers.” She beckoned both of us and we followed her to an examination room. I sat down on a chair while Bill stood. A doctor came in, looked at me, and turned toward Bill asking, “How is he?”

“He’s not having a good day,” Bill said.

I felt fine and almost told the Doctor so before he came over and began asking me a lot of questions. I could not answer any of them.

The ride home was uneventful and we rode in silence. We got home before my show started and I was happy. I could hear Bill and Ann talking in whispers. I didn’t care. My show was getting good, though the unmistakable click of the door closing when Bill left did not go unmissed.

The next morning I went into the kitchen, and Ann was making breakfast. She turned to me and said, “Good morning, would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Of course,” I replied. “You’re making scrapple. I hope you saved some for me.”

Ann smiled. “I did. You saw Doctor Bridges yesterday and he changed some of your medications. Hopefully, you will not have as many side effects like the other ones he had you on.”

“What else did Doctor Bridges say?” I asked knowing Ann would tell me what I missed.

“He said you had no significant changes from the last visit.”

“That isn’t saying much. When he diagnosed me, he said I would only get worse. He said I would have good days and bad days with the bad ones slowly outnumbering the good ones. Where am I now?”

“You’re having a good one. So let’s enjoy it,” Ann replied as she set a plate with two eggs over easy, scrapple, and whole wheat toast in front of me. I dug into my breakfast while she sat across from me, sipped on a cup of coffee, and discussed our plans for the day.

“We’re going to Ryan’s school this afternoon. He’s in a play they’re having as part of their Thanksgiving pageant. He really wants his Grand Pap to see him. He’s one of the Pilgrims.”

I remembered Bill telling me about Ryan being in a play but I had forgotten that it was today. Thanksgiving, already? “What time is the show?”

“It starts at two and runs until three.”

“I can’t wait.”

My life wasn’t always this way. It’s hard to believe, but five years ago I was running my own

company, John Powers Engineering. I started it working out of our basement a long time ago after I went to school on the GI Bill and got my degree. The business grew because I was honest and dependable. I hired good people to work for me. Some are still employed by the firm. Ten years ago I was happy that our son Bill joined me.

Everything was going well until a few years ago I began forgetting things. The first time it happened was on Ann's birthday. I forgot about it all together and I attributed it to being too busy at work. I made it up to Ann, but a month later a credit card bill came in with a no-show fee from a popular high end restaurant dated on her birthday. I was about to dispute the charge when I realized I had made the reservation two weeks before the event. This shocked me. Nothing like this ever happened to me before. I would have been able to hide this, but Ann was the one who confronted me with the credit card charge.

I got a pass that time, but other things started to happen. I had trouble reviewing calculations done on projects we had going on. I knew there was something else going on. I didn't have time to deal with it. The job came first. For a while, I was able to cover my faux pas by making notes to myself. This worked out until one day I showed up at the office for work, and no one was there. I called Bill and began to ream him out when he told me, "Dad, it's Sunday." I didn't know what to say. I went home to find out Ann was at church. I sat at the kitchen table and cried. "*Am I losing my mind?*" I asked myself that question over and over.

When she got home, Ann had found me still seated in the kitchen and asked, "What's wrong?" I broke down and told her what had occurred, not only what happened that Sunday, but also, everything leading up to it. I remember her holding my hands with hers, looking me in the eyes, and telling me, "You have to see a doctor."

First, I went to our family doctor, who referred me to a specialist, Doctor Bridges. After going through a whole battery of tests, Doctor Bridges told me that I appeared to have the onslaught of Alzheimer's disease. His words left me cold. How could that be? I had no family history for dementia, nor had I ever had any serious brain injuries. Ann was with me when I got the word and has been with me every step along the way. Working with Doctor Bridges she helped formulate my care plan.

I do remember having Bill come over to our house that night when we told him. He was in as much disbelief as I was, but I told him we had to work out a transitional plan for the company so that he could take over without it affecting the operations or future of the firm. Once we had the plan set up, the hardest task for me, so far, came up, telling the people who worked for me. I was scared.

We didn't rush into anything. It took a few months. Bill would come into my office at the end of the day and go over the day's events. He had already been handling our job bids for over a year, and his face was already become familiar with our customers. Now, it was time to plug him into the operational side of the business, which went well. Finally, after having one of my bad days, I told Bill it was time to tell our

people. I could no longer keep my condition a secret.

At a staff meeting one morning with everyone present and Bill at my side, I told them we were having a really good year with better than expected profits. I thanked them, and then I announced Bill would be stepping in to fill my shoes. Most thought I would stay on a few more years. A couple even voiced that sentiment. I spoke up by saying I had something else going on. They looked at me in awe. I responded to each of their gazes and said, "I've been told I have Alzheimer's disease, which is a journey not a destination. To go on this trek, I have to step down as your boss. I will be around here as long as I can to work through the transition, but there will be a day when my new route will take me elsewhere."

Some wept openly while others appeared to be stunned by my words. All offered me their support. My days at the office grew fewer. Bill quickly took over the helm. I don't remember the last time I stopped by to say hello.

I know today is a good day. I cannot wait to see Ryan in his play this afternoon. I can only hope that I can remember it tomorrow on the next leg of my journey.

Car Talk By DiVitto Kelly



Michael Kearns, schlock horror writer extraordinaire in his mid-forties, cruised along back roads to reach the Everglades Public Library, located southwest of Lake Okeechobee, Florida. He was giving a book talk at the quaint, isolated library on his latest horror novel, *Tentacle Heads*. He rolled into the parking lot honking his horn with five minutes to spare.

"It's about time," hollered Mark Nagel, patiently waiting just outside the front entrance with a smile. The silver haired library branch manager greeted Michael as he walked towards Kearns.

"I knew you'd show up on time," Nagle said laughing, wiping fake perspiration off his brow.

"Sorry I'm cutting it so close," Michael replied, shaking hands. "The main highway is closed off due to the fires."

"No problem," replied Mark, patting him on the back. "You know we never start on time out here in the glades. Either way, we're always glad to see you."

"Always a pleasure venturing out here in the jungle, joked Michael, who thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of giving back to the local community where he grew up. "I'm sure you know the story by heart; it's where I really began my writing

career – here after school working with a certain librarian."

"That I do. And it seems like the weather always craps out when you come," said Nagle, acknowledging the fog and smoky haze blanketing the area. "Wasn't it only two or three years ago we had that awful hailstorm?"

Oh I remember that," said Michael, cringing. "The roof of my car had welts all over it!"

"Well this year it's forest fires," added Nagle. "It's been so dang dry we've got 'em popping up everywhere. Every time lightning strikes, boom, you got yourself a fire."

"I could smell it thirty miles away," said Michael, who drove half the trip with the top down on his vintage convertible land cruiser.

"We got a big crowd for you tonight; maybe the biggest ever; you about ready?"

"Yeah, got that ginger ale for me? You know how I like my ginger ale when I do a book talk – it settles my stomach." The two went into the library and headed towards the exhibit hall.

"Got a six-pack chilling in the fridge; be right back," said Nagle, hanging a quick left towards the staff kitchen.

Michael poked his head in the exhibit hall, all set up with curving rows of white plastic chairs. As usual, a good crowd turned out to hear him speak. The library, no more than eight-thousand square feet, housed a respectable book collection, including new releases, classics, non-fiction, and DVDs. The children's area was as big as a master bedroom, with a three-yard long oval alphabet rug, perfect for story time. The adjacent computer lab consisted of a dozen computers,

retreads from the local community college located a mere thirty minutes away.

The pinnacle of the library was the new exhibit hall, a gift from Kearns after his second book zoomed up the *New York Times* best sellers list, making him a near millionaire. The open spaced room was filled with large hurricane resistant windows and white ash hardwood floor. During the day, natural light poured in from above, courtesy of a half dozen door-sized skylights -- perfect for art exhibits, concerts, and book talks.

On the wall in the lobby hung a swamp green wood frame with a painting of former branch manager John Fraser, who died tragically fifteen years to the day. The thirty year veteran was returning home from dinner when a drunk driver careened into him head on, killing him instantly.

Fraser was an inspiration to many in the community. A writer himself, he had a knack for getting reluctant readers, especially Kearns, who was shy as a freshly adopted cat, to become a passionate readers and writers. He nurtured the young teen's story making skills, honing them into acclaimed respectability. Fraser was thrilled almost as much as Kearns when he sold his first short story. Kearns would eventually sell his first horror novel, *Shark People* at the tender age of twenty-eight, becoming a celebrity in his hometown of Palm Bay. He followed that novel up with *Poriferas* from *Outer Space*, and *Night of the Flying Fish*. Fraser too was a writer; his style tailored more to the intellectual types. He'd sold a few short stories, but never published a novel, a thorn in his literary side.

The assortment of people attending the book talk were tried and true fans of Kearns, some traveling hours away to hear him speak. One young man created a papier mache flying fish sculpture. A twenty-something woman wearing a white tank top, dyed pink hair and sporting a nose ring, had a tattoo on her upper arm of a killer sponge.

“Dang, you attract in an interesting group of people,” joked Nagle, observing the assortment of oddballs through the door window.

“What have I done?” mused the writer with a laugh. The nearly six-foot tall Kearns was an unassuming trim-framed man with short, black wavy hair and three-day old bristly scruff. Most days he looked more like an accountant than horror novelist.

After a casual yet informative hour and a half book discussion and signing, Kearns fielded a couple more questions.

“So what’s the next book you’re working on,” asked a woman with black frizzy hair, heavy-set, and full of anticipation.

“Well, as you know, I always enjoy incorporating ocean life into my stories, but I’m thinking of something a bit shallower; something along the lines of . . . estuaries. You know that’s where many large ocean creatures begin life’s journey.”

“Ooh, that sounds so enticing!” replied the woman, baring a satisfied smile.

“Next question?” Kearns asked.

“In your new novel *Tentacle Heads*, what was your inspiration?” asked a teen boy, wearing blue jeans and a black tee-shirt.

“Good question – what’s your name?”

“Tommy,” he answered politely.

“Well Tommy, I’m sorry -- hold on for a sec.” The microphone sputtered feedback before cutting out. Nagle came over to fix it but Michael waved him off. “I’ll just have to speak up a bit. Tommy, can you hear me?” The teen nodded.

“Well, both my children love calamari and while I can’t stand the stuff, I was thinking, what if an evil scientist zapped them – I mean the squids, not my kids, with radiation. Somehow people start eating the tainted cephalopods and turned into, well . . . tentacle heads.”

Kearns made a zany gesture with his wiggly fingers.

“You know it always sounds goofy when I have to explain it, but it’s really a fun, creepy story; I know you’re gonna like it,” said Kearns. The audience laughed, except for one older person, who was frowning. He was hunched over with the bill of his bleached out Miami Dolphins baseball cap hiding his face. The man cleared his throat and spoke up loud and clear.

“You can do better.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” answered Kearns.

“I said you can do better.” The man wore a blue and white-checked shirt with sleeves rolled up and olive colored khakis. His glasses were red wine tinted and his shoes didn’t match.

“I can do better?” Kearns repeated, intent on hearing the man out.

“I mean, squid people? It’s kinda stupid, don’t ya think?” The man was shaking his head in disapproval then opened the back of the recent novel. “It says here you graduated from the University of South Florida with a degree in English and you studied marine biology too.”

“That’s right,” Michael answered. Many of the attendees looked at the

man in disgust. He looked homeless and probably never even finished high school. And yet this guy was being critical of a celebrated novelist.

“It’s okay people,” said Kearns, who inside partially agreed, but the public ate his novels up like Chicken McNuggets, which enabled him to reside in a gorgeous beachfront home in Key Biscayne overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

“Your name, sir?” asked Kearns, who always preferred to address people by their first name.

“Don’t wanna tell ya,” he replied, “It’s private.” The man crossed his arms over his unclean shirt, almost pouting.

“Please sir?” asked Michael, who finally persuaded the man.

“It’s Jay, but that’s as far as I’m gonna go!” Nagel walked over and whispered something into Michael’s ear.

“He’s a regular here – loony as a bed bug and such.” Kearns nodded.

“Sir, I agree it’s not exactly Shakespeare, but I like to channel my inner childhood and write about monsters. I’ve always been a big fan of monster movies, especially those 1950’s gems like *Them*, *Tarantula*, *From Hell it Came* – great stuff.” Michael paused. “And my novels pay the bills.” The audience broke out in laughter, enjoying the company of a good natured, down to earth author.

“It’s all just so stupid,” he hollered back, wanting no part of the conversation. He mumbled the title again and left the library in a huff.

“Well, to each his own,” said Kearns, being diplomatic and professional as he waved goodbye to the sour man.

Nagle cut in. “Well, I think that’s about it folks. We all appreciate Mr.

Kearns giving us extra time; a big round of applause for Michael “The Horror Master” Kearns everybody!” The attendees rang out with applause.

As the crowd thinned out; it was just Michael and Mark chatting just outside the front door. Nagle handed the writer another chilled ginger ale.

“So I guess we’ll see you in a couple of years, right?” asked Mark, toasting his friend as he held onto his own personally signed copy.

“I’m hoping much sooner,” replied Kearns, who mentioned he’d written a third of his latest novel so far.

“And don’t worry about that nut,” said Mark. “I’m ready to ban that guy because he’s . . .”

“Oh, he’s fine,” replied Michael, interrupting. “I actually appreciate the straightforwardness of everyday people. Critics will never tell you what they’re thinking face to face. Then the next day they’re ripping you to shreds in the press.”

“No, I’m actually banning him because he smells like a gator’s ass.” Nagle burst out laughing.

“You know the one thing that was funny was his comment, or should I say phrase – you can do better,” said Kearns.

“What was funny about it?” asked Nagle.

“Well, you remember, John Fraser used to tell me that. I’d show him one of my short stories or novel ideas and he’d reply, ‘you can do better’. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Funny indeed,” said Nagle, who handed Michael a Tupperware full of pigs in a blanket. “For the road.”

“Thanks my friend.” He took another swig of soda and let out a small belch. “Sorry. The thing is, I could never write like John. He was especially good; knew his craft

inside and out, but he never thought it was good enough, always dissecting paragraphs to death. I never told him this, but sometimes you gotta lighten up, write like people talk – be more down to earth, even if you’re writing about a mystery set in Paris or . . . tentacle heads in Captiva Island.”

“I hear ya,” Nagle replied, who wrote a weekly column for the free local newspaper, the Swamp Times.

“I learned so much from him, but I think maybe it’s why he was . . . never mind.”

“It’s okay to say he was stuck up,” added Mark, who was no fan of the late John Fraser. “Drive home safely buddy. With this smoke and fog, Snake Road will be a bear to navigate tonight.” He waved goodbye and walked back into the library, locking up.

Michael walked over to his 1969 pea soup green Pontiac Bonneville convertible. His other car, a late model Land Rover, was in the repair shop . . . yet again. He cursed himself after every expensive repair, complaining he should have listened to Consumer Reports and bought a Subaru. He preferred not to travel too far in the ‘boat’ because he wanted to keep the mileage to a minimum. That and it only had AM/FM radio.

He set sail out of the gravel filled parking lot, giving a honk on the truck-like horn. The trek home was a long one, almost three hours along Snake Road, a treacherous two-lane meandering thoroughfare with a horrific death rate amongst drivers, especially at night.

The main highway was closed due to raging fires burning on both sides. Kearns barely made it to the book talk due to its closing. Sometimes at night when crossing

Alligator Alley, the stretch of road linking the east and west coast of south Florida, you could easily spot fires in the distance; some caused by lightning strikes especially during the winter dry season, some man-made -- purposely torching fields of spent sugar cane.

For decades, the twisting stretch of road claimed many lives. Native Americans in the vicinity, convinced of its haunting nature, suspected parts of the road was built over Calusa Indian burial grounds -- made up of coquina shells, sand and rocks. The now extinct south Florida Tribe was often referred to as shell Indians.

The road wrapped itself around and through the Florida Everglades, encompassing its natural beauty on both sides of the pavement. Most local folks understood driving at night was a gamble, especially when there is no moonlight. In the past dozen years, Snake Road had an incredibly high number of accidents. Between 2001 and 2010 alone, there were over 74 accidents reported, resulting in twenty-four deaths.

And tonight, it was dark as alligator claws, unseasonably warm and the air conditioning wasn’t working too well in the U.S.S. Bonneville. Michael was supposed to have it repaired last week, but something came up. He opened a bottle of water and steered his Fisher Body beauty on the narrow pavement. It didn’t seem like such a daunting task navigating it during the day, but night time was a different animal.

Bored already, Michael clicked on the radio and started searching for anything free of static, which meant, unfortunately, either religious talk or country music, two things Kearns was least fond of.

Still probing, Michael stumbled upon a cool fifties tune and kept the radio dial there. The DJ's voice announced a weather bulletin and some local news, his voice was deep and raspy, yet soothing.

"And as you approach the sharp bend on Snake Road, and you know which one I'm talking about folks, watch out for those forest fires; it's starting to resemble hell out there!"

Kearns turned the wheel sharply on the sharp corner road. "Thanks for the warning, Mr. DJ," joked Michael.

The roadway's narrow lanes had basically no shoulders. Out of the dozen or so nasty curves that existed on Snake Road, only one met the proper standards for the 45 miles-per-hour speed limit. And with no guard railing or little grading on the curves, you were rolling the automotive dice.

One hour down, three more to go, Michael thought. A mixture of smoke and fog crept along the burnt out vegetation. "This must have been put out recently," Michael said to himself. The blackened trees kissed off spots of smoldering orange like fireflies.

Michael slowed down to a near crawl as the smoke intensified. He turned on the high beams but that made visibility worse. Seeing no one behind him, Michael pulled out a notepad and pen from his vintage leather book bag and started jotting down thoughts.

"If I can't come up with a scary idea here then I should give up writing," thought Michael. "Smoky, dreary, smoldering, toxic, charred, seared, barbequed jungle," said Michael aloud. "How about Evergloom, no, maybe Everblades – about a killer gator with super sharp teeth?" The author smiled.

He flicked the radio on again only to hear a major groan from the DJ. "Well, it's smokier than a mob poker game out there on Snake Road my friends so you drive safely, you hear?" said the voice.

"I promise," said Michael.

"Good," the voice replied before launching into another vintage 50's tune.

"Michael experienced a creepy sensation rolling over his fatigued body. "That was . . . nah."

Michael turned the radio off and began singing out loud, messing up the lyrics. The horror writer maintained a speed of forty-five miles an hour, any faster and he'd be risking a date with a ditch.

Twenty minutes past. Michael was dying to turn on the radio again, but hesitated. "Oh, for Pete's sake!" He turned the knob on.

The music finished up and the familiar voice spoke. "Gotta big fire bursting out on the west side of Snake Road, seems a towering Cypress tree got torched by Mother Nature – that's lightning for you city folks. Tis a shame 'cus you just don't find any more that size around the Glades no more. Back in the day, Seminole used to hollow 'em out for canoes."

"Hmm," nodded Michael, always eager to learn something new. He glanced to his right and spotted the tree, now engulfed in beautiful sunset orange flames. "What a shame, indeed," he sighed.

Up ahead, Michael spotted something on the road, about the size of an adult alligator. "A tree, maybe?" he speculated. As Michael approached, he noticed it twitch. "What the hell is that?" He stopped the car, about fifteen feet short of the object.

Michael stepped out and walked over next to the driver's side

headlight. Somehow, it looked familiar. The thing rolled over; something was sticking out from its back. Then it shot up, standing on two feet, letting loose with a vicious cry. Soon, others came out of the swampy mangrove-filled waters from each side of the road. "Shark people?" he stammered in amazement.

Michael stood still, frozen in disbelief. The shark man flailed his pectoral fins and gnashed his triangular teeth, sending Michael to scurry back into his car. He floored the gas, the tires screeching on the pavement. The shark man launched his sandpaper textured body onto the hood. The thing snapped away just like he described in his first novel. A pair of glow-in-the-dark remoras were fastened to the creatures' mid section.

"Oh this is nuts," said Michael, still trying to process the bizarre situation. He swerved the car back and forth trying to derail the strange creature.

"You can do better," said the radio voice.

"Huh?" answered Michael, who almost steered into the mangroves. He jammed on the brakes, the creature went sailing, tumbling onto the road, making a deadening thud.

"Okay guys, this is a practical joke, right?" screamed Michael, looking around. There were preliminary discussions of turning Shark People into a film. Michael postulated this was some over the top prank from some Hollywood ball buster.

Michael parked the car and walked over to the motionless body, nudging it with his shoe, nothing. He found a stick and poked at it; again, no movement. He clutched the head and tried to remove it,

thinking it was some kind of mask. Nothing doing.

Suddenly, the eyes blinked -- all cold and black. The jaws chomped down on the stick, snapping it in half. "Holy crap!"

Michael raced back to his car and spotted more coming from behind. He closed the door just in time, but the creatures tore away though the convertible top, shearing it to pieces. He sped away, glancing back in the rear view mirror, narrowly escaping.

The tattered convertible top fluttered in the wind as Michael reached fifty miles an hour. He turned on the radio again. "Close call with those shark people, eh?"

Michael looked at the radio not believing what he was hearing. "Who are you?"

"I'm your subconscious voice coming at you clear on Radio AM Mr. Horror writer," he said in an irritating DJ voice. Michael swerved around a dead raccoon in the road.

"My subconscious doesn't usually blare out in my Bonneville," answered Michael. "So who the hell are you really? Hello?" The voice was about to answer when a burst of static cut out the man's voice.

Michael continued driving. Now with the convertible top nonexistent, the smell of smoke was nauseating. He turned on the radio again. Nothing. Suddenly, something fell from the sky. Was it debris from the fires? A piece of singed bark? Another object fell, then another. Not hail, Michael hoped. If it was, he'd end up with a whole lot of lumps on his head.

Michael slowed down to a near stop and looked up. "No, it can't be . . . can it?" A deluge of the strange objects were falling, some big as Nerf footballs. The road was suddenly littered with them; now

they were pelting his car. One stuck to the windshield. It had beady eyes and a sinister looking mouth. They were . . .

"Poriferas from Outer Space?" God no, not them," Michael shrieked. They were falling everywhere, including right into the mammoth back seat to his prized classic car. They were nothing more than teeth housed in a sponge body: simple yet deadly. In his novel, a once peaceful coral reef turns into a blood bath as the supposed docile sponges are replaced by evil replicas and soon begin devouring everything human in the ocean sanctuary.

Michael felt something on his right shoulder . . . a killer porifera, a creature with an insatiable appetite for human flesh. His multicellular monster novel proved a best seller, but now, the fictitious little bastards were keen on tearing into his own flesh. And like hail, they kept falling. Michael slammed on the brakes and frantically raced to the car trunk. He popped it open and scrambled for his heavy duty work gloves, used mostly for fishing and an oversized golf umbrella. He raced back and started grabbing anything that squirmed. One after another, he sent the ferocious poriferi packing. He opened the umbrella, using it as a shield and took off. He could feel them bouncing off, one after the other. After a couple of miles, the spongy downpour subsided. He stopped the car and inspected the back seat again, this time it was free and clear. He folded up the umbrella and sped off.

With the killer porifera out of the way, what was next? Michael turned on the radio, this time the radio voice boomed loud and clear.

"You can do better."

"I can do better?" replied Michael, now fully irritated.

"Don't get mad at me, you wrote it," laughed the voice. Michael fumed then paused. "Hold on, I recognize that voice now, it's . . . Mr. Fraser?"

"The one and only son," he answered. "Oh you can call me John – no need to be so formal."

"What the hell are you doing here on my radio?" said Michael.

"Think of me as just a passing voice in the night."

"Come again?"

"You still don't get it, do you," said the voice. "I mean squid people, shark people, killer sponges; what's next? Sea Monkey People? Michael reached for his leather bag.

"Put that pen and paper away, pronto!"

"Pronto?" replied Michael.

"That's not a word you'd normally use."

"Well, now that I'm dead, I've lightened up a bit – maybe too much."

Michael regrouped his spinning thoughts. "Look, I'm a successful author and have a pretty decent life going here," said Michael. "My work sells for Pete's sake."

"Yes, but so do Adam Sandler movies and Justin Beeble records, or whatever the heck his name is. Look, my point being is you can do better and you know it. That man at the library this evening? I was channeling my thoughts through him – man was that guy stinky."

Michael was exasperated. "You what?"

"I struck a nerve, didn't I?"

"Kinda sorta; I even commented it to Mark."

The voice sighed. "That man couldn't write himself out of a paper bag."

“Hey, Mark’s a good man and a good writer too,” replied Michael, now getting a little irked. “You know what? He’s right; you were a literary snob who just didn’t . . .” Suddenly, an all-consuming buzzing sound engulfed the whole Everglades.

“What’s that?” Michael asked.

“See ya monster man.”

The radio voice abruptly cut out. Michael slowed down and gazed up into the charcoal sky. From the west, he spotted airplanes. The writer relaxed a bit then noticed their formation; a giant V shape like migrating birds – very big birds. Scores of them, maybe a dozen loomed into full view. “Oh no,” Michael uttered. “Giant flying fish.”

The fly leader strafed right over Kearns, creating a huge gust of wind. The car shifted to the other side of the road, almost catapulting him into the mangroves. He slammed on the brakes and ducked down, placing the car in park. Looking up, the writer gazed at the beastly fish, resembling World War II fighters.

One by one, the silver-sided fish whooshed past the writer. In an instant, the gargantuan shapes suddenly vanished. He sat up and scanned the night skies, first to his left, then to the right. Optimistic the coast was clear from his fictitious creations, Michael backed out of the ditch and sped away. After a few minutes, he repositioned the rear view mirror, feeling relieved before taking a deeper look. Then he screamed.

Right behind him was a rogue flying fish, eyes angry with gulping mouth wide open. In his novel, *Night of the Flying Fish*, an unscrupulous company dumps toxic waste onto a school of flying fish, which quickly absorb the contaminated substance throughout

their bodies. Soon, the flying monsters begin their reign of terror on a quaint seaside town until an ex Gulf War vet saves the day.

Michael floored the gas, but the fish continued to tail him. It moved closer, now hovering above the terrified author like a glider. With nothing to protect himself, he reached back and clutched the umbrella. The huge fish prepared to gobble Michael up when he pointed it straight into the enormous mouth and opened the umbrella, gagging the fish instantly. The great fish sputtered like a shot aircraft before crashing into a group of melaleuca trees, exploding on impact.

Michael roared, pumping his fist. “You don’t mess with your maker!”

“That was a close one my friend,” said the voice, snickering.” Oh, and the forecast calls for a surprise shower, so enjoy the rest of your journey home.” The voice sounded more vindictive now.

Michael shut off the radio and glanced at the starless sky then pointed angrily at the radio. “Rain my butt; it’s going to be dry as a bone for the next week.” The writer laughed, maintaining a healthy speed when he noticed rain droplets on the windshield. “Oh, you son of a rat!”

For the next ten miles, a rain cloud hovered over the embattled writer who was now soaked. “No more convertibles, I swear,” said Michael, eyeing the dark gray cotton ball of precipitation above. Michael looked down at the gas gauge and noticed he was running on fumes. “Ratones.”

Up ahead, Michael spotted a dilapidated gas station, tattered with white peeling paint and missing shingles. The Bonneville sputtered as he prepared to dock it at the lone pump; nothing digital, just the old

spinning number kind with a bleached out Mobil logo painted on the front.

Michael stepped out of the car and called out. “Hello, anyone home?” Stone silence. The gas station felt like a mirage, more like a prop thought Michael. The writer was praying there was gas available, any gas. He strode over to the office, noticing the door half open. He called out again, but no answer. A coffee pot was turned on, now smelling like burnt rubber. The soda machine was near empty, only a lone bottle of Fresca remained. Needing to pee since the onslaught of the killer sponges, Michael grabbed the tarnished restroom key hanging next to the register and headed back outside.

He walked around the side of the building, dodging stacks of worn tires and rusted out oil drums before locating the door. Michael took a hefty whiff and gagged; his eyes tearing up from the stench. He opted to take a leak behind the leaning tower of tires, then sported a ‘God that felt good’ grin.

Michael walked over to the gas pump and took out his debit card preparing to swipe it. He chuckled, noting the last car to stop here for a ‘fill ur up’ was probably driven by Fred Flintstone. He grabbed the pump handle, holding it with a leftover napkin from the book talk. Michael pressed the lever away from his car, hoping liquid the color of ginger ale would come out.

The pump sputtered, coughing up a spit amount of gas. “Crappola,” said Michael, realizing this was the only game in town. The fuel gurgled some more, then shot through like water from a hose. “Peachy.” He flipped up the back license plate and held the pump handle firm.

Michael finished up, the total just under twenty dollars. “Geeze this thing must be set at twentieth century prices – hell, I’m not complaining.” He took out a crisp pair of ten dollar bills and walked over to the office, placing it on the counter. “Here’s your money sir or madam; keep the change.”

A low frequency popping sound caught Michael’s attention. Pop, pop, pop. A radio, or maybe a television show? “Hello?” he called out. He spotted a closed door, painted light blue with a large poster of twin blonds seductively posing with a Dodge Reliant K car. The writer raised a brow then nearly tripped over an Icee display featuring the big slurping polar bear.

Suck, suck, suck, then pop, pop, pop. He tiptoed towards the door and pressed his ears to the door; the sound suddenly stopped. He reached down, heart racing, and clutched the handle, turning it ever so slightly.

Michael opened the door only to be greeted by a tentacle head, its slimy arms strangling the dead gas station attendant. He screamed, slamming the door just as the creature reached out to grab him. Michael stumbled out the room and ran for the car.

The tentacle head slid out of the building after Michael, letting out a blabbering howl. Sandpaper tan with mixed streaks of pearl white and orange, the creature stalked over on its semi-human limbs and outstretched tentacle arms. On top of its head sprouted a cluster of weed-like tentacles, each nine-feet long. The eyes were saucer like, the size of Frisbees. It headed straight for the horrified writer.

Michael jumped through the passenger side, sliding over to the steering wheel on the slick vinyl

interior. He scrambled for the keys deep in his jean pocket.

“Come on, come on!”

The familiar voice of Mr. John Frazer boomed from the radio. “The worst thing you can do is panic; isn’t that what you always write?”

“Who’s panicking?” Michael frantically called out.

The creature lunged at the car with its elongated limbs. As Michael pulled away, the barbed suction cups stuck to the trunk of the car like Velcro. Back on the road, Michael turned in horror as the tentacle head reached closer.

“Get the hell away from me!” he screamed. One of the hideous arms slashed at Michael, grazing his head; its beak-like mouth snapping away. He slammed on the brakes, hoping the creature would sail off. It flailed off the trunk, but landed on the front hood of the car, the suction cups holding firm. The monster managed to slink three of its smaller tentacles over the windshield, grabbing the steering wheel. Michael swatted them away then pushed in the lighter. It popped out seconds later, orange hot.

“Take that!” bellowed the writer, burning the strange flesh of the creature. Again, the writer aimed and seared the tentacle head. Surprisingly, the creature wailed in pain and flopped off the car. “I swear to God, no more monster stories!” He snapped on the radio and cranked up the volume. “You hear me, no more monster stories, okay!”

“I know you can do better,” spoke the DJ.

“Yeah, enough of the do better stuff and the God damn monsters.”

“Congratulations Michael, now drive home safely.”

A year later, Michael was back at Everglades Public Library

finishing up a signing of his latest book.

“Quite a departure from your past novels,” said Mark Nagle, a bit puzzled. “What made you try something like this?”

“A voice from the past,” replied Michael, who was disappointed by the half full turnout but understood. Nine tenths of the questions were monster related.

“They really miss the horror stuff,” said Mark, “Any chance you’ll write another?”

“Let’s see where this takes me,” answered Michael, stuffing his speech into the leather briefcase.

“To each his own buddy, but it must be weird going from shark people to . . .”

“Well, at least our homeless friend was a tad more receptive, but not by much.”

“Let’s just hope it sells; I had to put a fortune into my Bonneville.” The two toasted their ginger ales then Michael strode over to his car and put the top down.

“Good weather for a change,” said Mark, glancing up at the early evening sky.

“Until we meet again,” yelled Michael as he pulled out of the parking lot.

The weather was perfect for a change as the sun dipped behind the vast Everglade wilderness. A few miles down the road, Michael flipped on the radio. He searched for the familiar AM station but reached only static. Michael smiled as he rounded one of the tight bends of Snake Road. Suddenly, the road began to shake. From the distance, a vast line of dust swept the west side of the glades.

“What the . . . ?”

A clear voice finally cut through the distortion. “Howdy stranger, what’s new?”

“What did I do now?” cried Michael, exasperated to the tenth degree. “It’s not a monster novel; it’s clean as a whistle.”

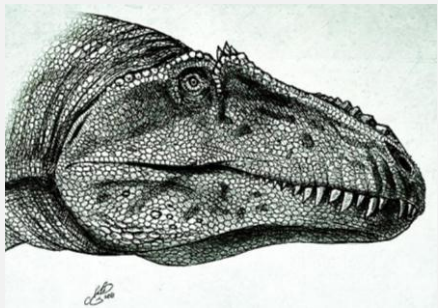
“I know. I still think you could’ve done better, but I guess it’s a start,” replied Fraser.

“There’s nothing wrong with a picture book about enormously cute bunnies . . . oh fudge.”

“Enormous indeed,” added Fraser. “I believe there’s a farmers market up ahead; I’m sure they’ve got plenty of jumbo carrots.”

“Maybe I should try non-fiction,” sighed Kearns.

“Better hop to it, son.” Click.



**Chapter Two from
DiVitto Kelly's
upcoming horror novel,
Seal Cove**

In Chedabucto Bay, just around the corner from the town of Canso, a young couple strolling along on the grainy park beach discovered

something bigger than a breadbox just behind a group of boulders used as a barrier. The husband, an L.L. Bean catalog model clone hurdled a washed up tree like a gymnast when he suddenly confronted the object, its nose almost bonking him right in the groin.

A seventeen-foot great white shark lay dead on the rocky shore, nearly bitten in half. A handful of front teeth were missing. Fresh scars ran along its sleek blue-gray body. The man landed on his rump and simply gazed upon the magnificent beast. “It’s a . . .” The wife, trailing behind, finally noticed and screamed.

“Shark.” uttered his wife. “Holy shit!” She hardly ever cursed, but the moment seemed quite appropriate.

“Yeah, a shark -- a really, really big shark.” After catching his breath, the man sat down on one of the rocks and pulled out his cell phone from his backpack. He fumbled for the park brochure, locating the phone number and contacted the park office who then relayed the message to a nearby constable.

Fifteen minutes later, a police car rolled up into the gravel parking lot leading to the rock-strewn beach. A constable got out, very tall and wide as a phone booth. He sidestepped the numerous puddles as he walked up to the railing. He peered down, not expecting much.

“You folks called about a . . . holy mother of God.” The couple stood side by side near the shark’s conical snout, dwarfed by the immense girth of the deceased shark albeit two massive chunks of flesh removed.

Canso Police Constable Rob Bourne stumbled for words, taken aback at the lifeless beast, the

black eyes still radiating fear and respect. He stepped down the gray recycled plastic steps and paced the length of the shark. “Something this big normally don’t take shit from anything in the ocean, you know what I mean, eh? Pardon my French Canadian, ma’am.” He put his hand on his chin, staring at the gaping wounds.

The wife found her nerve and started snapping away pictures with her cell phone, getting a few ‘up close and personal’ ones of the grimacing mouth. The couple, visiting from Rhode Island, had seen smaller sharks at the Mystic Aquarium located in said-named Mystic, Connecticut, but this was like finding the T-Rex of sharks.

A handful of seagulls squawked as they hovered above the massive fish. “This is how you discovered it?” asked the constable, feeling in awe as he placed his index finger on one of the serrated triangular shaped teeth, almost two inches in length.

“Uh, yeah,” replied the man. “We didn’t know great white sharks lived up here in Canada.”

“Well, they usually live in the oceans, eh,” the constable, said with a hint of humor. “Seriously though, we’ve spotted a couple of great whites in the bay, mostly near the harbor seal rookery just past our cute boxy lighthouse.”

Bourne was a former professional hockey player and class-A goon for the Winnipeg Jets, a defenseman who had an incredible knack for pummeling opponents. For the last fourteen years, he’d been a seasoned man of the law, too many injuries finally catching up with him. His main beat was the parks and public beaches rounding out the Canso coastline. It was a hazard-free gig that paid

fairly well. “By the way, thank you both for . . . I’m sorry, got a call.”

The constable reached for his portable radio on his service belt. “This is Constable Bourne. Where? I know where that is, near the boat landing. Give me about twenty-five minutes and I’ll meet you there. A couple just found Jaws up here at Jensen’s Beach minus two big bite marks – I’ll explain later.”

The constable’s frowning wrinkles in his face peaked up. “No, don’t touch anything. Contact the conservation office and ask for Christopher Swain to check it out, he’ll talk your ear off, but he knows his stuff. Give me a call when he arrives. Thanks.”

“What was that about?” asked the woman, a vibrant red backpack slung over her athletic shoulders.

“Fellow employee. Said about five kilometers down the coast, two dead seals were found – that’s five in the last week. There’s a guy in Seal Cove who’s supposed to be some kind of an expert; he’s been notified too,” he replied, his weathered face revealing more than simple puzzlement. “Culprit probably another shark; maybe an orca.” The constable paused, unnerved, staring at the lifeless fish as oncoming waves brushed up against its crescent shaped tail.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” asked the husband, a semi novice when it came to anything animals, but a big fan of nature programs. “Those are some nasty wounds; what could’ve done something like that? Uh, Constable?”

Bourne didn’t reply. He stood there studying the great fish, still amazed at seeing something so big and ferocious, now dead. “I’m sorry folks; I was putting on the ole thinking cap. My first instinct is a

killer whale – the only thing in these waters that could kill a great white. But to me, the bite wounds would be totally different here,” he replied. “I’m no expert, but I know orcas have more rounded teeth. The bite marks would’ve been more blunt; these are more slashing – pointed. It’d take a hell of a creature to do this.”

“Maybe it was another great white,” said the woman. Both men nodded in approval.

The young man stepped over a couple of barnacle encrusted rocks and squatted down next to one of the gaping wounds. “Do you know what this stuff is?” The man pointed just below the sharks’ outstretched pectoral fin with a waterlogged branch. “See it?”

The constable walked over to the man. He inched over, inspecting the bite mark more closely. “Never seen that before. Here, let me see that. He borrowed the stick and poked at the bright green streak of goop. “Do you mind taking a few pictures of this?” The woman obliged, pulling out her iPhone, housed in a light blue plastic case imprinted with smiling pink whales.

The constable handed the couple his card. “Please send those to my email address as soon as you . . .” The woman was already thumbing away.

“Done,” said the spunky health geek, eager to assist. The constable lumbered back to his car, retrieving a roll of yellow and black plastic tape and four, meter-long wooden stakes. The constable returned, planting them around the shark in a rectangular display then roped it off. He thanked the couple before trekking back to his car.

Bourne took in a deep breath before venturing down the coast

where the dead seals were discovered.

Stories in Spanish

Tarjeta de aniversario By Narda McCarthy

Hoy cumplimos treinta y nueve años de casados.

Anoche íbamos a ir a cenar, algo sabroso, elegante, en un lugar a media luz, con música de fondo. Esos eran los planes originales.

Por ellos rompimos un compromiso con unos amigos; no fuimos ayer a la casa de otros a ver el partido de futbol. Y al final, decidimos sin decirnos mucho que nos quedábamos en casa, viendo el partido los dos solos, él iba por un equipo y yo por el otro; así que no importaba quién ganara, de todos modos íbamos a celebrar.

Comimos el resto del asado del día anterior, hice una sangría y cuando se acabó el intenso partido, seguimos sentados viendo uno de esos misterios del canal dos que nos gustan tanto.

Por ratos yo me acurrucaba bajo su abrazo, y por ratos cuando el calor era mucho me alejaba al otro lado del sillón. Él dice que yo me muevo mucho siempre, “wiggly worm”, me dice. Tiene razón, siempre estoy moviéndome de un lado para el otro ya sea porque un lado del cuerpo se cansa o porque me acuerdo de algo que parece imperativo hacerlo en ese momento. Él ha aprendido a quererme así y aunque a veces se impacienta, ríe de esa manera baja, masculina, llena de calor que me hace sentir segura, tranquila, amada.

A veces me pregunto, ¿qué hago yo para hacerlo sentir amado? ¿Será que el siente lo que yo siento? ¿Ese calorcito así pequeño, estable, profundo?

A eso de las once y media decidimos irnos a acostar. No hicimos el amor como lo hubiéramos hecho hace treinta y nueve años. Aunque a él le gustaría que todo fuera igual, que las escenas románticas fueran como las de las películas, que la pasión fuera igual de intensa, yo no lo veo igual. Para mí el romanticismo nuestro, mío, está en ese amor que yo siento por él; en el hecho de que yo no quiero estar con nadie más que con él; que cuando no estamos juntos me siento manca, coja, ciega a medias.

Antes de quedarnos dormidos decidimos que si no habíamos ido a cenar, iríamos a desayunar. No muy seguros del lugar, pensamos en el cubano ese que hace unos desayunos que incluyen jugo fresco de naranja, café con leche azucarada, huevos con jamón, cebolla, tomates, jamón y tocino al lado. Una bomba de colesterol, pero no importa. Treinta y nueve años de casados no suceden todos los días. Y, de todos modos, los billetes del tren de la vida no son de ida y vuelta. Hoy es hoy y hay que vivirlo porque tal vez no alcancemos el mañana.

Cuando me desperté esta mañana, lo primero que hice fue ir a ver si el refrigerador, que se ha estado apagando intermitentemente, estaba encendido. Si, lo estaba, pero yo no convencida de que era la temperatura correcta, decidí que tenía que levantarme y cambiar toda la comida al refrigerador de afuera, así que regresé al dormitorio y me lavé los dientes, fui

a la cocina, saqué los huevos, el yogurt y los llevé al garaje. Cuando abrí el refrigerador de afuera, me di cuenta de que necesitaba una buena limpieza y decidí que tal vez no era para tanto, que el refrigerador de la cocina no estaba tan mal, al final de cuentas ayer había pasado un buen tiempo, casi todo el día, trabajando bien.

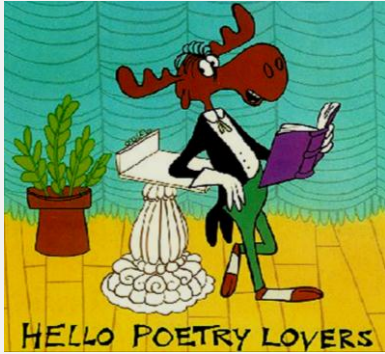
Así que regresé al dormitorio y decidimos que lo mejor era regresar a la cama. Yo me metí dentro de las cobijas, mi cuerpo camina del frío al calor constantemente. Él se quedó sobre la cama. Empezamos a recordar. Recorrimos el camino andado desde aquella mañana que salí de la casa de mi madre para mudarme a su apartamento. Las lágrimas de ella; la subida por la escalera y cómo él me levantó en vilo para traspasar el dintel de la puerta. Luego ese viaje de luna de miel a México, en motocicleta. Lo que comimos; nuestra subida a esas montañas frías, casi congeladas y luego nuestro descenso a la costa, los mexicanos buenos, el hotel de quinta categoría en ese puerto olvidado; los camarones de mar tan deliciosos. Recordándolos se nos hizo agua la boca. Nuestro regreso sin llegar a la capital del país porque quedaba muy lejos y el viaje en moto estaba cobrando su precio; nuestro encuentro con esa mujer arrogante y amarga antes de pasar la frontera de regreso, la casa de huéspedes en la ciudad costera y caliente. Luego, con las manos unidas, le dimos gracias a Dios por todo lo bueno; por todo lo que ha dolido; por los hijos, por los nietos. ¡Por hoy!

Nos quedamos a desayunar en casa; la clase de baile en el gimnasio empieza a las once, si comemos temprano podré ir a la

clase. No, no iré. Desayunaremos tranquilos, sin prisa. Hablamos de Santana y su último álbum, nos provoca escucharlo y voy a iTunes para poner las canciones que nos gusten en nuestra “wish list”; escogemos las canciones de Juanes, Gloria Estefan y Diego Torres. Luego vamos a YouTube y vemos con lágrimas en los ojos el video de *La foto de los dos* de Carlos Vives y en cuanto se termina decidimos que necesitamos algo alegre y buscamos *Qué bonita es esta vida* con Jorge Celedón.

Pero yo no puedo dejar las cosas así y busco *El Camino de la vida* con un trío que no conocemos y al escucharlo, él me abraza por detrás y juntos rompemos a llorar. Al terminar el video, deshacemos el abrazo, unidos por la nostalgia provocada por la canción y un poco avergonzados nos secamos las lágrimas, sin vernos hacemos comentarios que tratan de alivianar la sabrosa congoja y decidimos que hay cosas que hacer aunque sea domingo. Yo me siento a escribir, él sale al jardín, limpia la piscina, poda la rama del árbol que casi toca la mesa y luego entra acalorado y decide bañarse. Yo decido hacerlo feliz y dejo de escribir para ir a su encuentro.

Portal Poetry Corner



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: Aug. 11, Sept. 8, Oct. 13, Nov. 10, Dec. 8.

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:

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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 or call (954) 201-8870.

***Please specify the story and writer. Thanks!**



Congratulations to Portal writers CP Bialois and DiVitto Kelly who have their short stories published in separate anthologies!

Visit Amazon.com and search for (Dead but Dreaming Magazine #2 and #3 Michael Porter) horror anthology It's DiVitto Kelly's second official professionally published short story, available now in both paperback and Kindle. Enjoy!



Fifteen Appeals from the Mix Blood **By C.L. Mckenzie**

Onward we march because we must go on.
Onward we go because our destiny remains just on the other side.
Who has fallen?
Who falls behind?
Leave them, we must move on.
Mourn on the path, if you must object,
Battle is just ahead and we must continue on.
Sweet voices from the past cannot keep us in chains.
Vengeful ghost of yesterday cannot keep us on the red leash.

We Leave the Fallen Behind **By C.L. Mckenzie**

Behold the new tomorrow!
Ignore the ridiculous accusations of cruelty.
What do these false saints know?
What can we do about who have fallen?
They are gone.
The strong survive and we move on.
Our destiny lies ahead.
Behold the new tomorrow!
We leave the fallen behind!

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Enjoy!