

# The Portal

**A collection of short stories  
and poems.**

*\*We've added new writers!*



## Stranded

By Jamie White

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Claire wiped her forehead and pulled herself up onto the hood of the car. After a minute, she jumped back down to the ground and pulled her purse out of the car, digging around inside. Once she'd found what she needed, Claire tossed the purse back onto the seat and pulled her hair up into a bun.

*Better.* Now, if only the roadside assistance would arrive. There were much better things to do with an afternoon, in her opinion, than waiting around to get a flat changed. Claire pulled her phone out of her pocket and reached inside the purse again to retrieve her headphones. If she was stuck waiting, she might as well listen to some music to pass the time.

She scrolled through the phone's menu and started the music before sticking the ear pieces in her ear. Claire shut the car door and hoisted herself back onto the hood to wait, gently bumping her heel against the fender. As the beat filled her ears, Claire's

gaze drifted towards the building she'd just come out of. Her heart beat faster as she noticed Matthew Johnson walking out the door.

Her heart pounded out of control as his gaze strayed to her and he smiled. He walked over and came to a stop beside the car. "Claire, I thought you left already."

She swallowed and pulled the earphones out of her ears, gesturing to the tire on the passenger side. "My car had other ideas."

Matthew stepped over to the other side and glanced down at the tire. "I take it help's on the way?"

She nodded, trying to keep her voice under control. There was something about those eyes that made her forget how to form a coherent sentence. Sometimes, it irritated her. Claire felt like she was back in High School when he was around. "Yeah, I just called a few minutes ago. They should be here soon."

"Want some company while you wait?"

For a moment, Claire felt as though she'd fall right off the hood of the car. He wanted to wait with her? "You don't mind? I'm sure you've got a lot of better things to do than sit here and wait in this weather."

"Now, see, that's where you'd be wrong. I happen to like a nice day like this. Besides, I was just going to go home and put in a DVD or something anyway."

Strange; the more he talked to her, the more comfortable she felt. Her heartbeat slowed to the point where she no longer feared dropping over right then and there. "Somehow, I don't believe that. You don't seem like the sitting at home type."

He shrugged. "You don't know me that well. How long have you been working here, a couple of months?"

She nodded.

"And we haven't talked all that much since you've been here, right? So, I'm sure there are all kinds of things you'd be surprised to know about me."

"True." If she didn't know better, she would swear the guy was flirting

with her. *That can't be.* Claire remembered seeing him leave with some girl a couple of weeks ago, and she looked nothing like Claire. The woman had been much taller and had long hair. *He's just being nice, is all.*

"So, how do you like it here so far?"

Claire shifted so she could stuff her phone back in her pocket, considering his question a moment before she responded. "I guess so; it's a lot different than what I'm used to."

"What's that?" He took a seat on the hood and shifted so he could face her.

Having him so close made her squirm, but she fought not to show it. "I grew up in a suburb: houses that look identical, every yard cut to the same length—that sort of thing. It was boring, but I guess I got used to it. It was..."

"Safe?"

She nodded. "Yeah, that's a good word for it."

"It sounds like you need to get out a little more. Maybe we could go somewhere later."

Did her heart stop beating? It felt like it. She wondered if maybe she'd misheard him, but the look on his face told her different. He was waiting for her answer. "I, um, didn't I see you with a girl a couple of weeks ago?"

He gazed up at the sky, as though looking for an answer. A moment later, recognition registered in his eyes and he laughed. "You mean a tall girl with long hair?"

"That'd be her."

He shook his head. "Blind date that didn't really go anywhere; I went out with her as a favor to a friend of mine. I'd rather go somewhere with you."

Claire fought to keep the excitement out of her voice as she answered. It wouldn't do to appear too eager. "That sounds nice... when?"

"How does tomorrow night sound?"

"Tomorrow night, it is."

Matthew glanced down at his watch before allowing his gaze to settle over the street. "Are you sure they're coming? It's been awhile."

Claire glanced down at her phone's screen and frowned as she saw the

time. “They said they are. If you’d rather head home, it’s alright.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

*And I don’t mind you waiting...* She should be irritated by the fact they hadn’t shown up yet, but she couldn’t muster up the annoyance. Claire was enjoying the company. “Good. So, you heard a little about me. Tell me something about you.”

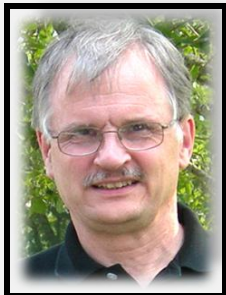
Claire wasn’t sure how long they sat there and talked. The next thing she knew, a large truck with a familiar name pulled alongside them. A uniformed man stepped out of the truck and walked over to her.

He glanced down at a clipboard in his hand before looking up at her. “Are you Claire Roberts?”

She climbed off the hood and nodded. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Sorry about the wait—I got backed up.”

Claire glanced over at Matthew. “Don’t worry about it.”



**Breakdown  
By Rick Weber**

“I can’t believe this is happening to me,” Jack Wooley kept shouting over and over as he stood beside his car in the garage under his company’s office building. He had an important meeting to attend and he was running late. A flat tire was not on the agenda. Adding insult to injury was that his jack was broken giving him no way of changing tires himself.

It had not been a good year for Jack. A business deal which took him months to put together fell apart due to his unauthorized disclosure of a supplier’s proprietary information. That supplier was now suing Jack and his company.

Jack did his best to put out all the fires but to no avail. When he thought he made headway, another issue always came up. He spent the morning taking care of a few small matters related to his situation which became full scale battles. This made him late for the meeting with his attorney outside of the office.

Jack altered his chant and began screaming, “I don’t need this. I don’t need this.”

“You don’t need what?” he heard a soft male voice ask from behind him.

Turning on his heels Jack saw a tall thin impeccably dressed man in his early sixties whom he did not recognize standing several feet away.

Jack on the verge tears replied, “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.” The man’s tone was consolatory.

Jack stared at the older man. His facial features were soft with warm steel gray eyes. He did not know why, but Jack felt he could trust this stranger. At the end of his mental rope, he broke down and began to sob.

“I’ve got too much going on. I can’t take it anymore,” he cried holding on to the car’s right rear fender. Without any thought of whom he was speaking to, Jack outlined the details leading up to the collapse of the big deal.

“Sounds like you could’ve made a lot of money,” said the man.

“Oh yeah, I could’ve made a ton of money. Now, I won’t have a job before it’s all over and you don’t know the half of it.”

The stranger raised his eyebrows as Jack went into the more tawdry side of his life. As job pressures began to build from the lawsuit, Jack ended a long term romance with a co-worker on a sour note. Word of the affair got back to his wife, and she kicked him out of their house.

“It’s still not that bad,” said the stranger.

Jack looked the man in the eye and calmly replied, “I’m thinking about calling it quits. I got nowhere to go, no friends. You’re the first person who’s heard me out. If I make it to this meeting, it all may be said and done. So, why show up?”

“Because you know how much trouble you’re in, and you’re the one responsible for getting it resolved.”

“That’s easy for you to say. When you walk out of here, you won’t remember that we even met.”

The stranger told him calmly, “You may not be able to control all of the events leading up to a situation, but you are responsible for how you react to it.”

Jack was speechless. His brain was traveling at light speed not knowing what to do next. Shaking his head, he gazed from the spare tire to the broken jack and asked, “How do I react to this?”

“I know a good mechanic with a shop close to here. I’ll give you his number. He’s usually able to come out on short notice.”

The man rattled off the mechanic’s phone number from memory to Jack, who placed a quick call. When he ended the call, Jack smiled for the first time in ages and told the stranger, “He’s on the way.”

Jack became apologetic. “I’m sorry for the way I acted. I had no right to be that way. You didn’t deserve it. Especially since I don’t even know your name...”

Before he could go on the stranger interrupted, “It’s Melvin, Melvin Baker.”

The sound of a vehicle coming up the ramp caused Jack to look up and see a tow truck pulling up by his car. Jack turned to finish his conversation, but Melvin was gone. Confused by the abrupt departure, Jack was distracted when he heard the tow truck driver ask him, “Are you Mr. Wooley?”

Jack nodded his head and waited while the man changed his tire. Jack made it to the lawyer’s office a half hour late for his meeting, but was relieved when he found out his attorney was

held up in court. Jack took a seat in the reception area and began mulling over what possessed him to open up about himself to a perfect stranger. It was something he had never done before.

“Jack, Jack,” he heard the lawyer calling his name. “Come on in, I’m sorry you had to wait.”

“That’s okay. I had a little hold up of my own.”

Inside the attorney’s office, Jack learned things were not as bad as he had perceived. A resolution was feasible, but it would not be easy.

As the meeting wound down and Jack got ready to leave, he commented to his attorney, “I met someone in our garage before I came here. He told me things weren’t going to be that bad. I didn’t believe him.”

“Who was that?”

“A guy by the name of Melvin Baker. I never saw him there before.”

“Sharp dresser in a tailor made suit?”

“Yeah, you know him?”

“I did, but it can’t be the same person. I defended a Melvin Baker who worked for your company about fifteen years ago on insider trading charges, but he never made it to court.”

“What happened?”

“Suicide, carbon monoxide poisoning. He rigged up his car in the garage at your office. Mechanic from a local garage found him during a repair call there. Melvin left a note saying he had enough and was ‘calling it quits’. The pressure got to him.”



### The Trip Home By DiVitto Kelly

It was already past midnight. Chris Wolfe, age 44, was returning home to Okeechobee, Florida from a job interview up in Atlanta. Things were looking desperate for the unemployed city computer programmer, out of work for half a year. He’d been scouring job sites ever since the Orange County commissioners Ginzued the town budget.

To save money, Wolfe slept in his car overnight in a nearby park, conserving every dollar he had for gas, food, and tolls. The next morning, Wolfe felt rejuvenated after downing a pair of Strawberry frosted Pop Tarts and large orange juice stored in his cooler. He needed this job. The interview went well, he thought. Two of the three interviewers were fair and professional, while the other treated the experience like the ‘dentist’ scene from the film, Marathon Man -- the only thing missing was the drill. Wolfe laid on the knowledge; the two women were impressed. The lone man, short, skinny and skeezy, kept digging into his past experience. Still, Wolfe handled the interrogation well and walked out feeling optimistic.

“We’ll contact you by the end of the week,” said the plump middle-aged woman, her locks dyed in Bozo the Clown orange. Wolfe heard that phrase in past interviews a few times too many – close, but not enough.

It rained most of the trip home. The tires weren’t so hot on his ‘89 Volvo wagon, still running strong with a quarter of a million miles. Lately, Wolfe patted the dashboard every time it started up. He looked down at his

watch. “One in the morning; God, I’ve got two more hours to go.”

Up ahead, he noticed a trail of breaking red lights; the traffic backing up in a hurry. “What now?” He turned on the radio and shifted the knob, searching for a traffic update. A tractor trailer overturned, snarling up the four-lane highway for what could be hours.

“What a suck,” he said, slapping the dashboard. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it Volvie!”

He skirted off the next exit, determined to at least keep moving like a shark. Wolfe despised traffic jams, becoming claustrophobic in a heartbeat.

The rural road ran parallel to the railroad tracks, a sure sign of podunkness he thought. Wolfe popped open another Coke, trying to stay awake. He rolled down the window; the chilled wind giving him an instant wake up call. The desolate stretch of road meandered before hitting a straight line for miles. The rural darkness felt uneasy. Maybe he should have stuck to the highway.

He began counting houses. Mile after mile there were maybe three or four, set back too far to matter. Just as he turned on the radio, something darted across the two lane road. A second later, the front passenger tire blew out. The car swerved violently. Wolfe applied the brakes lightly before spiraling off the road.

“Dammit,” he said before unbuckling the seatbelt. The putrid stench of burnt rubber flowed into the car. Wolfe stepped out, pausing for a moment before noticing a low rolling fog creeping over the palmetto scrub on both sides of the road.

He reached back into the car for the rechargeable flashlight stored in the glove compartment. He grabbed it like a squirt gun and revved the handle over and over. “Ah, let there be light,” he mused.

He rounded the front of the car and bent down to inspect the damage. The tire was complete history, tattered -- a deep, curving gash encompassed a third of the tire. “What the hell?” Wolfe

used to help out at his dad's car repair shop, mostly during the summer to earn money. He'd seen plenty of flat tires, but never anything like this.

A resonating hiss seeped over from the embankment, the shape hidden by tall grass. Wolfe peered over, revving the flashlight again and again. The three minute charge wasn't cutting it. He rushed over and opened the tailgate, scrambling to uncover the third row seat. He pulled out the tire, smooth as dolphin skin and prepared the jack.

The hiss was louder this time. Whatever it was, it was moving closer. One by one he removed the lug nuts. The last one wouldn't budge. "Son of a bitch!" Chris placed his foot on the lug wrench and stepped on it, finally turning the rusted bolt. He mounted the spare, tightening each bolt with his fingers first before finishing up.

The sound came closer. He revved the bright yellow flashlight again. A whip of a tail flashed near the driver's side of the car, snapping off the side view mirror. He rolled the flat tire towards the front of the car, hoping to distract whatever was beginning to scare the hell out of him. The thing screeched, a greenish limb with claws attacked the tire, shredding it to pieces.

He grasped the lug nut wrench in his right hand and ran for the back of the wagon. He jumped in and slammed the tailgate. The car started tipping back and forth. He dove for the front of the car and laid on the horn. The thing suddenly jumped up on the front hood, digging its claws into the metal. The thing lunged at the windshield, mouth open and snapping wildly, leaving a mass of saliva.

"Help me!" Wolfe screamed repeatedly as he bounced around like a pinball. The creature snapped off the wiper blades with its jaws then pounced on the hood, making a dent. Chris knew a little something about Florida wildlife, but this was something new. It resembled an oversized komodo dragon dressed in crocodile skin. Whatever it was, it was tearing his car apart.

Wolfe frantically searched for his keys, but couldn't find them. The creature impaled the aftermarket plastic sunroof and pried it off like a can of tuna. The creature stuck its head inside, its jaws thrashing. Wolfe eyed a can of WD-40 that rolled from under the front passenger seat. He grabbed it, flicking the narrow red stem and fired away into its mouth. The creature gagged, retreating momentarily.

The terrified man stuck his head out of the sunroof and screamed until his lungs and throat burned. He heard a gunshot and ducked back inside the car. "Oh crap . . . now what!"

More gunshots rang out from the woods. Chris revered the flashlight again but couldn't see anything. Suddenly, the creature bulldozed into the passenger side door, cracking the glass. Wolfe yelled out again – more shots echoed from the woods. The creature leaped onto the roof of the car, this time letting out a piercing roar.

The creature stuck its tapered dark olive green plated face through the open sunroof. The dirty ivory teeth were all lined up neatly and eager to rip the unemployed man to pieces. He gave the creature a double dose of lug wrench and WD-40, unleashing the life-saving lubricant straight into its eyes.

Wolf's back seared with pain, pressing uncomfortably against the hard steering wheel, the horn wailing nonstop. He screamed out again and again until he could utter no more. The creature dove in again through the open sunroof, the jaws snapping violently. More shots rang out, sounding more powerful . . . and closer than before.

The creature slumped over, the head dangling inside the car. Drool and blood ran down the lifeless mouth, falling into Wolf's lap. He made an undignified roll into the bent passenger side door and spilled out onto the road. He took in deep breaths, trying to gather what just happened before nearly passing out.

"Are you okay, sir?" said a voice, authoritative but reassuring.

Wolfe slowly opened his eyes, a bright light forcing him to squint. "Who are you – what are you?" he asked in a hoarse voice. A group of five men stood over the mid-framed man. One of them helped him up.

"We're from . . ." The man with the firm voice cut him off.

Wolfe rubbed his eyes and creaked his back. "Are you guys military? CIA?"

"No. And you?"

"Uh, unemployed computer programmer returning home from an interview."

"I didn't know you guys interviewed at night," said one of the men.

"We're a unique breed," answered Wolfe, aching all over. "Actually, the interview was in Atlanta today. I'm just returning home – cross your fingers 'cause I really need it. Oh, by the way, what the hell was that . . . thing?"

"New species discovered in the Everglades," replied another man, his black baseball cap worn backwards. "You have no idea what's brewing out here."

"There aren't more of them . . . are there?" He glanced back as four of the men removed the carcass from his chewed up wagon.

"What you got is a bunch of nippleheads disposing their exotic pets every day in the Glades. It's becoming a freak show of nature out there." Wolfe nodded, still stunned. "You heard of frankenfish, haven't ya? Well, it's really a cross between a piranha and large mouth bass."

"So what the hell is this? asked Wolfe, as he pointed at the deceased creature. "Frankengator?"

One of the men giggled. "Frankengator; I like that."

"Zip it dill weed," barked the man in charge.

"I mean, look at my car; it's totaled. What am I gonna do?"

"Tell you what. We could use a new programmer at our facility. We'll start you out at 75K. Hell, we'll even throw in a company Jeep." Wolfe's eyes lit up. Seventy-five grand would come in handy right about now.

“Anything else I need to know?” asked Wolfe.

“Well, you’ll be working with former military people, dedicated just like yourself,” said the man in charge. “You’ll run the computers, provide statistics every month, learn to handle a firearm -- just in case, and if I’m not mistaken, our health plan is pretty darn good.”

“Sounds great . . . I’m sorry, stammered Wolfe, “in case of what?”



### Common Cents Retail

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

One of the things Paul loved about his work was helping the customers enjoy their shopping experience to the best of his ability. Of all the things he wanted to do with his life, being an assistant m

anager was never in his wildest thinking. Still, he wasn’t one to shirk responsibility and worked his hardest to succeed at even the worst of jobs.

Maybe it was his work ethic that caught the attention of the store manager or, as he assumed, his boss simply wanted to mess with his head. It was something he deserved. Not only did Paul get along with everyone, but he never passed on an opportunity to torment those he considered his friends. It was his way of showing appreciation to them for putting up with his crap.

Whatever the reason, his patience and determination was often tested by

the occasional customer from hell. The second he heard his name called by the cashier, he knew it wasn’t going to be a positive experience.

Pushing himself to his feet from his position by a lower shelf, Paul turned and made his way towards the front of the store. Through the years working at Common Cents, he developed a defensive strategy for when he was needed by expecting the worst scenario. In the three hours he was on duty, he was called for eight voids, two returns, and one customer complaint for having to wait in line, despite the fact she was second in line and waited for a total of two minutes.

The need to spread her discord was more important than remaining respectful. Paul surprised himself by remaining calm while she screamed at him and threatened to call corporate to report his lack of help. The fact he handed her corporate’s number didn’t seem to register to her that he was attempting to aid her. The scene brought a shake of his head and laugh out of him after she left.

He was grateful he’d had twenty minutes of peace so he could try to get one of his daily tasks done. Paul knew his boss would blame him after going on about how nothing got done when he wasn’t there. Knowing there was little he could do either way, Paul accepted it as his lot as an assistant manager. What else could he do? Call out his fellow managers for sitting in the back and joking around during their shift? Nope, that wasn’t his style.

When he reached the register the register, the cashier, Brenda, nodded to a gentleman standing next to the manager’s register with a plaid jacket and dirty baseball cap covering his short hair. “Return.”

Out of all the store’s employees, Paul had the reputation as being the most helpful and polite. It was for that reason most chose to return any items they wished when he was working. Oh lovely, he thought as he walked around the edge of the counter and into the small alcove the cashier’s shared. His smile was warm and inviting as he

approached his register and pulled his keys out. “Good morning, sir. How can I help you?”

The man didn’t return the smile, causing his dark complexion to remain unreadable. He pushed a plastic bag across the counter towards Paul. “I got this a couple of hours ago to eat. It’s no good, it smells fishy.”

Paul remembered him coming in that morning and buying the can. In fact, he rang up his purchase. Curious, he picked up the bag and pulled out an empty can of mackerel. He couldn’t help staring at the can for a moment in an effort to figure out what about canned fish wouldn’t smell fishy.

“I’m sorry?” it was all Paul could think to ask.

The man motioned to the can with a finger. “It’s no good. I put it in a pot with a can of corn, but couldn’t eat it. Go on, smell it.”

Paul did as he was instructed and he smelled exactly what he expected, fish. Non-rotten, edible fish. He was sure what the man was attempting to do as he’d dealt with similar efforts from customers that wanted their money back after using the item. The man was a regular customer who hadn’t tried anything like that before, so Paul gave him the benefit of the doubt.

“I’m sorry about that, sir. You can take another can, if you like.”

The man shook his head, “No, I don’t want another can. That stuff’s no good.”

Paul let out a low breath as he weighed what the man told him. “Did you try any of it?”

“No, man. It smells fishy, so I threw it out.”

Seeing where things were going, Paul nodded. “Okay, I’ll remove them from the shelf and let the store manager know. Would you like a refund?”

The man nodded so Paul took his receipt and started to process the return when the man interrupted him.

“What about my corn?”

“Did you buy it here?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have a can or receipt?”

“No, I threw it out. It was ruined.”  
 Paul chewed on the inside of his lip. “So, you didn’t save the can?”  
 The man shook his head, “No.”  
 “I’m sorry, sir. I can only give you a refund for the mackerel without a receipt or can for the corn.”

The man rested his hands on the counter. “I want my money back.”  
 “I understand that, sir. I’m going to give you the money for this, but I can’t give you anything for the corn.”

He motioned towards the empty can of mackerel. “What about my corn? That ruined it.”

Paul continued to try to explain to the customer why he could only do a refund on the mackerel, but the man continued complaining about his corn being ruined and began shouting.

“Sir, please calm down. Do you want your money back?”

“What about my corn?”

“Do you want your money back for this?” Paul held up the can, “Yes or no, sir.”

“I want my corn.”

With his patience running low after twenty minutes of going back and forth, Paul set the can on the counter and locked his eyes with the man’s. “Sir, this is supposed to smell fishy as it is fish. Now, either you already ate it and are trying to run a scam or you threw out good food and want me to pay for more of it. Now, do you want your money back for this? Or do you want me to call the police and you can explain it to them?”

The man was about to argue, but he closed his mouth. “Fine.”

With a nod, Paul finished entering the information from the receipt and handed him his dollar and change. “Thank you, sir. Hope you have a great day.”

When the man left the store, Paul let out a breath and looked towards the ceiling wondering who he had wronged in a previous life. He was about to check if anyone else needed his help before returning to stocking the shelves when a woman in line caught his attention.

“Let me give you my name and number in case he makes hassle for you. I don’t want to see you get in trouble so he can save a couple dollars.” She pulled a pen and scrap of paper from her purse.

Her husband motioned towards Paul, “Me too. I would’ve tossed him out ten minutes ago.”

A short laugh escaped Paul as they helped restore his faith in humanity. “Thank you, I’d appreciate that.”

### **Road Work** By Edward White/CP Bialois

Jordan “JJ” Jones kneeled next to his car and stared at the flat tire. The last thing he wanted after working the graveyard shift was to deal with that. Not the best way to end the day, he thought to himself.

Letting out a sigh and slamming his hand against the tire, he pushed himself to his feet and made his way to the trunk. With a flick of his hand, JJ turned the key and opened the trunk. The sight of the dry-rotted doughnut brought a halfhearted sigh from him. Shaking his head, he pulled the tire from the trunk and rolled it to the front of the car.

Once there, he started to turn the locking end of the tire iron. To his surprise, the bolt turned without any of the usual resistance. It struck him odd at first, but JJ shook off the idea and moved on to the second and third bolt. By the time he started on the last one, he hadn’t noticed a car pull in behind him then pull away until a familiar voice called out.

“Hey, buddy. Need a hand?”

JJ jumped at hearing the voice and shook his head. How’d he get here, he wondered. Having his boss show up when he had a flat tire was another thing he hadn’t expected. “Not anymore, unless you want to supervise me some more.”

George Paul laughed while shaking his head, but stopped a couple of feet

away from JJ. “Come on, man. I’m not that bad.”

It was JJ’s turn to laugh, but it came out as a half grunt, half snorting sound. “You just wrote me up an hour ago. One more and I lose my job.”

“Look, we’re off the clock. Let me give you a hand.”

JJ thought about it for a minute then shook his head. “No thanks. I’m almost done anyway.”

“Suit yourself.” George turned and walked towards the back of JJ’s car without saying another word.

JJ shook his head and started to put the bolts back on the doughnut. It dawned on him that he hadn’t seen a car and wondered where George went. He was about to call to him when someone grabbed the back of his head and slammed him into the side of his car face first. The impact shattered his nose with a sickening crunch.

Feeling his nose crack and the blood running down his face, JJ tried to say something but all that came out was a strangled cry.

“Shut up!” George hissed into his ear, “Or you won’t be walking away from this.”

It took several seconds for the idea of George attacking him to register, but when it did JJ tried to talk to him after spitting out a mouthful of blood. “What are you doing? I’m sorry, alright? I’m sorry. If you want to help that badly then go ahead.”

George chuckled and slammed a knee into the middle of JJ’s back, pinning him to the car. “You didn’t think I knew it was you, did you? Thought you had gotten away scot-free.” As he talked, George slapped a pair of handcuffs on JJ’s right wrist and pulled it back before grabbing his left.

Having been preoccupied with being attacked, JJ failed to realize what was happening until George pulled his left arm behind him and closed the handcuffs on it as well. In a flurry of movement he tried to struggle and break free, but the pressure from George’s knee increased until he thought he heard s bone crack.

“That’s right, you’d better calm down before you hurt yourself.” With the handcuffs locked, George stepped back, lifting JJ up by his wrists while pulling a brand new handkerchief from his pocket with his free hand.

The sudden jolt of pain caused JJ to let out a gurgling cry before the handkerchief was shoved into his mouth from behind. A fit of fear surged through him and JJ tried to run, but George’s grip on the small handcuff chain was too strong. With a quick tug, he pulled JJ back hard enough to drop the bound man onto the ground.

“See, I tried to be civil, but you had to be the tough guy. Is that how it was with Jane? Hmm? Don’t you remember her?”

JJ looked at him in complete confusion and shook his head. Any vocal response he tried came out as little more than a long muffled groan and grunt. The look he saw in George’s eyes was enough to scare him into silence.

George took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself and looked around them. With it being so early in the morning no one was out on the back road yet. “It’s a shame you didn’t know her name.”

With a sudden surge of strength, he grabbed JJ by the arm and lifted him to his feet before dragging him towards the trunk. Once there, JJ tried to struggle but George punched him by his left kidney. The sudden blow was enough to force JJ to twist until he was off balance, giving George the perfect position to shove him into the open trunk.

After punching JJ in the groin, George had little difficulty in putting the man’s legs into the trunk then looked around to make sure no one was watching. Certain they were alone, George pulled an old, beaten up picture of a young woman and showed it to JJ.

When JJ saw the picture, his eyes widened and he froze. For the first time since he met George, JJ saw the resemblance between him and the girl.

George smiled at seeing JJ’s recognition. “Good, you do remember

her. She was fifteen when I took her from us. Now it’s my turn to be the brother I wasn’t then.” George reached into JJ’s pocket and pulled out his keys before closing the trunk. Sliding into the driver’s seat, he started the car and pulled onto the road.



### The Dinner that Wasn’t There By Joanne Williams

Jorge and Maxine were on their honeymoon on a beautiful tropical island near Bermuda. Standing outside of their resort, they looked at the pictures in an island brochure.

“At last, Jorge, we are here, together on this beautiful island. I love it, don’t you?” Maxine asked.

“Yes, I like it too, want to go check out the scenery?” said Jorge.

Maxine smiles and nodded yes. They decided to start the morning walk down a street near the beach. There were tiki huts on the left and the beach on the right. They both wore blue green shorts and shirts to match. Jorge had on a straw hat and a camera around his neck. Maxine slipped on lightly tinted sunglasses.

As they walked down the street, Jorge was snapping photos at almost everything: the birds in the sky, the drummers and dancers, the colorful banners. He asks people to take pictures of him and his wife in front of the landmarks that they adore.

“Jorge, I need to run to the restroom for a minute, I’ll be right back.” said Maxine.

“OK Hun, I will be here,” he said. Jorge spotted a bird he wanted to get a picture of. As he put his camera into focus, he is nearly knocked off of his

feet by a man who bumped into him on this right side. Jorge quickly catches his balance and yells, “What the heck are you doing man?”

“I am so sorry, I didn’t see you there,” the man said as he waved his hands.

“You need to be more careful and watch where you are going! If my camera would’ve gotten messed up, you would be paying a lot of money to fix it”, Jorge said.

Jorge noticed that the man was around five and a half feet tall; wearing a long sleeved light brown shirt and pants, which he thought was strange for a hot day.

In an accent, the man said, “Listen, for my apology I would like to give you this flyer to come and eat a free meal at my hotel restaurant. It’s located at the end of this street in the corner on the left.”

“Apology accepted,” Jorge said as he took the flyer. As he read it, he notices that there was no name of the restaurant on the flyer. Jorge turns around again and the man in brown was gone.

Maxine finally exits out of the bathroom and catches up with her husband. “Did I miss anything?” she asks.

“Yeah, I almost drop kicked this man for nearly knocking my camera down.” Jorge said.

“Knocking the camera? What about you? Are you ok?” Maxine asks.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Later on that day Maxine said, “I’m getting hungry; do you know where we can eat that’s decent?”

Jorge answers, “Well, the guy that I told you about gave me this flyer to get free dinner at his hotel restaurant.”

“What’s the name?” asks Maxine.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask the guy before he left; he did say that it was down the street in the corner on the left,” Jorge said, pointing in that direction.

The couple walks down the street, looking for the hotel. When they turn the corner they see a three story hotel building painted yellow and blue. It had

tall windows on the outside and double doors for the entrance. Jorge opened the door and the couple walks inside. They were greeted by a tall man in the same light brown outfit as the man who bumped into Jorge earlier that day. The restaurant was empty. The couple sat next to the window and given menus. Maxine orders the lobster with butter while her husband dined on crab. The dinner meal was the best they'd ever had.

Satisfied, the couple left a healthy tip and headed out the door. Before they can reach the exit, they hear someone call out, "hello". The couple turned around and Jorge noticed that it was the man from earlier that day still dressed in light brown.

The man asks "How did you enjoy your visit?"

"It was great. I wanted to ask you, what is the name of this Hotel?" Jorge asks.

The man looks at the couple, smiles and slowly says, "The Kalodge."

Jorge looks at him and added, "Thank you sir, but you are one weird dude."

The man smiled as the couple exited the hotel.

"Hey Maxine", said Jorge, "Why don't we get someone to take a picture of us in front of the restaurant?"

"Sounds good," Maxine replied.

The couple saw the person who greeted them at the door and asks if he would take their picture. They poses arm in arm in front of the hotel and the greeter snapped a picture.

The next afternoon, Jorge and Maxine set out for their walk again. Jorge took pictures of everything as they walked. "I'm feeling a little hungry. Are you?" Jorge asked.

"Yes, why don't we go back to the Kalodge?" said Maxine.

They headed in the direction of the hotel. As they turned down the same corner on the left, they looked puzzled. There was no hotel, only an empty lot.

"Are we on the right street?" asked Jorge. The couple spotted a passerby and asked him where the hotel was.

The passerby gave them an odd smile, "What hotel?"

"The Kalodge," said Jorge.

"Sir, that hotel burned down years ago, and all the staff died in that fire."

"Impossible! We ate there last night. Look, here is the picture!" said Jorge.

Jorge and Maxine both sighed in disbelief as they saw themselves in the picture, but no hotel building, only an empty lot.



**Derek James Reed: Spy  
By Yeshua Espailat**

For reasons unknown to the bustling bright neon city of Shanghai it was an unusually cold and rainy evening. For miles around all that could be seen in the streets were the tops of umbrellas flowing back and forth with the occasional pedestrian rushing through the crowd because he or she wasn't prepared for the weather. The forecasts all week had called for clear skies during the day and only slightly chilly nights, but the reports were consistently inaccurate on a daily basis. No one seemed to worry or think too much of it, though. It wasn't as if a bit of rain was something to be concerned with. The citizens went on with their lives as one would expect albeit with a slight snuffle and the need for a towel to dry off. For one man, however, the mildly annoying weather was just the kind of advantage needed for his job.

Derek James Reed, a calm collected man of class and intellect, had his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday two days ago, but he decided not to celebrate the occasion with friends or family; he was working. His chosen career field was incredibly dangerous and every day presented a new threat that could kill

him at any moment. But when duty called he was the first to answer. The time to celebrate would have to come later because tonight was finally the night he was waiting for. Tonight he was going to shut down the biggest black arms dealer and supplier to multiple terrorist organizations, a man known only as the Patriot. According to the intelligence Reed gathered the Patriot was an American man from a wealthy family who legally acquired high powered U.S. military weapons and then sold them to anyone willing to pay high enough from other countries regardless of background. He was wanted back in the states for tax evasion, but he funded the right politicians every election year so he was free to come and go as he pleased.

MI6 almost immediately noticed monthly shipments of car parts arriving from the California by the telltale signs of rapidly increased gun violence in key areas. Naturally, they sent their best agent in to investigate rather as opposed to wasting time by reporting it to U.S. authorities. Reed spent weeks making connections posing as a drug dealer and skulking around America's more dangerous neighborhoods. It only took him a day to find the leader of a local street gang who was recruited into the Patriot's thug ranks and in charge of an entire street block's distribution. The young man talked a big game and touted heavy weaponry, but a street thug was *nothing* compared to a secret agent. Reed quickly gained his trust after "saving" his life from a very well planned attack on his rundown shack of an apartment. The attackers were dressed in street clothes disguised as a rival gang, but they were all wearing bullet-proof vests and there wasn't a single fatality on their side. It was comically easy.

After he managed to gain the gang leader's trust he was introduced to the men responsible for securing the overseas shipments. They had a rather clever system going and it turned out that half of the car parts being exported were fake and contained pieces of guns

inside. The car and gun parts were then assembled inside garages across the globe and private buyers would come in to inspect and purchase the expensive cars which were stuffed with guns. Using the cars as mules gave the entire operation a perfect enough cover since nobody suspected an enthusiast of any wrongdoing. Once the shipments arrived the buyers would come in allegedly seeking an Aston Martin, leave only mere minutes later, and then the brand new car filled with extremely powerful illegal weapons would be delivered to their doorsteps or wherever else they desired within 48 hours. The Patriot did well to keep himself hidden and disconnected, but he was a sucker for expensive cars and a third of his business was devoted to the legitimate sales of collectable cars.

At Reed's request MI6 put in an order for a cherry red 1969 Corvette and the Patriot, being the red-blooded American that he was, couldn't resist coming in to see the classic vehicle for himself. The secret agent didn't get to meet the kingpin face-to-face but he was told by the man who showed him the car that his boss had come in to see it when it first arrived that morning. That was all the info Reed needed and when the garage closed that night he secretly broke in, stole the security footage, and saw the face of the man at the center of this crime ring. The previous two nights were spent tracking his movements and infiltrating his tight security systems. Thanks to Reed's efforts and diligent work MI6 was in the perfect position to detain the Patriot, but it would have to be done quietly to avoid creating an international incident because everybody seemed to have taken issue with China and the U.S. lately.

The Patriot may have been foolish enough to indulge his enthusiasm for rare automobiles, but he wasn't a stupid man. Everywhere he went he always had armed guards in suits but his private militia kept him safe 24 hours a day at his estate and they were armed to the teeth. MI6 wanted the

mission to be carried out as covertly as possible, so Reed would have to capture the man alone with only an extraction team in civilian clothing on standby. With so many high powered weapons everywhere the last thing they wanted was an enormous fire fight breaking out and attracting unwanted attention. All he needed was the perfect day; a rainy one just like today.

He waited inside a small corner café close to a loan office where the Patriot's bookkeepers and money launderers worked. Every week he would drop in to make sure his numbers added up correctly and to check in on the people handling his income. He didn't trust anyone with his money and probably would've taken care of the books and the cash himself if he weren't so busy running everything else. The Patriot had no choice but to employ people for such tasks, but he would never allow someone the opportunity to steal even a single penny from him. Someone tried once and that man's hands were preserved in a jar and put on display as a warning for anyone else who thought they could try the same thing and get away with it.

The black SUV parked across the street at seven in the evening like clockwork and Reed calmly took a sip of his coffee while watching from the safety of the café. One of the suited guards held out an umbrella to shield the Patriot as he exited the vehicle and he followed the crime boss inside holding it over him the entire time. Two guards went in with him while a third waited outside in the car with the engine running. When the door to the office closed Reed set down a tip for the waitress who served him and left the confines of the café.

With the collar of his dark blue coat upturned and his hands in his pockets he dove into the center of a small group of civilians crossing the street in the rain. The SUV was facing away and the guard inside was only paying attention to what was directly in front of him. The guard was still unaware of his presence even when he was behind the vehicle and visible if the man cared to look at

his rearview mirror. Reed got down on one knee pretending to retie his shoe, unsheathed the combat knife strapped to his other leg, and punctured the left rear tire.

When the tire was half deflated Reed knocked on the driver's window and pointed at the damaged wheel, "Oi, mate, you've got a flat."

The guard eyed him for a moment, being careful to examine Reed's dark features memorizing them as a precaution. He then opened the door to step out of the car and inspect the damage for himself, but Reed moved so quickly he didn't give the man any time to react to his sudden attack. He held the door open with one hand and used the other to pull out the knife he had just used and plunged the blade into the guard's exposed upper abdomen. When his body went limp Reed shoved the body over into the passenger seat, climbed in and drove the car around the block to park it in a small indoor garage up the street. All he had to do now was take out the remaining two guards and he already had the perfect distraction prepared for his next move.

On foot Reed quickly returned to the loan office and made his way to the alley behind it without anyone noticing him. He removed his long black coat revealing a Kevlar vest underneath and a handgun strapped to his torso along with a couple of other devices safely secured inside his pockets. One of those devices was a tiny remote control detonator for an explosive he planted earlier. He activated the detonator and set it off, but there wasn't a visible or audible explosion anywhere to be witnessed. Instead, when he flipped the switch the power was cut off in a 5 mile radius leaving the area darkened and confused. The only lights illuminating the street were from the cars which were now gridlocked thanks to the traffic lights no longer working and the intersection becoming flooded with opportunistic drivers.

He tossed the detonator into a nearby refuse bin and dialed a number on his mobile, "I'm ready to move in."

“Good work as always, Reed,” said a female voice on the other end. “Once the Patriot has been detained an armed escort will arrive to bring him in. Be safe and good luck.”

“Luck is for the superstitious,” he replied. “Send the escort now and tell them to use the alleyway. I’ll have the target in my custody by the time they get here.”

“Don’t get cocky,” she warned. “You know how violently Americans react especially when they have guns.”

“Yes, I do know; predictable and thick. I’ll call back when the job is done,” he hung up the phone, removed his sidearm from its holster and attached a silencer to it ready to begin the extraction mission.

A rear emergency exit creaked open catching Reed by surprise and he rushed over to hide behind it at the last second. The umbrella toting guard came out and sauntered over to a circuit breaker to investigate not realizing how widespread the power outage was yet. The stealthy secret agent silently stalked his target like a predator and shot the man once in the back of the head, his lifeless body collapsing to the floor crushing the umbrella he carried with him. Only one guard remained now and the Patriot was that much closer to being put out of business permanently.

Reed entered through the emergency escape silently making his way through the enclosed darkened room with his gun ahead of him. Because of the lack of light it was difficult to tell what the room was meant for, but there were all kinds of strange silhouettes everywhere he looked. There were shelves lined with musty old books, small edifices of unknown creatures, knives which looked like they came from ancient cults that practiced ritual sacrifices, and the jars of hands he expected along with more jars filled with various other organs. This room didn’t look like it belonged in a fake loan office but rather like it was taken from the dungeon of a horror film where torture and murder were commonplace.

*Just what the hell is all of this for?*

He made his way out of the unnerving room and found the Patriot and his last remaining guard facing out the front window of the office with their backs to him. Reed wanted to move in and take out the guard, but something in his mind held him back. There weren’t any workers nearby like he expected there to be and everything he saw in the previous room indicated that the Patriot was up to something more than selling illegal guns on the black market. He pulled back and found a safe corner to hide in and listen to conversation being held between the target and his bodyguard.

“I think they’re up to something big,” said the Patriot. “They’ve ordered more shipments than any mob boss or terrorist organization I’ve dealt with.”

“According to the intel from our scouts they’ve been secretly recruiting mercenaries, soldiers, veterans, and even criminals, but we don’t know why,” said the guard, who was apparently more than just a simple bodyguard and as American as the Patriot. “I’m not sure if snoopin’ around their back is the best thing to do. They’ve given you more than money, too. Maybe the best thing to do is back off and mind our own business.”

“I’m sorry, are *you* in charge now?” snapped the Patriot.

“No, sir.”

“That’s right, *I’m* the head of this operation and as such it’s in my best interest to find out what they’re doing. They aren’t a competitor; they’re a multi-billion dollar corporation with secret investments all over the world. I know a front when I see one and Future Sight is a front on a global scale. I wanna know what they’re planning and I want a piece of the action.”

Reed had heard enough and time was running out. The escorts would arrive in minutes to take the Patriot away so he had to quickly take out the final guard before he could arrest his target. The spy emerged from the shadows with his gun aimed at the man he was supposed to detain and he purposely cleared his throat loudly to

attract their attention. The two turned about in surprise, but maintained their positions once they saw the intruder had a gun aiming in their direction.

“Mr. Patriot,” began secret agent Derek James Reed, “if I were you I’d stand perfectly still.”

The Patriot grinned smugly upon recognizing Reed’s face as one of his buyers. “Ah, the cherry red Corvette. How’s the car?”

“You knew?”

“The entire time, of course,” he replied. “Do you really think I wouldn’t notice such a coincidental purchase? The first car I ever owned was a ’69 Corvette just like that one. Same color, too, but the engine in mine was custom built. It was a Christmas gift from my father when I was 16. That was a nice piece of bait. Too bad it was so obvious.”

“I should’ve figured you were over privileged as a child.”

“Being part of the upper class has a lot of perks.”

The Patriot’s guard saw an opening and very slowly began reaching for a weapon on his side, but Reed noticed the subtle movement and shot the man right between the eyes before returning his focus to the main target.

The Patriot chuckled and said, “You’re a stone cold killer! I like that in a man. So who are you working for?”

“Not a competitor,” divulged the agent.

“And not a cop either judging from the way you took out all three of my men. If money is what speaks to you I’ve got a *lot* of it.”

Reed remained silent and kept his weapon locked on the suspect.

“Wait,” said the Patriot, “I think I know now. You Brits and your loyalty, I *love* you guys. People back home are bought so easily I sometimes forget that money isn’t a priority for everyone. So if you’re not a cop and you’re not an assassin that must mean you’re with some kind of government agency.”

“MI6.”

“Oooh! For Queen and country!” he loudly mocked in a poor English accent.

“On your knees, *Patriot*.”

“Or what, you’ll shoot me? Don’t you wanna find out about a world even *more* secretive and dangerous than your 007 lifestyle?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“There are things in this world that people just can’t understand; scary things, *big* things. Somebody out there is planning something much bigger than anything MI6 has ever handled and I’m close to finding out what it is.”

“Talk, *now*,” Reed strongly demanded.

“Ever heard of Future Sight Industries?”

“Only briefly in passing conversation, why? What are they doing?”

“Not sure, yet, but if MI6 makes me the right kind of offer I can find out.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” began Reed. “You can either tell me what you know right now or I’ll kill you.”

“Aren’t you supposed to *arrest* me?”

He pulled back the hammer of his gun and replied, “I’m *not* a cop.”

A devilish grin spread on the Patriot’s face, “Okay, then. I’ll share some info with you if that’s what you want. Future Sight develops and manufactures everything from computers to vaccinations to high tech weapons for the U.S. military. Lately, they’ve been making deals with people in the black market such as myself and giving certain individuals amazing gifts in return for their services.”

“What kinds of gifts?”

“Power.”

“How much more power can a billionaire want?”

“Not that kind of power, agent.”

“Keep talking.”

The Patriot’s smug demeanor remained as he continued, “They gave us special abilities that humans are barely capable of and amplified them by ten. We can do things that only the monsters from our childhood nightmares could do.”

“You’d better start making sense before I lose my patience.”

“I’ll show you what I mean then.”

The guard that Reed dispatched only moments ago started twitching uncontrollably and slowly rose back onto his feet with the fresh bullet wound still bleeding from his forehead. The secret agent’s eyes went wide and he instinctively fired three more rounds into the man; two in the chest and the third in his head again. The shots were impossibly ineffective and the dead man, with his fists tightly clenched at his sides, started approaching him to attack with milky white eyes and a dead gaze permanently frozen on his face. The sound of a door bursting open from behind diverted his attention and he quickly turned his head hoping it was the escorts he called for while slowly backing away from the corpse coming for him. Unfortunately, the only person walking inside from the rear entrance was the second guard he had killed in the alley.

“Necromancy,” informed the Patriot. “My clients gave me the ultimate power; telepathic control of the dead.”

The first dead body lunged for Reed with its hands reaching out for his neck. The agent fired a shot into the dead man’s kneecap knocking the cadaver off balance before delivering a kick to the chest that knocked it to the ground. The other telepathically controlled corpse wrapped its arms around Reed to restrain him and the two struggled for dominance as Reed fought to free himself. The first body was now standing up again making the agent realize that no wound could stop them unless their limbs were removed rendering them harmless, but he wasn’t in a position to start cutting away at human arms and legs. He had to think fast or they’d kill him and the Patriot would get away. There was only one option left and he was going to have to answer for it later.

Reed threw his weight back toppling himself and the carcass behind him over which forced it to let him go for a brief moment giving him all the time he needed to end this ordeal. In a fraction of a second the agent took aim and fired one fatal round into the Patriot’s head. The suspect fell over and died

like any other normal man followed by the reanimated bodies he was somehow able to manipulate. Before he could catch his breath and get back up on his feet the extraction team arrived bursting in through the front door ready to haul off their prisoners, but all they found was Reed surrounded by dead bodies with fatal gunshot wounds.

The secret agent retrieved his phone and dialed HQ as he said he would. “I couldn’t arrest the Patriot,” he reported, “I had to kill him.”

“*What on earth were you thinking, Reed?! We needed him alive so we could find his global buyers!*”

He knew discussing what really happened over the phone wouldn’t be helpful in any way, so for the time being he would have to be purposely vague until he could show something to support the impossible report he would inevitably have to file, “The situation became extremely volatile, I had no other choice but to eliminate the target. I’m going to *personally* deliver my report this time.”

The female agent on the other end remained silent for a moment, “*You’ve always hated speaking with them directly.*”

“Hopefully that tells you something about what happened and what I’ve learned.” There was a brief pause in his train of thought as he stared behind him into the back rooms, “This has gotten more complicated than we could’ve realized and we may have bigger things to worry about.”

“*In that case,*” she began, “*I’ll buy you as much time as I can. Hurry back.*”

“Thank you, Angela,” he said before hanging up the phone. He ordered the escorts to recover the bodies and secure the immediate area giving him the privacy and time he needed to find every little shred of evidence to back up the impossible truths he would have to claim.

The MI6 agent then made a mad dash to the back room where the more disturbing items in the building were kept. The book shelf was obviously his best bet and he rummaged through each individual shelf with a small

flashlight being careful to read the titles of the books and skim as many pages as time allotted. He couldn't leave a single stone unturned but didn't have enough time to explore the minute details of this secret other world that supposedly existed alongside the reality he had come to know. Some of the books were stolen journals, some were reference books of unusual creatures complete with pencil sketched renderings, some had locks on them, and some were in foreign languages. It wasn't difficult to realize just how insignificant the Patriot and his black market dealings really were if the things in these books were real.

A lowly deep voice then caught Reed by surprise and a dark figure arose from a pitch black corner of them room, "They won't believe anything you show them."

The usually collected agent was startled by the man's sudden presence, unnerved by the fact that he had no idea how long the man had been there with him like a shadow, but kept his gun pointed and his finger on the trigger, "Who the hell are you?"

"Someone who sees things like necromancy on a nightly basis," responded the figure in the dark, unfazed by the firearm being aimed at him.

"Do you work for the Patriot?"

"No, I work alone, but that doesn't matter at this point. Take this," and he extended his arm revealing the very account book Reed required along with other various notes in a neat file. "You'll find your report along with every name and location of anyone directly connected to the Patriot and his business."

Reed accepted the stack finding a hidden manila envelope underneath everything else and felt it more worthy of attention since it was unmentioned, "And what's at the bottom?"

"Your next assignment," he darkly replied. "It started long before you. You won't understand now, but eventually you will."

The agent opened the envelope and pulled out what looked like an

employee handbook from none other than Future Sight Industries. Inside the book he found what appeared to be a brand new passport and a dossier that highlighted and detailed his own security and tactical training, "Am I to believe you want me to work for them?"

When Reed looked back up the man in the shadow had somehow vanished into thin air leaving no physical trace of his presence. Derek James Reed looked back down at the handbook he held and stared at the company's logo intently; a human eye with a clock face imposed over the iris. He then found, along with a copy of his report, a letter of his resignation to MI6 with his signature already on it. All he needed to do was date it and hand it in apparently. Whoever the man in the shadows was he assumed Reed would abandon his career in pursuit of whatever new truth he had yet to discover and came prepared, but also included exact instructions to fake his own death successfully just in case. The report written for him covered up the truth making it look like Reed was taken by surprise and forced to kill the Patriot in self-defense; an unlikely story, but considering the alternative he couldn't think of anything better himself.

Reed didn't want to trust the man who never gave his name or showed his face, yet his intuition told him to follow his instructions and seek out the people and places given to him. His exact next step then became abundantly clear when he found a torn scrap of paper with an address on it; an address in his home country no less. The answers to his questions were right in his backyard protected by a group of people whose name the man had written down; the Guardian's Council.

#### The Dinner By Yeshua Espaillat

Zachary Rodriguez, a young man with years of emotional baggage chained to his back, kept his hands buried deep into the pockets of his dark pea coat while his legs continued

warming themselves with each powerful stride he made through the neighborhood. The houses he had seen so far must have been at least fifty years old, if not more, and they were much smaller than he was used to back on Gateway Island. Here he was, though, in New York visiting family members who were so estranged they probably wouldn't have recognized him if they saw him in the streets.

He had already been living with his mother for a decade when he saw them last and now here he was, eight years after his own death, to finally visit his father's side of the family. The whole thing wasn't even his idea; it was his girlfriend who suggested he saw them before he started his own family since his mother's side knew he had died years ago. The man who cheated death with the help of his friends and faced impossible odds against enemies stronger than himself was now about to tackle his most difficult task to date: Christmas dinner with the family.

*I could really use a drink right now.*

He approached the front door as his worst fears started tumbling through his mind in a whirlwind of chaotic consequences and deep aggravation. If he had a dime for every time he uttered the words "I told you so" to someone about how things played out when he was involved he would have been obscenely rich by this point. He was going to have to lie through his teeth and try to avoid telling them vital information that could've brought them harm.

As he came up upon the house he began muttering a list of do-not's to himself as if he were reading them from a child's safety book, "*Don't* tell them you were born with supernatural powers, *don't* tell them you died saving the world, *don't* tell them you're always fighting a giant corporation because they made your cloned body with robotic cells and demon DNA and they want it back, *don't* mention I've been squatting in an abandoned mansion with my friends and a former MI6 agent and *don't* make an ass of yourself!"

He gathered up the last of his courage as he stepped up to the front door of the cozy-sized home and knocked three times, swallowing the last of his fears. Judging from the loud sound of happy casual chatter and cheery holiday music he figured they probably didn't hear him when no one came, so he rang the doorbell. While his rang went unanswered he contemplated using the Genesis technology running through his entire body to unlock the door and let himself in, but before he could break what was probably the most important rule he should've listed the door opened and there was his aunt. Needless to say, she was elated to finally see him after eighteen years of absence and no contact whatsoever.

"*Zach's here!*" she called out to everyone inside the house, hugging the long lost son of her eldest brother as tightly as she did when he was a kid.

And **NO** powers, he mentally added.

He walked into the well-lit home to see more relatives than he thought could fit inside and removed his coat, folding it over an arm. He remembered a couple of faces from his youth like his aunts and uncles and *their* kids, his cousins which whom he grew up with, and time looked to have been good to all of them. His cousins were teenagers when he saw them last and now they were fully grown adults with families and teenage kids of their own. The aunts and uncles he remembered growing up looked pretty much the same, though with more gray hair and a few lines. For so many years now he wanted to know what it was like to be part of a big family gathering and while Reed and Trista and the entire group became his new family these were people he knew since his original birth; his roots.

After everyone greeted him and introduced the newest members of the family, ranging from toddlers to young teenagers, he found a spot on the couch where his father's younger brother would always sit to watch his favorite various movie channels. Moving swiftly through the centralized

crowd in the house he made his way to the open living room and sat down breathing a sigh of relief. His house on Gateway may have been bigger, but it had *never* been so full before.

"Lots of new faces," he said to his uncle to stir up conversation.

"Well, you've been gone for, what, twenty years?"

"More like eighteen," he immediately corrected, even though it wasn't much of a difference.

"So you've been counting?" asked his uncle.

"Yeah, why?"

"Because people only count them as they go by when they're bad."

Zach nervously chuckled at the wise and quick assessment by his father's brother, but he had to avoid delving into a story about his ridiculously hard-to-explain life, "I've had rough patches here and there, but nothing too bad."

His uncle nodded and leaned back in his leather loveseat with the television's remote aimed forward, "Wanna pick a movie to put on?"

"I don't really watch a lot of movies," Zach replied, remembering this side of his family had the same preferences he had before his life took the insane turn it did. "They're too fake for me."

His uncle scrolled through the menu and asked, "Wanna watch *The Last Airbender*?"

He shook his head dismissively, "No, I'm good."

Then, one of the teenagers, his older cousin's oldest daughter, hopped onto the couch and pointed at a movie she liked, "Let's watch *Harry Potter*!"

"Never read the books," said Zach, not wanting to remind himself of a comparison once made between his current home and Hogwarts.

"James Bond?" asked his uncle.

He inwardly snorted and thought of Reed, his mentor, and replied, "I never really understood spy movies."

"Ooh, put on *Iron Man*!" exclaimed his second cousin with an eager smile on her face as her eyes locked on the movie's title.

*My suit's cooler*, Zach childishly thought and then vocally declined the film to the young girl's dismay.

His uncle lowered the remote control and asked, "Are there any movies you *do* like?"

His eyes darted to the left and right and a sudden feeling of dreadful awkwardness washed over him, but he decided to tell the truth and share something harmlessly true if not a little embarrassing for being a bit unusual, "Documentaries."

Both his uncle and second cousin nodded and together replied, "We like documentaries."

Zach's short aunt then walked to her place at the dinner table nearby and loudly announced to the rest of the family, "Dinner's ready!"

Everyone dropped what they were doing and began to gather around the long table to feast on the large selection of food. There was ham covered in glaze, buttery steaming hot mashed potatoes, lush salad for light eaters, pork chops and steak for heavy eaters, and all kinds of delicious looking finger foods to choose from. Zach couldn't remember the last time he was at a big family gathering like this with such a wide array of home cooked food and so much to learn about his long lost family.

For the first time since his death and resurrection through the unbelievable combination of super science and supernatural elements, Zach felt something he thought he'd never get to experience again; *normal*.

A sudden loud crash from the back door then brought him back to his usual life, catching everybody off guard, and his shoulders slumped as he sighed in defeat and annoyance, "Don't worry, I've got this."

A viciously snarling beast with thick furless skin and a long snout lined with rows of sharp teeth was standing on all fours like an animal on top of the door it burst in through. Its red glowing eyes locked on Zach and its upper lip twitched as it aggressively growled its intent. *What kind of crazy shit do they have going on here?!*

The eternally reincarnated protector of mankind and fugitive prototype super soldier, looked over his right shoulder to his aunt and bemoaned, "Titi, in advance, I'm *really* sorry about the kitchen."

He activated the armored form of the experimental Genesis cells coursing through his genetically engineered body startling his family, while amazing the kids. With his back facing them they watched red and black plates of armor extend from around the front covering him from head to toe and locking into place. The dark visor of his helmet sprang to life displaying a scan of the creature as it moved into an offensive pouncing position. Zachary Rodriguez, Sovereign and Genesis Soldier Zero-X, inwardly appreciated the short amount of normalcy he was able to experience after so long and he acknowledged it was time to get to work, but was at least able to see the silver lining in this highly destructive cloud.

*At least now I have something to talk about.*

## Poetry Place



You and Me  
By Patrice Cuadra

many people cannot see  
how we compliment each other.  
me with my golden delicious, done to  
perfection, brown you with your smooth  
french vanilla  
they can not see

but I see  
we are like creamy French vanilla ice  
cream atop a warm golden apple pie  
like the dark blue ocean resting near  
the white sandy beach  
like the stripes on a zebra, not knowing  
where the pattern begins or ends  
ebony and ivory, we create a perfect  
melody  
and I know as time goes by our  
features will never meld  
they will remain distinct, as two sides of  
a coin,  
but like that coin  
we are one  
you  
me  
together  
complete

### "The Only Time is Now" By Martin E. Gonzalez

The only time is now,  
Tomorrow is but a lie,  
We must confront this somehow,  
As to our past we die,

We walk the shifting sands of time,  
The pendulum swings to and fro,  
We contemplate our footprints,  
It's time to let it go,

We ask ourselves,  
What's in our fate?  
Have we already made our bed?  
On this we meditate,  
And ponder what lies ahead,

The only time is now,  
While we are still in Spring,  
To hug the friend,  
Forgive the foe,  
To dance, to laugh and sing,

The only time is now,  
To reconcile our past,  
To sing the song inside us,  
Until the light goes out at last

### Checklist Children By Connie Purser

I listened to the radio  
Last night as I drove home.  
I heard a dad of two  
Talking on the telephone.

He picked up his little baby girl  
On his way home from work.  
He also got the older child,  
His job he did not shirk.

And then upon arrival  
At the house, got dinner done  
And did a little cleaning  
While waiting for his "Hon."

Not much time 'til bedtime,  
Never long enough for sleep -  
Morning comes so early;  
Busy schedule, he must keep.

I listened to the radio  
Last night as I drove home.  
My mind began to wander;  
My thoughts began to roam.

I never heard him talk about  
The two great kids he had,  
How much he loved to hear them  
Yelling, "Hi! We love you, Dad!"

I only heard him tell us  
How he always did what's right  
By picking up the children  
On his way home every night.

I wondered why they had them  
(He and the little wife)  
Until I figured out  
His checklist for his life.

Get an education

And then when out of school,  
Get a job that pays well  
And be listening for, "That's cool!"

And then you must be married;  
Check that off of things to do.  
Buy a car and then a house  
And have a kid or two.

Checklist Children, I believe  
Have come into this world;  
And once they're here  
They're part of an agenda all awirl.

Once the first born has arrived,  
How soon 'til Mom is back  
At work, pursuing her career,  
So income does not slack.

Get back the figure that was lost;  
Then check the list once more.  
Before too long have one more child;  
Who's asking, "Who keeps score?"

Checklist Children fill our homes,  
The day care centers, too.  
Checklist Children in the schools...  
Do they belong to you?

Are your kids central in your life,  
Or are they on the list  
Of things that, if omitted,  
Just might be never missed?

If you have Checklist Children,  
May I recommend to you  
That you throw away your old list  
And make up one that's new.

The first thought in the morning,  
The last thought every night,  
Should be, "Where are my children  
On the checklist of my life?"

### Join the Writer's Portal today!

Starting in August, meetings will be held the second Monday (6-7:30pm) and fourth Thursday of every month (1-2:30pm) in the second floor conference room. From picture books to novels, stop by and discuss your ideas. Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal! All communications with the editors and all inquiries concerning this publication should be addressed to:

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### FEEDBACK CORNER

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

\*Starting in August, the writer's group will meet the second Monday of every month from 6:00pm – 7:30pm and the fourth Thursday of every month from 1:00pm – 2:30pm. I want to accommodate those who cannot make out afternoon meetings. Thanks!



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to view back issues and  
more. Enjoy!