

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems.



Foreign Service By Rick Weber

It was the day he had been waiting for almost all of his life, the day he would be leaving the United States to live overseas. Sean Callahan had not been this excited since he was a boy on Christmas morning. Instead of Christmas presents under the tree to be opened, there were suitcases by the front door. For Sean, it was a dream come true, but for his family, it was a bit of a nightmare. Their son was going to Pakistan to work at the US Embassy in Islamabad.

The dream began innocently enough starting out with Sean meeting Jagraj Wassan, or Raj as everyone called him, on his first day of school. They became the best of friends and still were close even though both had

grown up and begun their respective professional careers; Raj in biomedical engineering and Sean with the US State Department.

Sean's parents both held down low paying jobs just to make ends meet. They had no money left to pay for any baby sitter or after school care for Sean. They were extremely grateful when Raj's grandmother, Gurnoor Wassan, agreed to watch Sean after school since she had to do the same for Raj and his other siblings while their parents toiled in the convenience store they owned.

As part of his agreement, and not one by his parents, with Mrs. Wassan, Sean agreed not only to do his homework with Raj and the other Wassan children everyday but also, agreed to learn Urdu with them as taught by Mrs. Wassan. Mrs. Wassan had been a school teacher in her native Karachi before she and her husband immigrated to the US for better job opportunities in northern New Jersey. Mrs. Wassan wanted her children and now, her grandchildren, to maintain their Pakistani cultural identity. As such, all of the customs and even the Urdu, the country's lingua franca, were still practiced in their home.

As it turned out, Sean was her best pupil edging out Raj and his siblings. Even when Sean got older and no longer required after school care, he came by regularly for his Urdu lessons. This immersion into the Pakistani culture made Sean more conscious of international affairs. In high school, Sean's academic prowess and passion for the world outside of his country earned him a scholarship to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service.

At Georgetown, Sean was a Regional and Comparative Studies major with his focus on the Middle East and Asia. He found Georgetown to be tailored made for him. Sean took in all of the academic subject matter heaved upon him like a sponge absorbing water. To him; anthropology, economics, government, history, international affairs, linguistics,

sociology, and theology were all interconnected. They were the instruments he needed to become a good Foreign Service Officer.

The School of Foreign Service with its close ties with the State Department made it easy for Sean when their recruiters came calling for new employees early in his senior year. He took the Foreign Service Officer test, passed it, submitted his personal narrative, and had his oral interview. For Sean, the process moved like a well-oiled machine. He received a level 4 in his speaking and a 4 level in his reading proficiencies of Urdu when he was tested by the State Department. This made him, an Irish American with red hair, a fluent bilingual speaker. With the current situation in Southwest Asia, it did not take Sean long to get an offer of employment from Foggy Bottom. He learned quickly soon after he was hired, and not to his surprise, that he would be going to Pakistan. After some additional training, Sean was ready to embark on the adventure of his life.

After some heartfelt hugs and tearful kisses from his parents, Sean's father helped him lug his bags out to the taxicab for the ride to Newark Liberty International airport and the first leg of his trip. After over twenty hours in the air over the next two days on three different airlines, Sean finally made it to his new home, Islamabad.

The early morning landing at Benazir Bhutto International Airport gave Sean his first taste of reality with his new surroundings. While the plane back taxied on the runway to the terminal, Sean noticed a heightened military presence on the tarmac. It was not just the contingent of Pakistani soldiers with automatic weapons that got his attention, but also, the number of US Air Force planes which got his attention. Sean realized that he was in for a lot more of these attention getting moments as his tour in this country would progress.

Sean was met inside the terminal by Phil Brady, a political officer at the embassy who had been in country for

just over a year following a tour in Mumbai, India. Phil, an affable Bostonian with big smile, walked up to Sean with an outstretched hand and said to the new guy, “So, you’re the wunderkind that everyone has been talking about.”

“I guess so,” Sean replied in a groggy, jet lagged tone. “Are you Phil Brady?”

“I am,” boomed Phil in a loud voice. “Let’s get you out of this place and into your new digs. We can chat on our way to the embassy.” With that, Phil waved to the two of the embassy’s Foreign Service Nationals who were with him to gather Sean’s bags. Sean was then whisked through Immigration and Customs after the inspectors were advised of Sean’s diplomatic status.

The ride to the embassy was yet another reality check for Sean. It was his first time in an armored vehicle, a Chevrolet Suburban with bulletproof glass.

As Sean looked around the inside of the conveyance, Phil spoke up, “You’ll get used to not having the windows go up and down. This is the only way we travel around here. I know you’re dead tired after your trip. I got your apartment set up for you. I won’t go into anything meaty until you get some rest, but there are some basic things I have to tell you first.”

Phil went on to outline the items Sean had to know before he had his formal security briefing with the embassy’s Regional Security Officer, or RSO, the next morning. The most important was that no one left the embassy compound alone and definitely not without permission first. The rest were just plain common sense. The ride to the embassy went by quickly with Phil doing most of the talking about life in general in Pakistan.

The ride also gave him a taste of what awaited him. He noted widespread poverty and even people living in tents outside of some local government buildings. He saw a caravan of camels loaded with goods being led by some men heading out of the city. That sight to him was purely

biblical. It was only the beginning. Both men and women were wearing the traditional *Shalwar Kameez*, a long shirt with matching trousers, the national garb of *Pakistan*. Some men wore a *Taqiyah* or brimless cap on their heads. All of the women he could see had on the *Hijab*, the traditional veil worn by women in Islamic countries.

The US Embassy located near the British High Commission is a fortress like campus, which not only contains the chancery building but also has housing and other facilities for its American employees. This differed from most other embassies which only have chancery buildings for its offices. The heavy steel fences and sally ports gave Sean the impression in his sleep deprived state that he might be entering a prison. He was taken directly to his quarters in an apartment building which resembled many such structures in the US. Phil had the apartment set up for him, which included a welcome kit with some pots, pans, and linens for him to use until his household goods arrived, which would be several months later.

“I’ll let you get some sleep. Two days of doing nothing but being in the air or inside airports takes it out of everyone. I put some things in the fridge for you to munch on until you get over to the commissary. I’ll be over in my office. Here are my direct line and my cell phone numbers,” Phil said handing a piece of paper. “Give me a call when you get up and we can talk some more.” With that, Phil gave Sean a pat on the back and handed him the keys to his new apartment as he walked out the door. The bed had already been made up and Sean crawled into in falling almost immediately into a deep sleep.

Late in the afternoon Sean woke up and after a long hot shower, he gave Phil a call. “Good to see that you’re awake. I’ve got a couple of things to finish here in the office but I’ll be over about six to get you. We’ll be having dinner at the American Club, on me.”

With about an hour to kill, Sean turned on the television and found it tuned to an Urdu language news

channel. He found the reporting to be balanced with stories ranging from insurgent activities in the Northwest Frontier Territory to financial reports from Wall Street. He became immersed in the program and was interrupted when he heard a knock on his door. It was Phil. Sean quickly turned off the TV and walked out of the building with Phil to the American Club which was on the embassy grounds.

After sitting down, Phil asked his dinner guest, “Well, what are you going to have for your first meal in-country?”

Without hesitation, Sean looked up from the menu and said, “I think I’m going to have the Chicken Curry.”



“Good choice,” Phil replied with his ubiquitous smile.

While they waited for their order and sipped on local soft drinks, Phil spoke up. “You’re going to have a busy day tomorrow mostly with your security briefing and administrative in-processing. I know that you were told that you would be working in the consular section and that’s still true. However, since you tracked as a political officer, I asked the powers that be to have you shadow me when you’re not working on the visa line.”

Sean had been told that all new Foreign Service Officers started out in the Consular Sections of the embassies so that they could learn the ropes of their new careers by dealing one on one with foreign nationals, but Pakistan was a different story. The current situation there pushed the junior officers to adapt quickly.

“I guess that was what you meant when you referred to me as ‘the wunderkind’ at the airport this morning,” Sean said in a calm tone.

Looking Sean in the eye, Phil responded, “You’re right. I want you to know that I did my homework on you

when I found out you were coming here. The person you are replacing had to have his tour curtailed due to a medical emergency. When I was told we were getting a gringo who got a 4/4 in Urdu that piqued my curiosity. To be perfectly frank, I checked you out and found out you were for real. I even read your thesis from Georgetown on Pakistan India relations, very impressive. I also found out how you learned Urdu. Not too many persons without roots to this region can do that. Even though English is used by the government here and there's no language requirement for the post, we need all the resources we can gather. It amazes me that you weren't wooed by the CIA."

Now, it was Sean's turn to grin. "To tell you the truth, I'm not a cloak and dagger kind of guy. I'm just happy that I got a job, any job, so soon after getting out of school. I also know that I have a lot to learn. So what's next, *ustaad?*" as he addressed Phil with the Urdu word for teacher.



Their food was brought to the table. As they each began to eat, Phil answered, "The bosses have agreed to have you in the Consular Section in the mornings when they are busiest, and then to have you work with me in the afternoons. They also know that you have talent which needs to be tapped into. I've got some things set aside I want you to look at. Tomorrow afternoon, after you're done with in-processing, stop by my office and I'll lay them out for you. Just to keep things straight, your desk will still be in the Consular Section." With that remark by Phil, their business for the night was finished and they spent the remainder

of the evening talking about a wide range of non-work related topics.

The next morning was spent in a security briefing given by the RSO which was mandatory for all newcomers. Being that the post was in Pakistan, it was very detailed and meant to be taken seriously. As the RSO put it to those present, "We're not in the 'wine and cheese circuit' of Europe. This is an unaccompanied post for good reason but I think you all know the reasons why your families cannot be with you here at post." After the briefing, Sean and the other newcomers were issued their embassy access and identification cards. This was followed by a trip to the Administrative Section to be issued their cell phones, which had to be carried by them at all times. Before going to meet Phil, Sean and the other new arrivals met with the Ambassador for a short welcome on board conference. After talking with the Consul General his new boss, Sean made his way to the Political Section and Phil's cubicle.

He found Phil busy typing on his computer when the secretary led him in. Phil looked up without stopping and told Sean to have a seat. A minute later, Phil finished typing and turned his attention to Sean. "Well, how do you like things so far?" Phil asked this time with a dead pan expression on his face.

"So far, so good, I guess," Sean said with some hesitation in his voice and then added in a more direct manner, "So what do you have for me?"

Phil turned to an open Mosler drawer safe behind his desk and took out several files each stamped "Classified" with a "Secret" cover placard on the front. "These are what I was referring to last night. I need you to read over all of them but, you can't take them out of this office for obvious reasons. In a nut shell, you know what our situation here is with the host government. We have to make some new inroads with our counterparts here to, not only, mend fences, but also, to set the frame work for new policy with them. Last year when I first got here,

things were tense. To be honest, I thought that the Ambassador was going to do a draw down and send all non-essential personnel back home, but things worked out. These files are divided up into three areas. The first one is all the things we've done here in the Political Section to document our progress with the Foreign Ministry. The second has background information or dossiers on the principle people we have to court in order to get things done. The third are the draft proposals from the Public Diplomacy folks as to how we should pursue things. I need you to get up to speed on these files ASAP. Got any questions?"

Sean had looked at Phil the entire time Phil outlined what he had for him. Again in a calm confident tone, Sean responded. "I don't have a problem with doing any of this. In fact, I'm ready to jump into it with both feet but, I do have one question. What makes you think that I can do the job any better than people we already have working here? Some of the people I met today are, not only, of Pakistani heritage, but also, have a lot more job experience than me. They also speak languages such as Punjabi and Pashto in addition to Urdu. What makes me so special?"

Without breaking eye contact, it was Phil's turn to reply. "When I referred to you as a 'wunderkind' at the airport yesterday, that was not a moniker I came up with. I was not the only one who looked into your qualifications when you got selected. The Deputy Chief of Mission, the DCM, was the one who approved of your modified work plan and he referred to you by that name. The decision came after an evaluation of who we had on staff, all great people. Everyone, including myself, had been here when things got strained. A fresh face is needed; someone who doesn't represent the past. Someone who is culturally aware enough to get the job done, and that someone is you."

Sean got the message, but he did not think that he would get thrown into something this meaty so early in his career, although he did dream a lot

about doing work like this when he was at Georgetown. “I’ll get right on it. So, what’s our next step?”

“After you’re up to speed, I’ll take you over to meet our counterparts at the foreign ministry. The ones at our level know that we have to work on improving relations, and they’re just as eager as we are to get moving on it. Both sides have to show a unified front. This will not be easy for anyone. People used to say that ‘the State Department made the world safe for cocktail parties.’ During my tenure with this fine organization, I’ve never attended one, but I have put in some killer hours to get the job done.”

With that, Sean smiled and said, “I guess that I will be putting in some killer hours of my own.” Phil and Sean each let out a good laugh as the sun was beginning to set outside the window by Phil’s cubicle. Sean’s journey was well underway.



The Drip

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

Drip. Drip. Drip. That constant sound is the most annoying thing in the world! Have you ever been forced to sit there and listen to the monotonous drone of those drips? Where are they coming from? Until a minute ago I thought they were just part of the disturbing dream I was having but now... I fear it's something more. Try as I might, I can't see what it is, the room's pitch black and my cries have thus far gone unnoticed. Maybe I'm still dreaming... my eyes may not even be open but

until someone wakes me, how would I truly know?

It's hard to imagine that such a thing could be happening to me. Yesterday I was lost on my way to my brother's wedding in the Hamptons. It was going to be a huge wedding on par with the Royal wedding that was plastered all over the television a short time ago. I was never a fan of those large weddings. Nothing more than someone's method of having the attention on themselves, at least in my opinion. It was because of that thought process I found myself racing through the hills of northern New York in the middle of the night and in a rain storm. Of course, there's no one to blame but myself.

I've been telling myself that since I was a young boy, mainly because my parents dotted on my brother and treated me like a second class citizen. Any time something went wrong, or something unexpected happened, I was the one taking the blame. My brother was perfect in every way and to think otherwise was a punishable offence. Believe me, I know. I tried to defend myself for years before I allowed my parents to brainwash me into believing their lies. Anyway, that's a story for another time... if we have the time that is.

As I was saying, I was speeding through the winding roads in less than desirable conditions when I heard what sounded like a shot and I nearly lost control of my car. When I did manage to stop without killing myself, I brought my BMW to a stop alongside the road and, against my better judgment, I climbed out into the rain to see what happened. Surprise, surprise, I had a flat tire and no spare in the trunk. Normally I would've been driving my Cutlass, but my loving brother insisted he pay for a rental so I wouldn't need to worry about any mechanical problems should they arise. A generous offer, especially if you know my brother, but it ended there. The roadside assistance the rental agency offered was available twenty-four hours a day, but where I was in the mountains there wasn't a

signal for my cell phone.

With nothing better to do aside from sitting in my car, I pulled the collar of my light brown coat up around my neck and started walking. It didn't take long for my clothes to become soaked through, less than two minutes, actually. I'm serious. Being as stubborn as I am I continued to walk, trying to ignore the cold rain as it ran down my back and glasses. I couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of me and I was freezing, but I wanted to keep moving. Before too long I think I got used to the rain, either that or I entered an early form of hypothermia. My vote goes to the latter, and I still refused to stop.

I assume in many ways I wanted to die, right then and there, and for someone to find me in the morning. The thought had some appeal, especially considering the grief my brother would feel for not letting me drive my own car. As I said, it was an appealing idea until I remembered it'd be my fault. My fault for driving too fast, my fault for not checking for a spare before I left, and of course, my fault for walking out into a night like this. Someone had to take the blame so why not the family scapegoat? That realization alone gave me the strength to push on, to quicken my pace. I'll be damned if I'd give my brother the chance to reap even more attention because of his poor, stupid brother.

A minute later was when I saw it. The broken down motel sitting off the side of the road no more than a hundred yards from where I stood. The rain had begun to let up a few minutes previous, but I hadn't noticed until I could see the red neon sign that said "VACANCY" in bright, red glowing letters. I'm not sure, but I think I even laughed then. The idea of beating my brother instantly warmed my body and the distance between me and the motel disappeared in no time.

The inside of the building was just as you'd expect in a relaxed country area: soft, warm, and inviting. Above the small desk, which was an actual desk by the staircase, hung a sign that

proclaimed the Lodge was “more comfortable than a mother’s bosom”. The man behind the desk was more than grotesque in appearance. His shoulders were slumped and his face was disfigured as though he’d been soundly beaten with a baseball bat and his face never recovered.

“Welcome to the Lodge, dear Sir. May I take... Oh my. Are you in need of assistance?”

His eyes bulged out when he got a good look at me and I truthfully appreciated his efforts. “Thank you, yes. I had some car trouble about a mile from here and I’d like to use your phone.”

The man nodded. “Of course, Sir. But I must insist you change out of those wet clothes and eat something first. On the house, of course.”

Hearing him I realized I looked far worse than I felt and for the first time in a short while a chill crept into my body. I tried to politely refuse his offer but he wouldn’t hear of it.

“Please, Sir, you can change in here.” He led me to a small room that was obviously his room. He surprised me at how well maintained it was, not even my brother’s home was kept as tidy by his fleet of maids. “A change of clothes are in the top drawer on the left. When you’re ready, I’ll dry them and give you some hot soup to warm you up.”

I felt real appreciation for the man, but all I could do was nod and smile. He waved it off as an unnecessary bother. “Don’t worry yourself, Sir, please. Let old Vinier help you as best he can.”

Vinier. That was the first time I heard his name and I immediately compared him to Quasemodo, the reluctant star of Hunchback of Notre Dame. I waited until he closed the door before I stripped off my soaked through clothing. I hadn’t noticed until then just how cold I was. Without the wet clothing I felt incredibly warm as I stood there naked. It was only out of the humility my family imbued me with that I pulled some of the clothes from the drawer and put them on. While they

were nowhere near the style I was used to, I thought they fit me quite well. It was the first time in my life I wore a checkered flannel shirt and blue jeans and I enjoyed it.

When I stepped out with my wet clothing in hand, Vinier took them from me while ushering me into the common room where a large fire was already burning in the stone and mortar fireplace. He sat me in a large, soft chair facing the fire with a blanket already folded on the chair waiting for me.

“Please, have a seat, Sir. I’ll be right back with your soup.”

“Really, you don’t have to go to all this trouble.” It was the first time I spoke since we first met and my voice sounded weaker than I would’ve liked but he smiled at me. The look made me feel welcome.

“It’s no trouble, I assure you, Sir. With the weather outside there are few travelers so you are our only guest this night.”

His words were soothing and I wanted to stay, I really did, so I returned his smile. “Thank you, Vinier, I appreciate this more than you could ever imagine.”

His smile was genuine as he bowed and left me alone. Calmly, as though I were master of the house, I unfolded the blanket and wrapped myself in it as best I could after I took my place in the chair. The room’s ambiance wasn’t anything special. A mix of browns and red that gave me the feeling of a comfortable home. After my brother’s wedding I planned on stopping here again. I’d be able to repay Vinier properly for the favors he bestowed on me. It would be my pleasure.

The more I think about it, I don’t remember seeing him again. I sure didn’t remember the soup being brought he talked about. That was when I noticed the drip I mentioned to you before. While I can’t see it, it’s driving me out of my mind! The more I struggle the more I realize I can’t move or see in the darkness. I even tried to call out again and this time I thought I

heard something.

“Sir?”

I felt a gentle push on my shoulder once, twice, then a third time.

“Sir?”

That time the voice was louder and I recognized it.

“Vinier?” My voice croaked as I opened my eyes. The light from the fire was bright and caused me to blink for a moment or two until I was able to focus. I looked around realizing I’d dreamed the entire torment of the drip. “How long have I been sleeping?”

Vinier stood a few feet from me with his hands clasped in front of him. “An hour, Sir. You were asleep when I came in with your soup and I didn’t want to disturb you.”

I smiled. “It’s alright. Do you mind if I use your phone?” I had to call the rental company. I didn’t want to hear it from my brother for not being at his wedding on time.

Vinier shook his head. “Not at all, Sir. But I don’t think you’re strong enough yet.”

I was surprised and I think it showed in my voice. “What do you mean? I feel fine. I...” When I tried to lift my arms they wouldn’t move. It was then I heard the drip again. When I glanced down at my left arm a red tube ran from it and off the side of the chair. I was tied to the chair watching my blood being drained away! I looked at Vinier, horrified and unable to speak.

“As I said, Sir, there aren’t any guests here, but that doesn’t mean they won’t be here in the morning. My clientele doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

I struggled against my bonds but I slowly began to weaken. The only thing I could think of was this was all my fault.



The Pyramid By Emiliano Moreno



CHAPTER ONE

Nice, France 1931

The moon was a perfect ball of amber light over the casinos and hotels on the *Promenade des Anglais*. The midnight-blue waters of the Mediterranean sparkled under its rays like numerous cold, white diamonds strewn over a velvet canvas.

Next to a small restaurant named, *La Sirena* was a large hotel-casino, *Le Chat Blanc*. Inside it elegantly dressed men and women cashed in their chips, tried their luck at the roulette tables or had a drink at the bar.

A stately, thin, oldish woman sat at one of the playing counters. She wasn't at all attractive with small, narrow, blue eyes; a long, beak of a nose and a stern, cold mouth. Her hair was quite gray and done up in an old, Edwardian fashion. Beside her chair stood a man in a dinner jacket, who could have been her son, he appeared to be in his late thirties. He had dark hair and round, slightly popped out, Peter Lorre eyes. He watched the elderly woman play with his cruel orbs and unsmiling lips.

"Ah, yes, Madame is again the winner!," cried the mustached Gaming Dealer.

The old woman with both her heavily jeweled hands raked her chips towards her. "Thank you, I'll cash these in," she told the gaming dealer without any emotion.

"No more tonight for you, Madame? But you are being so lucky this evening," replied the Gaming Dealer, grinning at her.

"No, thank you," answered the oldish woman as she stood up and the

Peter Lorre-type man next to her helped her with the chips. They left and headed towards the lobby to get their winnings. As they walked past a paneled alcove a man came down the carpeted stairs within it. First his black, shiny wingtips came into sight, then his black, neatly pressed trousers, this was followed by a white dinner jacket with a black bow tie, yet he paused on the steps just before his face came into view to reach into the pocket of his coat for something. His thumb as well as the index finger pulled out a toothpick which he put into his, as yet, invisible mouth. Afterwards, the rest of him descended to the bottom of the gaming floor. His hair was short, parted to the side, and medium brown in color, the hair gel carefully applied to it made it a shade darker however. His eyebrows had a coolly unconcerned yet serious look to them above the green eyes. The face was strong-featured and handsome. He was young, thirty-two-years-old with a slim, muscular physique standing six-foot-two. As the toothpick protruded from his lips, the Kelly Green eyes, surreptitiously, followed the elderly woman and the thirtyish, Peter Lorre man to the cashing window. Rex Tanner, that was this good-looking young man's name, leaned against the corner of the alcove and watched the pair, nonchalantly. After they had cashed the chips both went to the bank of elevators to head up to their suite. Rex eyed them until they got into one of the cars and the doors had slid shut on the two. His orbs went up to the dial over the elevator and he watched the hand go along until it stopped on the twelfth floor.

The next morning the skinny, old woman and the man left the hotel. They walked towards a 1930 Rolls Royce Phantom 1. It was really a convertible, but the canvas roof was unfolded and protecting the interior even though it was a beautiful, sunny day.

Rex sat patiently at one of the outside tables in, *La Sirena*, sipping coffee and studying the odd couple. He saw the hotel doorman help the elderly lady into the car. She slid behind the

wheel of the Rolls Royce and the short, hard-looking man climbed in next to her. The lady started the engine and the graceful vehicle drew away from the curb. Rex waited a few seconds before springing to his feet, throwing down some coins beside his unfinished cup of coffee on the table and hurrying to a strange, futuristic-looking car parked right behind where the Rolls Royce had been just a moment ago. Years later, this vehicle of Rex's would become known as the 1938 Phantom Corsair, yet Rex Tanner had managed to purchase a copy before it was ever even revealed to the public by its designer, Rust Heinz. Having the right connections made all the difference. The sleek, shiny, black Corsair rumbled to life as Rex turned the key in the ignition. He made a U-turn and drove up the *Promenade des Anglais* after the old woman's Rolls Royce. This being Nice and the South of France she wouldn't look twice at Rex's odd, six-passenger, sports coupe. It was just like any other rich playboy's car here in a land of trillions.

The Phantom Corsair snaked rapidly along the curving mountain roads at a moderate distance behind the speeding old woman's Rolls. Both vehicles drove for a while passing a string of villages that were below the steep mountain sides and perched on the edges of the Mediterranean.

The Rolls stopped at a hillside restaurant overlooking the ocean. Rex's Phantom Corsair slowly drove into the parking lot a few minutes later. The strange pair had already entered the place by then.

Rex stepped out of his car attired in a white fedora and a tailored, tan suit. His shoes were brown and white two-tones. Coolly, he started towards the fancy eatery. A waiter greeted him, pleasantly, at the door.

"Ah, you are American?" said the waiter as he led Rex to a table. The interior wasn't very crowded, there were a few people having breakfast. Rex was surprised the place was even open so early and serving the morning meal.

“Yeah, that’s right,” replied Rex. “Say, can I get a table by the windows?”

“Why certainly, Monsieur. You can sit anywhere you like. As you can see we are not too busy at the moment,” replied the waiter.

Rex took a seat two tables behind the old woman and her youngish, Peter Lorre type. They were sitting with a fat, bald, sixtyish fellow dressed in a white, linen suit. His Panama hat lay on the table in front of him by the cup of tea he was having with the lady and her cruel-looking gentleman.

A young, attractive, French waitress came over to Rex. “Are you ready to order, Monsieur?” she asked him.

Rex smiled up at her and said, “Coffee, please.”

“Cream and sugar?” she asked him, recognizing his accent as American.

“Yeah, thank you.”

She left and Rex tried to hear the trio’s conversation. He faced the windows, casually placed his elbow on the table with the cheek against his fist and leaned slightly over to listen. Through the large, square panes he could see the tranquil blue waters of the Mediterranean. Some miles northward an ocean liner was sailing by a sandstone castle which sat on a low bluff. Yet, try as he might what little he heard was incoherent. They were speaking in low tones and obviously didn’t want anyone else to hear them.

The couple didn’t go anywhere special after the restaurant. The old woman and her gentleman returned to Nice. But, that afternoon Rex tailed them again as they once more left their hotel. This time the two drove up into the mountains to Saint Paul de Vence. There, stealthily, Rex moved after them down a narrow, ancient street within the hilltop village that ended at a cemetery. The graveyard offered magnificent views of the mountains. Rex entered the burial ground as he trailed the pair and hid behind a small, family mausoleum. He was finally able to hear some of what they were saying as the odd couple met the fat, bald man from the restaurant there.

“Tonight we will meet you at your villa for the exchange,” said the old woman to the fat man.

“Very well,” answered the fat man. “No one has seen her?”

“Absolutely no one,” said the elderly lady.

“We have her with us in our hotel, but no one has seen her,” added the Peter Lorre guy.

Rex’s brow furrowed with interest and he leaned closer to overhear more.

“They will tonight since you must take her out of the hotel to bring her to my villa,” said Fat man.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be a good little girl,” the old woman assured the fat man and she smiled, harshly, with her thin lips.

Rex moved back out of sight as the pair left the fat man and headed past the small mausoleum Rex was concealed behind. The fat man turned around and kept strolling through the cemetery. Since he had his back to Rex and the evil couple had already exited the graveyard, Rex came out. He tugged down his fedora brim and started walking away.

CHAPTER TWO

Back in town again, Rex spent the rest of the afternoon walking through the park not far from the *Promenade des Anglais*. He ate in the old town section of Nice, alone; a glass of French burgundy wine, a bread roll and cheese. When he was done he put a tooth pick between his teeth and sauntered back to his hotel.

Later that night, parked across from *Le Chat Blanc*, Rex watched the elderly lady and the Peter Lorre type emerge from the building holding a pretty, fifteen-year-old girl between them.

Rex’s Kelly Green eyes turned to slits as he looked intently at the adolescent. There was no mistake. It was her, the Cuban girl, Concepcion Gomez Hidalgo. She was from a prominent family on the island who had been visiting Miami when she’d been kidnapped by the weird pair.

There was a big, silver moon hanging over the ocean as the

Phantom Corsair followed the Rolls Royce Phantom 1 through the steep, undulating mountain passes. The strange duo traveled to a grand villa crowning a hilltop. Rex halted the Corsair by the side of the road, its black metal gleaming under the rays. He watched the Rolls turned into the gravel drive and start up towards the house. Rex noticed there were two gangster-types in fedoras and chalk-striped suits guarding the cast-iron gates. They carried tommy guns. He swung the car around and headed back to Nice.

Once back at, *Le Chat Blanc*, he went into a phone booth and made a long distance call to Miami, Florida.

“Hello, Mr. Gomez? Rex Tanner. I found, Conception.”

“Is she all right, Mr. Tanner?” said the Spanish-accented voice on the other line.

“Yes, Sir, she’s fine,” Rex told him.

“Where are they holding her?”

“A villa up in the hills a few miles outside of Nice,” answered Rex.

“Please, you must get her back, Mister Tanner! My wife, she is so hysterical I cannot calm her down,” said Mr. Gomez. “And I am so worried too.”

“No, don’t worry, Mr. Gomez, I’ll get her,” Rex assured him.

“Are you certain you can?”

“Yes, Sir, I am. Now, look, you may get a call tonight from these people. They’re gonna ask you for a lot of cash. You can’t give in to them, Mr. Gomez, whatever they say you mustn’t agree to pay the ransom money. *I mean* agree, *lie* to them, but in reality you don’t pay them a cent. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“That’s very important. Trust me,” Rex told him.

“I do, Mr. Tanner, that is why I hire you.”

“Okay, look, I can’t get to her tonight, I need to think of plan, but she’ll be okay, trust me. Tomorrow night, I’ll get her back for you,” Rex said.

“I trust you, Mister Tanner.”

“Good. Remember what I said, Gomez, if they call you and demand money, you tell ‘em you’re gonna pay, but you don’t, you hear me, in reality

you're not gonna pay them a single dime. Because if you do your daughter's dead. You hear me?"

"Yes, I understand you."

"Good and don't, under any circumstances, even if your wife pleads with you, don't go talk to the police. If you do, your daughter will be killed. Just trust me on this."

"I will."

"All right, goodnight then. I'll contact you as soon as I have, Concepcion," said Rex. He hung up without waiting for a response from Gomez.

Rex's room was on the fourth floor in, *The Hotel Negresco*. Early the next morning as Rex was having breakfast there was a knock at the door and he answered it in his robe. Outside there stood, Kamal Maalouf, a Moroccan and former intelligence officer. He was in his fifties now, portly, with a thick, salt and pepper mustache, yet he was quite trustworthy for in his day he had been a loyal and dutiful man within his country's military, often going to extraordinary and ruthless lengths to acquire needed information. He wore a red fez upon his rather large head and was carrying a leather case.

"You got it?" inquired Rex, gazing down at the case in the Moroccan's hand as he let the man in. He closed the door and they went over to the couch where Kamal opened what he had and took from it three file folders. He spread these over the glass coffee table.

"You did it! Kamal, I could kiss you," said Rex sitting beside the portly Arab.

"Please, I would rather you did not," answered Kamal, somewhat jestingly, then getting serious, he added, "I did the best I could, my friend. You know I am no longer an intelligence officer, still I have good connections and in many needed situations this pays off."

"I trust you, Kamal, you've never let me down yet," replied Rex.

"Yes, let us hope I have not this time. Take a look," said Kamal.

Rex opened all three of the files. Two were on the elderly woman as well as her youngish traveling companion and one was on the fat, bald man.

"The woman is Edwina Lake, fifty-nine-years-old, American, she has a lengthy criminal record and so does her strange young friend, Adrien Babineaux, nationality French, age thirty-five, but nothing compared to this big fellow here," Kamal lifted the fat man's file and placed it over the other two, he went on, "Egon Drechsler, sixty-two, and a German national from Dresden. He is a very wealthy and powerful man this one, but most shocking of all, he is – among other criminal activities- a white slave trader, a human trafficker."

Rex knit his eyebrows and looked up at Kamal.

"Yes, my friend, he's trafficked girls of all ages- and of all races- to Morocco, Egypt and other Arabic and Middle Eastern countries." Kamal gestured down at the folders housing the pictures and personal information on Edwina Lake and Adrien Babineaux. He continued, "These two are just kidnapers who were hired because they want to make a grand sum of money, but this man here, he is truly dangerous and very influential not just in legitimate society, my friend, but in the criminal underworld too. I think he means to sell this fifteen-year-old, white, Cuban girl to some rich Arab."

"Son of a bitch," muttered Rex looking away, thoughtfully, as he sat on the couch beside Kamal Maalouf, the remnants of his breakfast on a salver next to the files.

CHAPTER THREE

Rex dressed himself in black that night; turtleneck, trousers and shoes. He killed his lights when he was getting close to Drechsler's villa. Steering the Phantom Corsair onto the far side of the narrow road he killed the engine, carefully opened the door so that it would not creak and then didn't close it all the way, he left it ajar.

The two guards at the gates didn't see Rex scale the side of the wall, crouch for a moment on top and afterwards drop himself down into the German's property on the other side.

Rex squatted in some bushes as headlights suddenly flooded the gateway and the gravel driveway ahead of him. He watched the guards open the gates to allow a 1931 Ford Tudor Sedan to enter. It proceeded towards the house.

The Ford stopped under the carport. Two men in fedoras and three-piece suits got out manhandling a fifteen-year-old girl. A moment later, Egon Drechsler stepped from the back seat. He wore a broad-brimmed, white fedora and a matching tropical suit. He walked with a cane and smiled at Concepcion as she struggled in the arms of his two gangsters. He fingered the girl's face with his fair, beefy hand.

"Why so sad, my Sweet, I promise you will be very well taken care of," spoke the German, "you will have many pretty clothes and money."

Fire burned in her dark eyes as she glared at the fat man. Concepcion kicked her foot out at him, aiming at his shin, but she missed. "Yo no soy una puta! Viejo maricon!," she yelled, indignantly, at Drechsler.

The German grinned at her and merely said, "Into the house now, Fraulein."

The two gangsters dragged Concepcion down the path towards the front portals of the villa with Drechsler making his way close behind them.

Rex managed to sneak up to the house. At the side of the villa he peered into one of the windows and saw the gangsters tossing Concepcion on a twin bed inside a room. They left her there, locking the door and the fifteen-year-old buried her face in her arms to cry on the mattress.

What he needed to do was cause a diversion so he could break into the house and get the girl while Drechsler's men were distracted. Rex crept low on the ground over to the front of the villa and from there scanned the yard as well as the driveway. On the opposite side of the property he noticed a stone, barnlike building. He made his way to it. Looking around to make sure no one saw him, he opened one of the two

rustic, pinewood doors and entered the structure.

Rex realized that he was inside of Drechsler's personal winery. There were barrels of wine stacked against the walls and vats of it where the beverage was being automatically processed. He reached into the pocket of his pants and searched for a pack of matches he'd taken from the bar at, *Le Chat Blanc*. Yet, just as his fingers enclosed about the small book, Rex heard the unmistakable sound of gun safeties being released. He turned around to find himself face to face with ten of Drechsler's men. They were all Arabs and Berbers dressed in fedoras with neat suits. Men, mainly Moroccans, the German had hired to protect him while he lived here in the South of France making his shady deals.

Rex grinned at them. "Hi, fellas, nice night for a walk, huh?"

Their answer was to point their submachine guns at him. The gangsters stared, balefully, at the young man who was clad in black with a day's stubble since he hadn't bothered to shave that morning and looking very much out of place within the German's winery.

One of the Arabs came forward and motioned with his gun for Rex to move to a side door in the corner that Rex hadn't observed when he'd entered the building.

"And put up your hands!" he ordered Rex.

Rex brought his arms up. He started to walk, but quickly halted again and gazed at the same Arab with a smile. "Look, you mind if I smoke. I'm unarmed, you can check me."

"You move now!" the Arab yelled at him.

"I'll pay you for a smoke. I've got fifty American dollars, okay. It's yours if you just let me reach into my pants for my matches," Rex tried again.

The Arab gazed dubiously at Rex.

"Come on, fifty dollars for you and the boys, you can divide it among yourselves. Look, I really need that smoke. I'm just not gonna be able to

face Drechsler and whatever I've got coming to me without it. Whaddaya say, huh?"

The Arab looked at a young, Berber-looking gangster and commanded him to search Rex for weapons. The Berber found nothing on him since Rex had left his pistol with silencer in one of the bushes outside just in case anything went wrong. The Berber did find the fifty dollars and he handed this to the Arab leader.

As the Arab was studying the fifty dollars and the other nine men had their attention on him, Rex swiftly slid his hand into his trouser pocket and took out the matchbook. By the time the Arabs and Berbers looked back at Rex, the private investigator had already lit several matches. He threw them into one of the open vats and then ducked towards that side door the Arab had been so keen to get him to.

The vat exploded sending the ten gangsters scattering through the air with their bodies on fire and screaming in agony as their flesh was consumed by the hungry flames all over them. A second detonation blew half of the building apart. Outside Rex grabbed his handgun from the bush and ducked under the Ford Tudor Sedan in the driveway as more Arabs with their guns drawn came from the villa to see what all the commotion was about. A third blast from the winery collapsed the entire building and shook the nearby villa to its foundations.

Drechsler jumped up from his arm chair in the living room, dropping his tumbler and spilling whiskey onto the bearskin rug below him.

Rex took the opportunity to drag himself out from under the car and run to the house as the men who had emerged from the villa, babbling in Arabic and Berber, strove to put out the huge flames now burning on the German's property.

As he neared the facade of the villa two Arabs in fedoras and trim suits hurried out by the front portals. Both saw Rex sprinting their way. They lifted their tommy guns, but Rex was quicker with his handgun and silencer, it

weighed less. He shot them both, hitting the men in the chest, blood sprayed from the wounds of the two Arabs. They grunted and collapsed to the ground. Rex reloaded as he entered the house.

A Berber in a tan, linen suit and white fedora was stomping down the tiled stairs as Rex came inside. The Berber paused halfway on the treads and took aim at the Private Eye with a Beretta 1931 semi-automatic pistol.

"Shit!" uttered Rex, ducking as the bullets from the Beretta ripped a series of holes in the wall in back of him just where his head had been a second ago. Rex rolled on the tile floor, rose on one knee, brought up his handgun and fired back at the Berber gangster. One bullet tore into the man's brow and the fedora violently flew off his head. A second one blasted half of his neck away, blood spurted intermittently from it as the Berber fell and his body tumbled over the remaining stairs to the bottom. Rex rushed past the corpse and through a narrow hallway to where he calculated the bedroom with Concepcion inside of it was.

Concepcion screamed and she bolted upright in bed as the door of the room was ripped open by Rex's weight breaking the lock. It crashed against the wall sending bits of plaster into the air. He hastened to the mattress and tried to take gentle hold of Concepcion, but she slapped and kicked at him.

"It's all right! It's all right, I know you're dad! I'm here to get you out!" he tried to explain, but she wasn't listening to him. Fiercely, she resisted his attempts. She bit, scratched, kicked, hit him with the flat of her hands, did anything thing she could to keep Rex away from her.

"Dejame! Cochino! Hijo de puta! Vete conyo!" she screamed at him with tears in her eyes.

"Listen to me, Concepcion, listen to me!"

He was abruptly cut off by the sudden appearance of an Arab gangster dashing into the bedroom with a submachine gun. Frightened by the Arab's unexpected entrance,

Concepcion screeched in Rex's ear making it ring and causing a buzzing sensation in his head. Rex grabbed the man's Thompson before the gangster could shoot it. They struggled and slammed onto the bed next to the girl who was screaming hysterically, each trying to take the weapon from the other. Rex freed one hand from the gun and he dug his thumb into the Arab's right eye. The gangster yelped and his hold on the weapon loosened, Rex seized the moment and pulled the Tommy out of the man's clutches. The Arab dropped to the floor, but rapidly jumped to his feet and pulled out a bowie knife from somewhere inside his suit coat. He lifted it up, sharp blade pointing toward the ceiling, and lunged back at Rex. Rex nimbly raised the Tommy Gun at the Arab and blasted him out the door in a hail of bullets.

He slung the Thompson Gun over his shoulder and turned back to the fifteen-year-old. He held his hand out to her, but she slapped it away. The girl slid over the mattress into a corner on the bed where she assumed a fetal position, shaking like a leaf and watching Rex with wary eyes.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," Rex tried to reassure her. "I know what you've been through, but you have to trust me, I'm your only way outta here."

She stared at him with mistrustful eyes. He leaned towards her and again she struggled with him. Biting, scratching, spitting even.

"Vete, dejame tranquila! Conyo a tu madre, singado!" she screeched at Rex.

Rex rolled his eyes up. "We don't have time for this," he said half to himself, half to Concepcion. He curled his hand into a fist and drove it into the girl's face knocking her out cold. He put Concepcion over his shoulder and pivoted towards the door. "Sorry, Princess, but if we don't move now we might never get out of here," he told her, apologetically, as he carried her out into the hallway.

As Rex was passing the living room, he heard a German accented voice call

to him, "Hey, American, where do you think you are going with my prize."

Rex swung around with Concepcion over him to see Egon Drechsler stepping out of the living room with his cane.

"I'm taking her back home to her parents where she belongs," Rex said.

"I do not think so, I paid a high price for her, young man, I can't just let you take her," replied Drechsler, grinning in a self-satisfied and confident manner.

"Most of your men are too busy putting out that fire I started," Rex said, "what are you gonna do, stop me yourself, old man?"

Here Drechsler aimed his cane at Rex and a sharp, shiny, silver blade popped out from the end of it mere inches away from the young private investigator's face. "Oh, you should not underestimate me, Junge Menschen." Drechsler's kind expression transformed into a mad look. Before the German could poke Rex's orbs with the knife/cane instrument, the Private Eye quickly unslung the submachine gun he'd taken from the Arab and grasping it with one hand, opened up on Drechsler. A barrage of lead perforated the fat man. The cane spun out of the German's hand into the air. Drechsler danced, spasmodically, backwards into his living room as he was hit. He stopped with his back to the coffee table when Rex ceased firing. The beefy man was a gory mess, riddled with bullets. Thinking about all the girls Drechsler had callously sold into the Arab sex trade, Rex pressed his lips together with hatred until they were white, and then sent another load of lead into the German. That time the succession of bullets eradicated Drechsler's face; ruining his features by splitting his nose open, blowing his eyes to pieces and shearing off his lips. Rex brought down the smoking weapon and Drechsler's heavy cadaver toppled onto his coffee table. The German crashed on it with his backside, breaking it apart. Drechsler lay there spread eagle with blood forming a giant pool underneath him and over the smashed remains of the table. The

sanguinary fluid started to spread across the tiles of his living room.

Rex rushed with Concepcion over his shoulder to Drechsler's 1931 Ford Tudor Sedan parked in the driveway by the carport. He opened the passenger door and deposited the girl onto the seat then he ran around to the driver's side. Rex got in and started hotwiring the vehicle. He noticed that a group of Arabs and Berbers were heading toward him.

"Start damn it! Start!" Rex cursed as the gangsters drew nearer. The motor, unexpectedly, roared into life. He sighed and released the brake.

Drechsler's men started firing. One of the back seat windows shattered. Rex drove down the curving driveway towards the main gates of the villa. The Arabs and Berbers chased the Ford shooting their submachine guns at it. Rex heard Concepcion groan as she began to awaken and sit up in her seat. A stream of lead from the Tommy Guns caused another of the sedan's windows to explode and spray glass all over Concepcion's black hair. She shrieked like a monkey in heat.

"Stay down!" Rex yelled at her, slamming his hand onto the crown of Concepcion's head and shoving it downward.

Soon the gates were looming at Rex through the windshield. The two guards in front of them brought up their Tommy Guns to take aim at the Ford barreling down the drive. The car was shooting up gravel and clouds of dust as it went.

Concepcion peered over the dashboard in time to see the gates rushing to meet the Ford at an incredible rate of speed. The sedan was going to slam into them. "Ay dios mio!" she screamed, her face contorting.

"Just stay down and don't look!" Rex told her.

The two Arab guards were about to fire, but Rex propelled the Ford at them, striking the men with the front of the vehicle. One Arab was torn in half at the waist, his torso rocketed upwards and his body from the hips down was

swallowed then mangled by the undercarriage of the car. The second guard was run over, his head crushed like a watermelon by the tires of the Ford and the rest of him ripped apart exposing his innards. Their blood struck the windscreen of the sedan and Concepcion screamed.

Now came the closed gates. Rex braced himself. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel and forced his body back, deeper into the seat. Concepcion placed the curled fingers of both her hands into her mouth. The gates dashed at them. Concepcion's eyes bugged out and she removed her fingers to shout, "Pinga!" The Ford slammed into their cast iron, busting both wide open. One gate broke off its hinges, flew into the air and clattered down onto the middle of the road. The Ford swung left and sped away from the villa.

Rex screeched the Ford to a halt near his Phantom Corsair. Grabbing Concepcion by her hand he ran out of Drechsler's car with the girl, tossed her into his own and climbed in after her. Rex started the engine, swung the Phantom around into a U and peeled off down the mountain roads heading for Nice.



**Pumpkin and Vine
By DiVitto Kelly**

"Oh my God Tommy, pull over, pull over!" Maria Casanova squawked, grabbing her husband's rock-solid shoulder. He slammed on the brakes, making an abrupt right-hand turn up a shabby, weed-filtered gravel driveway. Tommy parked the car under a soaring, lifeless tree where a rotted out birdhouse dangled from a heavy

branch. The dented black mailbox stood with the name Rey finger-painted in bold white letters.

"I gotta have two of those; Zoe and Chloe will go gaga!" boasted Maria, in her mid-thirties, short, curvy, with long black hair and heels so lengthy it would keep her dry in floodwater. She sauntered over to the picket fence surrounding the pumpkin patch like a graceless show horse, a sea of gold jewelry slinking up and down her skinny wrists. The woman's grating Long Island New York accent, thick and rich, was headache inducing.

Mr. Rey was hunched over working on his tractor in the decaying barn, but stepped outside as he heard the irritating voice. His eyes perked up, yet his cold wrinkle-free face, always without a speck of facial hair, almost doll-like in complexion, remained firm. He was late middle-aged with straight straw-like silver blond hair and wore thick black-rimmed glasses, resembling a fusion of Andy Warhol and Clint Eastwood. The tall man stalked over to the unwanted car, clutching his infamous wrought-iron pitchfork, the two-foot long tines gleaming in the partial, late afternoon sun.

"Get out now," he said, his voice coming out in a harsh, sandpaper rough tone. "Can't you read? It says no trespassing!" Maria was thoroughly enthralled by the pumpkin patch, a sweeping field of tangled vines that semi-circled his decrepit two-story farmhouse like barbed wire.

"Huh?" the woman replied, turning her head slightly like a dumb animal. "I couldn't hear you." She continued to snap away on her neon pink bubblegum. Maria explored her Samsonite-sized white leather purse and pulled out a pair of crisp twenty-dollar bills.

"Sir, I gotta have two of your gorgeous red pumpkins; they're for my nephews!" Her husband leaned against his car, arms crossed, bored. The man moved closer to the woman's ears, which held hula-hoop sized gold earrings.

"Get off my property before I kill you," rasped Mr. Rey whose garb was a habitual washed out gray with a black and white checkered flannel shirt. The other couple standing behind her milled around next to the picket fence.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" inquired Maria. "My hearing ain't so good."

"They're not for sale, so get off my property before I kill you!"

"Tommy, he says he wants to kill me!" She turned to her husband in mock horror.

"Really? Do us all a favor old man," replied her husband, smirking with a half-smile. Built like a fire hydrant and from the looks of it, as smart as one, Tommy pulled down his vertical striped Italian flag sweater to cover his early onslaught of middle-aged gut.

"T-o-m-m-y," said Maria, drawing out her husband's name in a torturous inflection. The stout man walked up to the towering Mr. Rey, who was almost a foot taller.

"Did you really threaten my wife?" asked Tommy, who had no problem tapping into his well of Mafioso wrath. "Because if you did, I may need to rectify the situation, you understand me?" The other couple froze their conversation in an instant. They knew Tommy Casanova was a mob pro and had no problem 'taking care of people.' Idle threats were not in his vocabulary.

He stepped closer to the tall man until he stood no more than a foot away. "I'm talking to you doll face," said Casanova, staring directly at Mr. Rey. He could almost see his reflection in the man's chiseled cheekbones. Tommy was irritated, yet slightly unnerved by the man's soulless black eyes, only enhanced by the man's glasses. He then pointed his sausage-thick index finger in Mr. Rey's face, almost touching his nose. "Well?"

Mr. Rey returned a cold stare, his thin grayish lips barely visible. Tommy's angered brow formed a wrinkled V-shape. He inched closer. His finger touched the tip of Mr. Rey's nose.

In a split second, Mr. Rey took his enormous left hand and grabbed

Tommy by the throat, lifting him off the ground. Rey's eyes gleamed in guttural hate.

"Holy shit," shouted his cousin Mikey, stunned by the man's strength.

"Oh Tommy!" screamed Maria, hysterically. "It's just pumpkins you jerk face."

Mr. Rey tossed Tommy onto the ground. Landing on the trampled grass and leaves, he reached for his knife tucked in his coat pocket, but before he could extend his arm, Mr. Rey knocked it out of his hand with a kick then pointed the pitchfork tines directly at Tommy's throat. The knife-sharp tips nicked the skin just below his Adam's apple, drawing a trickle of blood.

"Hey, let's just remain calm, shall we?" said Mikey as he picked his cousin off the ground and straightened his ruffled sweater. Tommy swatted Mikey's arms away, boiling over with anger.

Tommy pressed his fingers against his throat. He was infuriated. "I'd killed you mother wacko right here and now, but as a rule, I don't kill no one with my wife present."

"Oh that's so sweet," said Maria, picking a pair of dead leaves off the back of his sweater, still chomping away on her gum.

"For the last time, get off of my property -- now!" Mr. Rey shouted, with more graveled venom in his voice. Tommy retrieved the weapon before storming back to his ink black Mercedes, a top of the line S600 sedan complete with bullet-proof windows that set him back over a hundred and fifty grand.

"You picked the wrong person to mess with psycho!" bellowed Tommy, as he stepped into his car, bumping his head as he got in. "Ow, piece of shit car."

"Enough honey, let just get out of here!" said Maria, in her patented Long Island caw.

"What a horrible voice," said Mr. Rey as he watched a dozen or so vultures settle on tree branches in his yard -- they eyed his unique pumpkins, always. He squinted his eyes, clutching the

pitchfork in his right hand, looking like the man in Grant Wood's 1930 American Gothic painting. He exchanged a dark, hateful stare with the mob man before returning to his tractor.

Tommy floored the gas, leaving a spray of gravel and dust from the weathered driveway. As they sped away, Tommy whispered to his cousin, "We're coming back here tonight to finish this, you hear me?" Mikey paused then nodded in agreement. The wives chatted amongst themselves, oblivious to their husband's revengeful intensions.

Halloween night reached half past eleven, temperatures hovering in the low forties. After a subpar dinner and tasteless bottle of domestic red wine at the bed and breakfast, both men left their spouses, both in blissful cozy coastal town sleep.

"Is this really necessary?" asked Mikey, a bit drunk from all the wine. "I was gettin' ready to watch Sports Center."

"Zip it linguini spine," answered Tommy. "That freak . . . no one grabs my throat and lives. You should know that by now!"

"Yeah, you're right Tommy," replied Mikey, a near physical replica of his cousin, six years older and twenty pounds heavier. "Strong dude, huh?"

Tommy stared straight ahead, "Yeah."

Mikey glanced over at Tommy and saw concern. He'd never seen his cousin unnerved before, not even before his wedding day or the time he had to whack a backstabbing relative. Tommy turned the lights off as the approached the dilapidated farmhouse, stopping thirty yards short of the uphill driveway. He backed up the car off the street onto the grass before parking under a line of oak trees, standing out like skyscrapers, their leafless branches reaching out like spindly fingers.

"If any birds crap on your car, I'll torch these trees personally for ya,"

bragged Mikey. Tommy knew his cousin was serious. He was nicknamed "The Torch" by his mob buddies and always carried his trusty 14-karat gold lighter and hefty five-gallon metal gasoline can filled to the brim with premium (and only premium) gasoline in the back of his custom painted glittering bronze Cadillac Escalade. Earlier, the two had stopped by an auto parts store to pick up the necessary supplies for the evening then to the local Exxon station for a five-gallon fill-up.

They closed the car doors; Mikey's a bit too loud -- causing Tommy to give him a stare. Tommy closed the drivers' side door then gave it a gentle bump with his hip.

"You don't broadcast when you're about to whack someone, doofus," scolded Tommy. "That's why they call me the quiet one. Here, get the gas can in the trunk -- you got your lighter, I presume?" asked Tommy.

"You're asking me if I have a lighter?" replied Mikey, almost insulted that his cousin would second-guess him. Mikey then displayed his thousand dollar custom-made gold lighter in his right hand, in his left, two books of matches just in case. "Don't leave home without 'em."

Tommy smirked. "Always prepared like a good boy scout."

The two men were clad in the same attire they wore earlier in the day, including their expensive, white Italian dress shoes. They hiked up the leaf-covered incline, both slipping in the damp earth.

"Not exactly the ideal hiking shoes, eh?" joked Mikey, doing his best to lighten the mood. His cousin found nothing funny about ruining three hundred dollar shoes.

The house stood fifty yards away. The front porch light was on, along with a lone room upstairs. More vultures sat perched on the naked trees circling the property, none making a sound. The two men noticed the large barn doors open.

"Maybe he's in there?" proposed Mikey, itching to warm things up a bit.

The moist covered ground squished with every step the two made.

“Ready to jump it?” asked Mikey, as they approached the deteriorating picket fence.

“Hell no,” replied Tommy. He quietly pried the pointed slats from the decrepit fence with his bare hands, creating plenty of space. “After you.”

The two hunched down as they approached the pumpkin patch. The boundless rope of vines encompassed the whole back yard like a bowl of spaghetti. “Maybe we’ll see the Great Pumpkin tonight?”

“The Great Pumpkin? What the hell is that?” inquired Tommy, irked.

“You know the Peanuts cartoon? Linus, Snoopy, and the . . .”

“Oh. Is that the one with that dikey chick, Peppermint Patty?” His cousin could only shake his head.

“Look at these things?” gulped Mikey, staring at the sea of red pumpkins, “I mean; they all look a little too, you know, perfect, don’t they?”

“Like that guy’s face,” answered Tommy, gritting his teeth.



The two followed the trail of vines leading to the back yard. The far reaches were filled with trees, mostly pines and oaks. As they approached a lone apple tree, the two squashed and slipped on the rotted fruit. Tommy caught himself, but Mikey took a tumble, landing straight on his back. The gasoline can he was carrying nearly fell smack dab on his head.

“What are you, the Three Stooges or something?” said Tommy. “Enough of the slapstick, nipple-head.”

“Sorry, sorry,” replied Mikey, rubbing his lower back. He never liked pissing off his cousin, but for some reason, he had an incredible knack for doing so.

A thick congregation of pumpkin vines seemed to venture out from a solitary location about thirty yards from the back of the house, an area already cluttered by rusted out farm equipment. Both men noticed a rotting smell, like dead animals.

“I know in our line of work we don’t visit pumpkin patches too often, but jeeze, this place smells like . . . where we ‘dump the bodies,’ you know what I mean?” said Mikey, making air quotation marks with his fingers. Tommy hated when he did that, but concurred wholeheartedly.

The two men tiptoed between the foliage. Tommy reached for his pen flashlight and bent down to touch one of the pumpkins. “You know this feels weird,” he said, rubbing his fingertips together, “They’re soft like . . . skin, or something.” His cousin reached down and did the same.

Mikey flicked out a silver six-inch folding knife from his back pocket and placed the blade under a hearty vine, thick and flexible like rope. He struggled. “I can’t cut it.”

“My sentiments exactly,” replied Tommy, getting in a verbal barb at his cousin’s expense. “Gimme that!”

Tommy used his knife and attempted to cut through the pumpkin vine. “See, I told ya,” said Mikey, watching his cousin struggle as well. “I’m tellin ya, this whole thing is getting strange – like Twilight Zone strange. You know tonight’s Halloween?”

“Don’t get stupid,” said Tommy, annoyed. “Maybe we just need to try something different. Here, hold the flashlight.”

“What are you gonna do?” questioned Mikey, feeling anxious.

Tommy bent down on one knee like he was going to propose to the plump, red pumpkin. Studying it for a moment, the mobster clutched the knife in his right hand and poked the tip of the blade into the pumpkin’s smooth surface. A minuscule drop of red fluid leaked out like a teardrop.

“Juicy, ain’t it?” observed Mikey. “Hold on, pumpkins aren’t –”

Tommy placed the blade in the same spot, but this time, plunged the blade straight into the pumpkin’s flesh. Blood squirted from the wound as the impaled vegetable let out a minuscule, high-pitched cry.

“What the hell was that?” yelled Mikey, as he looked over at Tommy,

his face now painted with blood.

“Oh, this is messed up; let’s get the hell out of here!”

Getting to their feet, Tommy reached into his back pocket for a handkerchief to wipe the red liquid off his face. He then kicked the pumpkin, making a dent, but hurt his foot in the process, his shoes now sponged red. “Let’s torch this place, now!” he growled. Mikey always made sure he had enough gasoline to bring down at least a building or two.

Suddenly, the back screen door creaked opened with Mr. Rey brandishing a double-barrel shotgun. The tall man stared at his field of prized red pumpkins. A pair of vultures took off from a branch just above the two men, now lying flat on their stomachs, hiding. Mr. Rey fired, blowing both birds from the sky. Their remnants rained down on top of the two men. The decapitated head of one of the birds landed a foot from Mikey’s peering eyes, still twitching. He almost barfed on the spot. Mr. Rey, standing as still as one of his ghoulishly posted scarecrows, finally went back inside.

Tommy got to his knees and whispered to his cousin. “Time to barbeque this son of a bitch, and take out the pumpkin patch with it.”

The two men stood up, but Tommy stepped on something solid near the base of the pumpkin vines. He waved his cousin over. The men felt a wood board under their feet, partially covered by leaves and dead grass. Tommy shone his flashlight and noticed a rusted metal handle on the six-by-eight foot wood plank.

“Maybe it’s a trap door that leads to his house,” surmised Mikey. Suddenly, the weight of the two men broke the wood, throwing them down into a deep pit. They found themselves in total darkness.

“Tommy, can you hear me?” Mikey called out. “Oh my God, what the hell is this?” The two men tried to stand up, but the footing was cumbersome – soft in spots, but also hard and uneven. The smell was rancid and overwhelmingly nauseating.

Tommy fumbled for his flashlight, the small beam partially hidden under something moist. He picked it up and pointed it at his cousin. Directly behind him and all around were piles of rotting corpses in various stages of decay. The smell was unbearable, unfathomable. Mikey couldn't hold in the nausea any longer, vomiting in a corner. Tommy frantically waved the flashlight back and forth. What he saw was impossible.

A forest of thick celery-green roots dropped down like paratroopers from the hole above. Both men flung their arms through the strands of vegetation; it was everywhere. Tommy dragged the flashlight beam from top to bottom. Horrified, he noticed the ends of the roots burrowing into the scattered dead bodies.

"Oh my God," said Mikey, his mouth agape. Tommy looked closer at the translucent roots, blood now flowing upward into the . . .

"Those pumpkins," Tommy uttered. "Those freaking pumpkins are living off the blood of people. We gotta get the hell out of here!" Just then, the roots starting swaying back and forth aroused by their voices. They began to wrap around the arms and legs of the two men.

"Aagh!" screamed Mikey. "My knife, where's my God-damn knife?" One particular root reached into Tommy's ear, searching for nourishment. He seized it with his bare hands, ripping it out from the damp earth. The torn roots showered blood.

Tommy threw the knife to his cousin. "Got it!" shouted Mikey, snapping the blade out and cutting away at the flesh-eating root system. Blood squirted out like water through a tattered garden hose. Both men continued to fight with the killer roots, pulling at anything hanging. It was then Tommy heard the back door open.

"Quiet, I think he's coming!" The tall man was outside again, firing at more vultures.

"Over here!" insisted his cousin, pointing to a tunnel that was free of the tentacle-like roots. Tommy handed his cousin the flashlight as he lead the

way. The two men crawled on their hands and knees about twenty feet before Mikey noticed an opening.



He dug his pointed shoes into the damp Earth and climbed up, clearing away the final layer of grass and drooping pumpkin roots with his hands. Mikey poked his head out from the hole, but before he could climb out, he was impaled by Mr. Rey's pitchfork, one of the four tines plunging straight into his neck; two others piercing the shoulder. He gurgled as blood filled up his windpipe. Quivering in pain, he finally slumped over, motionless.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Tommy, panic in his whisper. He tugged on his cousin's leg, but there was no response. The bloodied flashlight dropped at his feet. Tommy picked it up and flashed it upward, only to see streams of blood cascading down his cousin's neck and chest. He was shocked. Before he could react, Mr. Rey grabbed his cousin around the collar and pulled him up from the hole.

Tommy slumped to the ground in horror, barely able to move a muscle. From above he heard his cousin groan – he was still alive. With a burst of energy, he wiped the blood off the flashlight and did an about face, crawling back over mud and bones towards the human compost pile. Frantic, he scrambled for the gasoline can, spreading a third of the contents around the killer vegetation and dead bodies before climbing up, using a handful of the thickest roots as rope. He nudged his face out of the hole, peeking just above the pumpkin foliage. He spotted Mr. Rey standing with his back to him.

"The hell you're feeding my cousin to your freak show pumpkins," growled Tommy under his breath.

With one hand, he placed the gas can onto the grass and whipped his legs upward. A few stray vines were wrapped around Tommy's ankles, but he ripped them off with his bare hands with ease. He crawled over and hid

behind a tree. All Tommy was thinking about was saving Mikey -- and burning everything down to the ground . . . and below.

Mr. Rey was halfway to the human compost pit when he was startled by more vultures, a hundred of them, the barren trees now looking full with darkened leaves. Tommy reached in his back pocket searching for matches, but came up empty. "Crap," he said. His cousin – The Torch, he had them.

Tommy crept on his knees, circling around through the sea of red pumpkins and hid behind an old tractor. Somehow, he needed to take out porcelain face, but how? Tommy looked over at the back porch and saw the shotgun there. Good, at least he didn't have his gun, Tommy thought, but Mr. Rey still had his pitchfork. Tommy circled behind the tall man nearly stepping on a half-rusted shovel. It wasn't much, but he'd take it as a weapon. There was no way Tommy was going to watch Mr. Freakshow drop his cousin's body down that death hole. No way.

Part of the shovel blade was broken away, but it had a nice point. If these pumpkins were filled with blood and had feelings – what a bizarre concept that was, Tommy postulated, he could draw Mr. Rey over to him by jabbing at his revolting creations.

Tommy eyed a large, fleshy red pumpkin, big as a beach ball, just in front of him. Still on his knees, Tommy harpooned the object. It made a high-pitched sound as blood gushed out like water from a broken water balloon. Mr. Rey turned, dropping Mikey's limp body. Tommy stood up and began jabbing at more pumpkins. There were more high-pitched cries, and more blood spilling onto the ground.

"You're a dead man," hollered Mr. Rey, in his malicious voice. Tommy kept up the attack, plunging the shovel blade into anything round and red. Mr. Rey stormed over in Tommy's direction, but the mobster was ready. As the tall man raised his pitchfork, Tommy launched the shovel, hitting Mr. Rey right in the gut. The old man cringed

and doubled over in pain, but didn't scream. Tommy ran to his cousin and found a pack of matches tucked in his back pocket, not wanting to toss Mikey's prized gold lighter, a Christmas gift from his wife, Ginger.

He scrambled over to the hole, ready to drop a pair of lit matches when Mr. Rey hit him on the back with the sharp edge of the shovel, causing Tommy to recoil in pain. The burly man tumbled over, narrowly missing the body pit. He dodged being speared by the shovel and struggled to his feet. He then noticed his side was bleeding profusely.

As the blood touched the ground, pumpkin vines swirled toward him, like sharks sensing injured prey. Tommy hurtled over, grimacing in pain as he seized Mr. Rey's pitchfork. He stood up then glanced over to the hole. Tommy began circling the crazed man, hoping to steer him in that direction.

"You're a freaking wacko, you know that?" yelled Tommy. "Think you can kill people to feed your zombie pumpkins?" Mr. Rey didn't reply. Blood continued to drip from Tommy's wound. The tall man was only a few feet from the pit now.

Tommy stood still, staring at the man. Mr. Rey started uttering words under his breath. "I hate people who mumble; speak up you bastard!" screamed Tommy.

"I told you to get off of my property, didn't I?" said Mr. Rey, "But your yappy wife had to have one of my pumpkins. Now both you and your friend will be dead."

"I don't think so old man," bested Tommy, ready to harpoon the man, but now overcome with excruciating pain and weakness from the loss of blood.

Unsuspecting, a stream of vines curled around Tommy's bloodstained shoes. As he stepped forward, he stumbled, falling straight down on his face. Turning his head, he witnessed the vines in attack mode, their leaves fluttering up and down in a frenzy. In no time, he was almost completely blanked in pumpkin foliage.

"Now if you don't mind," said Mr. Rey, as he reached down and pried the pitchfork from Tommy's pinned hand.

Mr. Rey raised the pitchfork above his head; ready to plunge the tines straight into Tommy's chest. "Your wife will be next."

Tommy eyes nearly popped out with hatred. He mustered every ounce of violent energy in his frame and ripped through the entanglement of vines. He flung the torn vegetation off his body just as Mr. Rey thrust the tines penetrating deep into the ground. Tommy seized the knife from his pocket, flicked the blade open, and lunged at Mr. Rey, stabbing him hard in the thigh. Tommy fell back on his side, feeling lightheaded on the damp ground. Mr. Rey toppled over in pain uttering an indecipherable cry. Before Mr. Rey could remove the weapon from his spindly leg, Tommy stood up, gritted his teeth then launched a patented Mike Tyson-style left hook to the side of Mr. Rey's pallid face, shattering his left cheek.



"What the fu . . . ?"

The rest of Mr. Rey's broken face fell to the ground, like an antique ceramic doll. Inside, a harsh, narrow dark facade emerged, eyes burning red with anger, teeth small, but sharp like a piranha. Two elongated incisors slowly emerged. Not sure what he was seeing, Tommy threw another thunderous punch, this time in the midsection. Crack. Shattered bits of white material cascaded down Mr. Rey's pants. Tommy connected again. This time, the rest of Mr. Rey's body fractured away, pieces falling on top of pieces. Mr. Rey's attire then dropped to the ground.

It hissed at Tommy. "I told you to get off my property!" The words came out mechanical and wobbly. The thing hoisted its sinewy limbs skyward; displaying four-pronged lengthy fingers like his pitchfork then aimed them at Tommy. The stocky man jumped back, the finger blades narrowly missing him. He reached for the pitchfork on the

ground and thrust the tines into the thing's narrow chest. It staggered backwards and toppled over into the pit. Tommy quickly lit a handful of matches for good measure and tossed them in. The flames soared skyward from the pit.

Tommy picked up the gasoline can and staggered around the pumpkin patch, dousing anything red. He dropped more matches, setting the back and side yard ablaze. Agonizing cries filled the whole back yard, scaring off the hundreds of perched vultures. He picked up his cousin and placed him on the back porch for safety. Tommy stumbled to the barn and poured more gasoline on the decrepit, wood structure. He scanned the hay-filled floor before spotting an oak barrel full of red pumpkin seeds. "Oh shit," he uttered, as he emptied the remaining contents.

The brawny man reached for a match and dropped it into the wood barrel. The blood filled seeds started exploding like popcorn. He dropped another on the pile of gas-soaked hay. The old structure quickly ignited; smoke billowing out the gaping front entrance. As Tommy ran out, he spotted a rusted gasoline can sitting next to a tractor. He struggled, but managed to remove the cap, taking a quick sniff. "Smells like gasoline to me."

As the pumpkins heated up, they began to explode, a sudden burst of red liquid showering the cool ground. With the property almost fully engulfed with flames, Tommy raced to the back of the house to retrieve his cousin's body. It wasn't there.

"Mikey!" He scoured the grounds, running over to the human compose, but couldn't find him. "You shit monster!"

Tommy raced back through the barbecued back yard and tried to open the back door. "Damn it, locked." He lifted up his stocky leg and busted the door wide open -- no time to be quiet now. He poked his head in. The darkened interior smelled just as bad as the pit. Tommy stumbled across the kitchen, but found a mountain of filthy

dishes almost toppling over in the dirty porcelain sink. Still holding the gasoline can, he poured some on the contents into an empty coffee can sitting on top of the mustard yellow countertop.

He searched out each and every room on the first floor, but found nothing. The whole place was nearly void of furniture except for a ratty brown sofa chair, small table with a lamp, and a RCA color television left over from the Carter years. Tommy hustled upstairs, but found the same thing, nothing. He poured the contents on the hallway floor and ventured back downstairs. As he walked towards the kitchen to fill up the container again, he heard a groaning cry from the basement.

Tommy retrieved the pen flashlight from his back pocket and headed to the basement door. He cautiously stepped down on each plank, barely making a sound. Reaching bottom, he followed a strange noise, almost like buzzing flies. Tommy heard his cousin moan again. He walked over to a door sporting a foot-long crack. He pressed his ear against the dingy white paint, paused, then bent down and peered through the slivered opening. Through a low wattage light bulb hanging from the ceiling, Tommy could see the thing about to bite into Mikey's bloodied neck as he lay motionless on a half-busted folding table.

"Not a good idea prune face!" said Tommy, who kicked the door open in classic mob fury. The creature turned to attack, but Tommy hurled the gasoline straight into its eyes. He reached into his front pocket for the matches, but came up empty.

"Oh crap, where are they?" he screamed. The creature, screeching in agony, shook its head wildly from side to side. Tommy tried to get to his cousin but the creature was too close. He frantically searched for anything to defend himself. In the corner he found a broom . . . and more containers of pumpkin seeds, thousands of them. The thing started to regain its composure.

"What are you gonna do Tommy, brush me aside?" asked the formally Mr. Rey, now sneering, his emaciated charcoal gray body, partially charred like a briquette. Tommy's eyes darted between the creature and Mikey.

Tommy poked the broom at the thing like a lion tamer, hoping to keep it at bay. Mikey started to regain consciousness; he groaned then slowly placed his fingers in his pocket and pulled out his custom made gold lighter. Tommy jabbed again at the creature again, but it knocked the broom out of his hands.

"I told you to get off my property," the creature began saying repeatedly, quicker and faster then suddenly like a skipping record. "Get-get-get-get-get-get."

"Mikey, hurry!"

His cousin reached back and flicked the lighter – the flame shot up two inches high, and tossed it at the creature, setting it afire. Quickly, the room became engulfed in flames. Tommy picked his cousin up by the waist and helped his out from the burning room. He hurried over to the base of the stairs and placed Mikey's arm over his shoulder. Struggling to reach the top, the two men headed for the back door.

"The gas Tommy, turn on the gas," gasped Mikey in a whisper, coughing up blood.

"The what?" screamed Tommy.

"Turn on the gas stove and . . ." uttered The Torch before passing out. Tommy shook his head, trying to understand his cousin. He poured a trail of gasoline along the floor and counter top.

And just for good measure Tommy grabbed the gasoline can and headed back to the basement. "We can't have any of those damn seeds around."

Tommy opened the door only to be greeted by the smoking creature, still in flames like a Durafume log. It reached out with its sinewy arms and grabbed Tommy's sweater, searing the fabric.

"This was a present from my wife you bastard!"

"The voice! She has a horrible voice!" the creature screeched, before being doused by more gasoline. Tommy kicked the burning creature down the stairs where it broke apart like a towering stack of Legos.

"Alright Mikey, let's get the hell out of here!"

Tommy grasped the gasoline can and finished up a trail ten feet outside the back door. His cousin handed him a half used pack of matches and lit the whole thing. The two started back to the car when the house exploded like a bomb, throwing both men to the ground. Tommy picked his cousin up and helped him into the back seat.

The mob guy got in and simply stared at the burning house, all tangerine orange and cinnamon red. He sat back trying to digest what the hell had just happened. He closed his eyes to rest, only for a moment. Twenty minutes later, he was awakened by the sounds of blaring sirens. He crouched down as a fire engine came barreling down the road. After it passed, he started the car, lights off, and headed in the opposite direction. Mikey was coughing in the back seat, in pain, but still alive.

Nearly a year later, the two couples decided a coastal New England weekend getaway would be a nice idea. Actually both men were secretly scouting for fresh new places to stash 'the bodies.' Mikey suggested he and his cousin write the trip off as a business expense.

"Hope you don't mind ladies, but I want to stop off somewhere real quick," said Tommy, driving his new maroon four-door BMW down a familiar countryside road. He pulled up a deserted uphill driveway; the gravel completely blanketed by weeds now, and parked the car.

"Hey, this place kinda looks familiar," said Maria, sitting in the back seat with Mikey's wife, Ginger. "Isn't this where we saw all those gorgeous red pumpkins?" Tommy looked over at his cousin. The wounds to his throat

healed, but now Mikey spoke with a tried and true raspy Mafioso voice.

“Yeah.”

All four got out of the car. The house and barn were all gone. The only remnants left from that horrific night was a rusted out tractor way in the back yard. “What happened?” Maria asked.

“Got me by the cannolis,” her husband answered, grinning at Mikey with a wink.

His wife gave him a cool stare. “Tommy?”

“Mikey?” inquired Ginger, who seconded the motion.

“Whadda say we stop off and pick up some fresh made apple cider?” exclaimed Mikey, trying to change the subject in a hurry.

A few miles down the road, Tommy spotted a large pumpkin patch, complete with hayrides and apple cider for sale. There were lots of people milling around, enjoying the fall festivities.

“Hold on,” said Tommy, his little gray cells trying to work in overtime. There, a large, rectangular orange sign, the letters painted in robust Kelly green paint . . .

“That’s so cute,” said Ginger. “Rey’s Pumpkin Patchorama.”

“Rey?” Tommy muttered in horror. He turned to his cousin. The four got out of the car; Tommy sprinted ahead. Mikey followed, albeit a step slower.

“Our boys sure love their pumpkin patches,” boasted Maria. Ginger agreed as she threaded her brunette locks through the back opening of her white Polo brand baseball cap.

“What’s up?” Mikey called out, trying to keep up with his cousin.

“Rey!” blurted Tommy, turning back to his cousin. “For God’s sake, Rey!” Mikey finally got it.

The two men frantically paced the grounds. “There, standing by the tractor,” pointed Tommy.

Both Tommy and Mikey jogged over to the tall man, who from the back resembled . . .

Tommy placed his hand on his shoulder. The man abruptly turned around, sporting an orange sweatshirt

with the words Rey’s Pumpkins printed in bold green letters.

“Are you Mr. Rey?” asked Tommy, who had erased most of his protruding gut by cutting back on his mom’s homemade pastries.

Mikey stepped closer and pulled down his turtleneck, revealing a pair of quarter-sized round scar. “Does this ring any bells old man?” The gentleman, early sixties, tall and slender with a graying beard, took off his sunglasses.

“I’m sorry, do I know you two?” he asked, startled by the two beefy men.

“Maybe,” answered Tommy. “How long have you been doing business here?”

“And do you have a brother? About yay tall with smooth skin?” asked Mikey.

“To the first question, all my life, sir. And to the second, no brothers -- just a younger sister. Why do you ask?” he replied. A woman around the same age with curly black peppery hair walked over, her two grandchildren by her side.

“Is everything okay, honey?” she asked.

“It’s all fine, ma’am,” replied Mikey, “Our mistake.” The two started walking away when Tommy noticed something amongst the huge field of pumpkins.

“I see red!” Both men picked up their pace, stalking into the sea of orange and began rummaging through the piles of pumpkins.

“There!” cried Tommy. He reached for his pocketknife, snapped it open and to everyone’s horror, began stabbing it. Mikey spotted another one and repeated the onslaught.

“Where’s the blood?” Mikey asked.

A large circle of people convened, observing the inexplicable behavior. The owner and his wife meandered their way through the stirring crowd. Mr. Rey stood behind to the two men, tapping his duck boot. One little boy, baseball cap backwards, videotaped the whole episode on his iPhone.

“And how will you be paying for those,” the man said, sternly.

Both cousins looked at each other, puzzled then a wave of stupidity hit

them square in their collective noggins. The wives sauntered over to find out what all the excitement was about only to discover their husbands, sitting together like a pair of preschoolers in time-out, holding switchblades amongst butchered red pumpkins.

Tommy looked up at his wife like a sad puppy. “Sorry, we thought they were something else.”

“Like what?” asked Maria, dressed in a skin-tight cheetah print dress. Both men were pink-faced with embarrassment “Oh, this is so humiliating Tommy.” Her grating voice rang out loud and full of dismay.

The drive home was surprisingly quiet. Maria and Ginger, usually a pair of gold medal yapazoids, were fast asleep in the back seat. Mikey had finally nodded off too, cradling a vibrant orange stuffed animal pumpkin. After the patchorama fiasco and late afternoon lunch, Tommy drove about forty minutes out of town when he was hit with a wave of trepidation.

“I just gotta make sure,” Tommy uttered before turning the car around. He headed down the familiar side road again, pulling into the empty lot. Dusk was settling in as Tommy reached over for the flashlight in the glove compartment.

He stepped out of the car and took a deep breath, absorbing the crisp autumn temperature, with just the right hint of briny ocean air thrown in. Tommy scoured around, then walked over to where the horrifying body pit was, now completely filled in. He strolled a few yards farther back, spotting a lone apple tree. The apples looked deliciously red. He was about to pick one but thought otherwise. “A bit too red,” he thought.

Tommy combed over the grounds back and forth for almost half an hour, finding nothing. Then, hidden behind a couple of recently deposited old tires, he spotted something. He bent down and saw the familiar red shape, small, about the size of a softball. He touched the object then stroked his hand along the vine and leaves. He knew the fragrance, having worked in his dad’s

pizza restaurant for years. Still, he wasn't taking any chances. Tommy took out his handgun and fired repeatedly into the red shape, splattering it all over the place.

After close inspection, Tommy was satisfied. He placed the gun back in his coat pocket and returned to his car where he planted a Frank Sinatra CD right into the CD player then headed home.



**Uncle Max's Gift
By Jamie White**

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

Andrew hated that doll. From the moment he opened up the package, he could tell that there was something not right about it. It felt weird.... evil. As he stared into those creepy, blank eyes he couldn't help but feel a cold chill run down his spine. No one else seemed to notice, though. He wanted to toss that doll in the trash right then and there. Unfortunately, Andrew knew if he tried his parents would've been furious. And besides... what could he do? Say the doll was scary? They'd think he was crazy... or at least sneaking scary movies at a friend's house. He also didn't want to hurt Uncle Max's feelings by telling him that he hated it. He was always Andrew's favorite uncle and they were very close. They always had fun together and usually he was great at picking out presents. So Andrew sucked it up and thanked him for the devil doll.

Looking at the doll was bad enough. Then he found out it could move and make sounds. As the little troll skated

across the floor, its choppy movements and creepy music made Andrew want to run screaming from the room. The weird thing is everyone else liked it. They actually thought it was cute! He tilted his head, noting how the lights around its eyes formed this kind of demonic look. Why couldn't anyone else see that?

Later that night, he had a hard time sleeping. The doll seemed to be watching him. He got up, slowly walking over to the dresser he'd had set it on. He didn't want to touch it, but he had no choice. He needed to put that thing somewhere where he couldn't see it. Andrew finally moved it behind a bunch of pictures and turned to go back to bed.

He woke up the next morning, feeling much better after a full night's sleep. Andrew actually managed to forget all about the doll as he stretched, yawning slightly. He stood up, putting on his slippers and bathrobe to warm up a little. It was kind of cold out that morning. As he reached for my doorknob, Andrew stopped, looking around the room. Something wasn't right.

After a minute, he saw it. ; The doll. Somehow it was now sitting on top of his television. Had he dreamed getting up and moving it? No, he'd definitely woken up last night and moved it behind some pictures. Andrew decided that it was time to move it to a more out of the way spot. He took the doll and set it on the top shelf of my closet. He even tossed a few old sweaters he never wears on top of it. *There. That should do it.* Satisfied, I turned around and hurried to the kitchen for breakfast. He remembered suddenly that they were supposed to be going to his grandparent's house- they were throwing him a birthday party because they had been out of town the other. He'd been looking forward to it, there was going to be great food, lots of music and lots of cousins to play with. Forgetting all about his new toy, he hurried to eat as quickly as possible and then finished getting ready. *This is gonna be so cool....*

They finally got home at about 9 o'clock that night and he had to hurry up and get ready for bed. As Andrew opened his door, a scream escaped his throat. Sitting on the bed was that horrible little troll doll. His parents raced in, asking what was wrong. "The doll!" Andrew pointed at it with shaky fingers. "It moved!"

"What do you mean 'it moved'?" His dad raised his eyebrow, looking at his son like the child had lost his mind.

"Daddy, I swear! Before we left I put it in my closet! I even had a bunch of sweaters on top of it and now it's on my bed!! It did the same thing last night." Andrew turned to the dresser, pointing at the pictures. "I moved it behind those and this morning it was sitting on the TV!"

"Sweetie, I think you're letting your imagination run away with you. Were you watching scary movies at Tommy's house again?"

"MOMMY! I'm serious!! And I only did that one time!"

"You did that a week ago! A doll can't move by itself, even ones like that. You still have to press the button to make it move. Why were you trying to hide it anyway?"

"I promise it moved, Mommy! The doll scares, me so I put it where it couldn't watch me but it moved!! Now it moved again. I don't like it!" Andrew was so scared, he was almost crying. My parents looked at each other a minute and then his Dad spoke up.

"Alright.... We'll tell you what. We're going to take the doll and put it in our room ok? We'll show you where we put it and in the morning, you'll see it's still going to be there."

"Ok, Daddy". Andrew was just glad to get that thing out of his room. It almost felt like its eyes were following him wherever he went. Andrew ran to his bed and grabbed the doll, handing it to his mom and following them to their bedroom.

"Now let's see...." His mom glanced around the room a minute before walking over to their bookcase and setting it on the top self. "Here. This is where it's going to be, alright? You'll

see... tomorrow morning it will still be there.”

He didn't believe them, but he nodded anyway. "Ok, Mommy. Good night. Night, daddy!" Andrew turned and hurried to his room, eager to be as far away from the doll as possible. He got ready for bed and climbed under the covers, pulling them all the way up to his chin and looking around, wishing he still had a nightlight.

It took a while, but Andrew finally managed to fall asleep. When he woke up the next morning the first thing he did was look around for the doll. Seeing it was safe, he got up left the room, heading into the kitchen. "Good morning." His mom was cooking eggs and his dad was buttering up some toast. Andrew breathed deep, almost forgetting about the bad dreams he'd had. Everything smelled so good....

"Morning sweetie." His dad set down the knife and walked over, giving Andrew a hug. "How'd you sleep?"

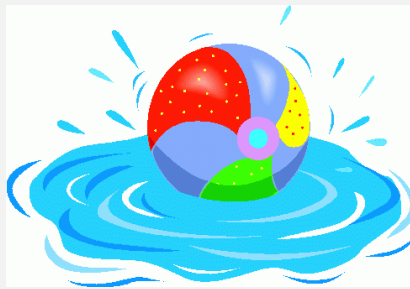
"Good." Suddenly, the little boy remembered the doll again. "Did it move?! Where is it?"

His mom turned the stove down a little, continuing to stir the eggs. "It's exactly where we left it, just like we said. You see? Nothing to worry about." She must've seen Andrew was still nervous because she added "If you want, we'll keep it with us one more night." Andrew nodded. He was in no hurry to get that thing back. He didn't care that it hadn't moved last night.

Two nights later, though, and it was back. This time, it was sitting on a chair in the corner. The boy still couldn't get over the feeling that it was watching him. Scared, he picked up a jacket and covered it up again. He lay down in bed, pulling the covers up high and watching it. Just as I was starting to fall asleep, he heard it; the choppy, robotic sounds of it moving across the floor. Then the music started. He couldn't even scream he was so scared. Andrew watched it terror as it moved closer, its eyes lit up like the demon eyes he'd seen on all those Halloween pictures. He tried to move, to run for the door but he couldn't. It was like that doll

had put a spell on him. Andrew started breathing fast and shaking as the lights around its eyes got bigger and bigger. The doll seemed to get bigger too. It finally reached the bed and the light spread out away from the doll, moving towards him. He tried to scream again, to let someone know what was happening, but he couldn't get a sound to come out.

The next morning when Andrew's parents came in to wake him for school, all they found was the troll doll lying on my pillow.



The Land Barge's Final Demise

By Marjorie Ann Clark

In 2005, our family, which then consisted of my husband, Frank, our Boarder, Davidah, three cats, and a dog named Spike, needed a larger car for the up and coming Federation for the Blind State Convention on July 7-9. Since there was hardly time and even less money to purchase a vehicle, my late mother in law, who we all called "Mom", suggested that we purchase a beaten up, very worn car for the price of car reregistration, 50 bucks. Being very naïve about the hidden flaws of used cars, I accepted her offer and proceeded to refuel the car, check the tires, and put new oil in the engine from our trusted mechanic who worked down the street from "Mom" for another thirty to forty dollars.

During the next two weeks before the convention, I drove the car to and from work. My boss, Mark, upon viewing my newest conveyance for the first time, promptly dubbed it the "Land

Barge." It was bigger than I ever expected. If we could look past the faded blue paint and buckling fake wood side panels, and the erstwhile AC, plus the almost not there power steering, it should be noted that the interior could easily accommodate eight persons or four persons with a lot of luggage, if we could stomach the stench of what could have been engine oil and smelly socks.

The only real problems I had with this station wagon, (for want of a better term), were parking, leaving a parking space, and making tight turns, probably in part due to the very stiff steering column and the wagon's actual width and length. Parking spaces have, on average at least in Florida, become much smaller than they were in the 1970's, possibly because the store owners want more parking spaces and that people are driving much smaller cars than they used to, like compact and midsize cars. But, of course, I digress.

The day dawned turgid and humid on that Friday morning of July 9, 2005, with the sun already making its furnace like presence known shortly after the relative coolness of dawn. What did I care? I could withstand the rigors of packing copyrighted paper goods for Davidah to sell at her rented booth at the hotel, my army backpack, a cooler filled with ice and edible goodies, Frank's gym bag, and Bonnie, our other business partner's luggage into the cavernous space of four unfolded seats in the back of our wagon. We were going to Orlando, city of the best in family entertainment and shops for miles around!

Normally, the trip from East Miramar to the outskirts of Orlando's International Drive, takes about 4 hours. We completed it in 6 hours, with many bathroom stops and rest breaks along the way because Davidah had problems holding her fluids in check. Somehow, we got lost trying to find the Convention's Holiday Inn address and arrived there very late at night. Bonnie had taken over as driver for Frank shortly before our arrival, without telling

us she had night blindness! She later admitted it, stating that by following the Truckers' taillights, she was able to get us somewhat safely into the city, given that we were also in a downpour.

Of course, we then had to locate the night clerk's office in order to obtain two rooms, one for Bonnie and Davidah, and the other for Frank and myself. At long last, we got our room keys, and proceeded to unpack everything into the rooms, meet up with Davidah's blind friends and their guide dogs, and return to our rooms for a dreamless and deep sleep from stress and exhaustion. Little did we know that our problems with this trip were only beginning!

The next morning, Davidah, Frank, and I hauled the paper products to the booth we almost did not get due to a mix up at registration. Bonnie had gone to a meeting and then disappeared for another several hours. In retrospect, I think she was having misgivings about this trip as well as myself, and was quietly staying out of the way as much as possible. The next snag in our plans was that no one, and I do mean no one, even wanted to really even look at our wares, let alone buy them. The consumer base was more geared to younger blind persons and their needs, not to an aging blind population; the folks who came were more interested in technology advances for the blind, not for large print check registers, for example, which we were trying to sell. This made Davidah more cross than ever, so Frank and I also tried to stay out of her way and her frequent tongue lashings. Was this really a vacation?

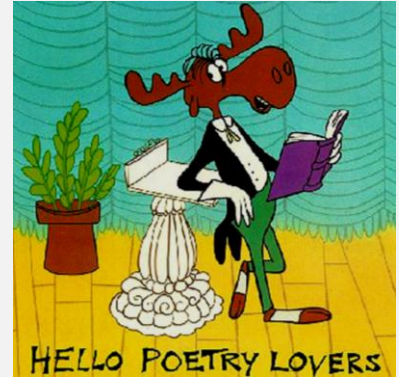
On the last night of the convention, Davidah got drunk and had a one night stand with one of the conventioners; I would guess from what little she told me that next morning. So we packed all our stuff we came with, checked out of the hotel, and headed for the Turnpike around 9 am. Seven miles out of town, I noticed the Land Barge's radiator temperature gauge go red. Next thing I know, we lost almost all steering and all power at 60 mph in the right lane on the Florida Turnpike!

Frank somehow managed to steer the car to the right shoulder as it shuddered its last "dying breath." Now what were we going to do, no wait, what was I going to do? I foolishly had taken a laxative the night before and needed a bathroom right then and there! For only the second time in my life since college, I relieved myself in front of everything and everyone in what little bushes I could find. How humiliating that was!

The next problem we all faced was, how were we going back home when our wagon was pronounced "dead on the scene" by the AAA tow truck man, who kindly allowed us to take the car's body to the Orlando's Sears department for a second opinion? I think all 3 of us were still in a state of shock and denial at that time. (Bonnie had quit the scene entirely earlier and had found another ride home from her partner, Curtis, who came from Miami to take her home-smart woman!) At long last, due mainly to Davidah footing the bill for the next three days while we looked for a minivan to cart ourselves, the wares, and our other stuff, I was truly able to have a much needed vacation, even in the light of not having enough meds for the extra time we were there. However, after a quick call to my boss at the library where I now work, I was granted some more time off.

We all pooled our financial resources and had great fun t-shirt and souvenir shopping on International drive, swims in the pool, tasty meals in inexpensive restaurants, and some basic rest and recreation while learning to drive a van at the time. That is correct: Davidah bought a barely used Minivan for 15 thousand dollars from her account in order to obtain transportation home and utilize the van's space potential that was even more than the wagon's ever was. In a nutshell, we had some rough times on this trip, but everything came out all right in the end.

Portal Poetry Corner



Nice To Know A Friend Who Cares By Joanne Williams

It's nice to know a friend who cares
Someone who's loving and trusting
A friend that will be there

A lifelong of laughter
A day of falling tears
A heartfelt soul warming hug
That can last in our hearts for years

A soft touch on the shoulder
Whenever I was down
A needed friend to talk to
I'm glad to know that
You were always around

I hope that as long as we live
We will always be friends
A long lasting friendship
We together could give

All I want to say is that
I love you
And I hope that stay
Best friends together
Forever
To Last for all our days

Of You and I By Joanne Williams

In a cloud of dreams
I dream of you and I
Holding hands so tight
Oh how nice
Oh how right
A partner for life

Through the struggles up ahead
 Through thick, thin, and strife
 No parting unless we're dead
 The magic of wonders
 From the day that we met
 Through thinking
 Yes we pondered
 And now our minds are set
 So let us be here together in the mist
 Of this wonderful space of art
 With you
 The partner of my dreams
 From this day let us never part

The Tree in my Backyard is on Top of Me.

By C.L. McKenzie

The tree in my backyard is on top of me.

I know! I know!

No one will believe me but trust me, trust me!

The tree in my backyard is on top of me!

It stands there, its large roots placed on top of me.

It mocks me and teases me, telling me that my days are numbered before the world forgets about me.

It inevitable, isn't it?

The world forgetting about me.

Oh, why me! Oh, why me!

The tree is on top of me! The tree in my backyard is on top of me!

On days that I think I can be unburied.

When the dogs sniff around the tree and digs a bit

He pushes them away and plant bright red roses instead.

That damn tree!

It grows its roots, pushing me deeper in the dirt.

It sends its army of insects to take and consume my flesh

Help! Help!

My mouth, its open and I can't close it anymore!

The roaches flood it. They flood into my mouth!

At this rate, I will surely lose my tongue.
 My tongue! My tongue!
 How will I ever speak again?

Oh, why me? Oh, why me?
 This tree is on top of me.
 Does it not see my woe?
 My terrible luck and poor chances?
 Does it not see that my family misses me?
 They search for me in vain, ignorant that I am only but a few yards away.

Oh my mother!
 How does she cry!
 She does not know that this tree sits on me.
 Its roots pushing through my torso, feeding off what used to be me.
 Curse that man who buried me under this tree. Curse him! Curse him!

The insects may devour my flesh
 The rains may wash the hairs of my head off
 The stubborn tree may sit on me
 But beware, beware. I will come back.
 I will come back and revenge will be mine.

Till then, Oh, why me? Oh, why me?
 This tree which sits on top of me.
 Oh, someone help me!
 I am under the tree in my backyard.

Cries from the Angry Mix Blood
By C.L. McKenzie

I do not know where God is sometimes.
 Olympus above sends no lightening good or bad to any of my cries.
 What is this heaven that people speak of? A paradise of bliss sent to bandage old warrior wounds.
 Souls and energy pressed into the wine press to pour out old bitter poison.

Disappointment.

Confessional organs swell holding back angry tsunami flood of discontent.
 What am I supposed to do against the angry hails?
 Disgusting talks declaring release.

I have no key to let loose the Dam.
 I wish to return to my green plains and leave this roman stadium. I am not a gladiator.
 I want to drop my cotton bags and not worry of artificial colors.
 I do not know where God is sometimes.
 Where are you?



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: June 9, July 14, 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.

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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 will have one of their short stories published in separate anthologies!



Keep writing!



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to view back issues and more.
Enjoy!