

# The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



## Uncle Max's Gift By Jaime White

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

Looking at the doll was bad enough. Then I found out it could move and make sounds. As the

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

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

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

After a minute, I saw it. The doll. Somehow it was now sitting on top of my television. Had I dreamed getting up and moving it? No, I had definitely woken up last night and moved it behind some pictures. I decided that it was time to move it to a more out of the way spot. I took the doll and set it on the top shelf of my closet. I even tossed a few old sweaters I never wear on top of it. *There. That should do it.* Satisfied, I turned around and hurried to the kitchen for breakfast. I remembered suddenly that we were supposed to be going to my grandparent's house for their own holiday party. It was one of my favorite parts of Christmas. They always had great

food, lots of music and there was always lots of cousins my age there to play with. Forgetting all about my new toy, I hurried to eat as quickly as possible and then finished getting ready. *This is gonna be so cool....*

We finally got home at about 9 o'clock that night and I had to hurry up and get ready for bed. As I opened my door, I let out a scream. Sitting on my bed was that horrible little troll doll. My parents raced in, asking me what was wrong. "The doll!" I pointed at it with shaky fingers. "It moved!"

"What do you mean 'it moved'?" My dad raised his eyebrow at me, looking at me like I had just lost my 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." I 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 Amy'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!" I was so scared, I was almost crying. My parents looked at each other a minute and then my 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”. I was just glad to get that thing out of my room. It almost felt like it’s eyes were following me wherever I went. I could swear it was smiling, too. I ran to my bed and grabbed the doll, handing it to my mom and following them to their bedroom.

“Now let’s see....” My 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.”

I didn’t believe them, but I nodded anyway. “Ok, Mommy. Good night. Night, Daddy!” I turned and hurried to my room, eager to be as far away from the doll as I could get. I got ready for bed and climbed under the cover, pulling them all the way up to my chin and looking around, wishing I still had a nightlight.

It took awhile, but I finally managed to fall asleep. When I woke up the next morning the first thing I did was look around my room for the doll. Seeing it was safe, I got up and left my room, heading into the kitchen. “Good morning.” My mom was cooking eggs and my dad was buttering up some toast. I breathed deep, almost forgetting about the bad dreams I’d had. Everything smelled so good....

“Morning sweetie.” My dad set down the knife and walked over, giving me a hug. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good.” Suddenly, I

remembered the doll again. “Did it move?! Where is it?”

My 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 I was still nervous because she added “If you want, we’ll keep it with us one more night.” I nodded. I was in no hurry to get that thing back. I 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. I still couldn’t get over the feeling that it was watching me. Scared, I picked up a jacket and covered it up again. I laid down in bed, pulling the covers up high and watching it. Just as I was starting to fall asleep, I heard it. The choppy, robotic sounds of it moving across the floor. Then the music started. I couldn’t even scream I was so scared. I watched it terror as it moved closer to me, it’s eyes lit up like the demon eyes I’d seen on all those Halloween pictures. I tried to move, to run for the door but I couldn’t. It was like that doll had put a spell on me. I 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 my bed and the light spread out away from the doll, moving towards me. I tried to scream again, to let someone know what was happening, but I couldn’t get a sound to come out.

The next morning when my parents came in to wake me up, all they found was the troll doll laying on my pillow.



### The Drip By CP Bialois/Ed White

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 doted 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 no where 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 he 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.

**Check out CP's many novels  
at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)**



### In Search of an Ear By Rick Weber

Life is a three act play. First, you are born and grow up. Second, you carve out a career and perhaps, have a family. Third, you retire and enjoy the fruits of your labor before dying. Yes, death comes to all of us, and we should be prepared. The reality is that most of us don't plan, leaving the decision making in the hands of our loved ones.

I was in that majority until a routine medical screening by my doctor revealed that I had a terminal disease. *Me, I thought. Doctor, you must be wrong. I'm getting a second opinion.* The second opinion confirmed the first. My prognosis was not good and my time left was short, according to both doctors. I was still in denial. I always took good care of myself. This could not be happening to me. Even medical science makes mistakes, but a review of my test results confirmed what both physicians advised me. Although I felt fine at the time, both practitioners told me to get my affairs in order, including my living will so my loved ones would know my wishes.

The truth was that I had no next of kin. I was an only child without

an extended family. My parents passed away a number of years ago leaving me well off. I never married. Although I enjoyed numerous intimate relationships over the years, I had no children. My will consisted of leaving my estate to various charities with my attorney as executor.

On my own, I made a substantial amount of money from a company I founded. A few years back, a large multi-national corporation made me an attractive offer to buy my firm which I could not pass up. I spent a lifetime working twelve to fourteen hour days building up my business. This left me no time for a family. I accepted this. Otherwise, I would have been divorced multiple times leaving a lot of collateral damage along the way. The sale of my business came at the right time just before entering my golden years. I started to travel around the world and regretted not doing it sooner.

Being alone did not bother me for it was my way of life. Dying alone was my fate, but I had never thought my end game all the way through before. During my research, I learned that most people did not speak about end of life care with their loved ones nor had their wishes put into writing. This stunned me. I had no one to talk to about this subject, but why would anyone not discuss such an important matter with their family puzzled me.

Knowing how much time I had left was the most important piece of information my doctors gave me. They gave me the details of my condition, and the treatment options available. They knew I wanted a say in every decision. Quality versus the quantity of life was what mattered most to me. I did not want

overly aggressive care, and wanted to spend my last days at home.

My attorney, a close friend of mine, knew my situation and agreed to drawing up my living will and to act on my behalf when I could not make decisions for myself. In my case all of this was easy to do. It was all done in one sitting at his office. I wondered how people with families approached end of life issues.

How involved did they want their families to be in their end of life decisions? How much of their medical information did they want their loved ones to know? Did they want to be surrounded by them when the time came? Did they ever think of when they would approach their next of kin to talk about any of these questions?

Before any meeting, you must decide who you want to talk to; your spouse, your children, your parents, clergyman, doctor, friend, or caregiver. When to do it is also important, depending on your family circumstances. The setting is also critical. It has to be in a place where you feel most comfortable. Outline what you want to say to them, not only about your wishes concerning your treatment, but also, about other important matters like your finances, among others. Talk about family disagreements or other tensions which may exist. Treatments you want, or don't want, such as resuscitation or a feeding tube. Let them know that nothing is set in stone and can be altered as your circumstances change.

By the time you read this, I will be long gone from this life. Take what I have just shared with you, and at least think about it.

*\*This work of fiction was inspired by the Conversation Project. More information can be found at [www.theconversationproject.org](http://www.theconversationproject.org)*



### **Barn Find By DiVitto Kelly**

Alex Brickman drove by the rust red old barn, now standing precariously between towering pine trees. He slammed on the brakes of his newish crow black BMW and backed up, parking on the side of the road. He stretched his right arm and reached inside the glove compartment. He'd heard rumors, now catching a glimpse of the back taillight through a pair of binoculars. It was true.

He was familiar with the design; his grandfather owned an early 1960's model before swapping it even Steven for a 32-foot sailboat. The old coot was dead set on sailing the seven seas. Unfortunately, he didn't make it past sea number one. He hit a coral reef somewhere in the Caribbean and drowned.

The man focused the binoculars and peered through as the late afternoon sun glimmered off the visible chrome bumper. Yep, just his luck: the barn doors were slightly ajar and the tarp not fully blanketing the automotive beauty. What a tease, he thought.

"Bingo." The man was elated and relieved. It wasn't one of the 1970's models, especially the last one issued in 1974; even he knew that was a bad year for Jags. The model sported those horrible bulbous front and rear black bumpers that stuck out like buck teeth. Oh hell, beggars can't be choosy, Brickman mused, letting out a sly laugh.

Either way, he was ready to wheel and deal. Brickman always brought along a thick wad of cash, usually three or four grand just in case he stumbled upon a classic. Or, if the rube owner was smarter than a bowling ball, he'd delve into his briefcase and take out that Italian leather-bound checkbook and write away for the whole kit and caboodle, but not too much. His persuasive usage of cash usually spoke abundantly loud and clear.

Today though, the normally calm, cool, and collective Brickman was feeling anxious. His hands were quivering, his heart palpitating in anticipated joy. If he was able to snag the jag, it'd feel like Christmas morning ten times over. The early forties man with wavy black hair took in a deep breath then exhaled. "Patience Mr. Brickman, patience," he reminded himself.

He knew central North Carolina, the heart of Piedmont territory, was now a hotspot for automotive gems, kinda like San Francisco during the gold rush days. Brickman was from the metro DC area and preferred keeping his treasure trolling to within a four hundred mile radius. Two years ago, he tracked down a mint 1968 white Mercury Cougar in Kernersville, just outside of Greensboro. That netted the car-flipping pro some serious cash.

The man glanced at the rear view mirror and then forward. Not a soul was stirring on the lone stretch of road, once fully paved. Most of the top layer of asphalt had withered away, now replaced by sprouting patches of Schwarzenegger tough weeds. He stepped out of the car and took off his mirror sunglasses, nearly planting his brand new Johnston & Murphy Conard wingtips on top of road kill. "Disgusting," he uttered.

Brickman sidestepped the dead raccoon, or was it a squirrel. He didn't know – or care. He sized up the well-kept modest two-story property, painted Tar Heel blue with white trim. Affixed were narrow black shutters - a classic Midwest looking abode. The next closest house was at least a mile away. Perfect, thought Brickman, a low-life lobbyist from the Beltway, a breeding ground for the profession.

"This is gonna be like taking candy from a baby," he said before closing the car door, tweaking the remote with a double chirp.

Brickman crossed the street then walked up the gravel driveway. He sauntered past a 1981 two-door Dodge Reliant K, a car that somehow managed to win Motor Trend magazine's Car of the Year. It looked like it was painted with White Out.

Brickman cringed at the blighted auto. "What a piece of crap." He sighed. "What the hell happened, Detroit?"

The sole property was carpeted in rich green hilly grass. In the front yard stood a nice-sized oak tree; complete with a weathered tire swing hanging from the thickest branch. Scattered pine trees lined the sides and back yard. It was still

hot out. He hated the month of August. No matter where you were in the U.S. of A., it was hotter than a dog's breath as his grandfather used to yarn. He stepped over some rusted garden tools before proceeding up the squeaky gray painted stairs, each side lined with potted herbs. A nice touch, Brickman thought.

The once black mesh on the screen door was bleached cinder gray by the sun, but was still serviceable. Brickman peered inside but couldn't see much. The flowery designed door mat read Home Sweet Home in blunt, dulled yellow lettering. The whole scenario felt like it was straight out of a heartland postcard. He was already anticipating the towing service picking up the automotive gem and hauling it back to his suburban blissed four-bedroom, four bath, and four car garaged, brick-faced McMansion. He was hoping he was still within the hundred miles allotted by AAA Plus. The Plus membership allowed him to tow it for free at that distance, something that had come in quite handy on many occasions. If it was just out range, a little palm greasing never hurt anyone.

Brickman knocked on the door rather tentatively. Too much apprehension, he thought. His gut told him any little thing could blow this whole deal. His usual brand of persuasive negotiating style was less reserved, more like pure unadulterated brashness. Sometimes his past stint as a trial lawyer got in the way. As a professional schmoozer, he needed to work on that. "Knock on the door like you mean it," gritted Brickman under his breath. "Let them know you mean business."

He spotted a car barreling down the two lane road, an older black Ford pickup. The competition, maybe? He knocked harder this time. He was anxious. Brickman patted his back pocket making sure he had the money. For the most part, prying away classic cars from unsuspecting yahoos was easy peasy. His people person prowess came in the clutch more often than not. Brickman could size 'em up in an instant. And back home, garage number four needed a new occupant.

"Come on, come on, I know you're home," Brickman uttered, peering in again. He waved away the mosquitoes and was about to knock again when he heard a voice call out.

"I'm a coming, I'm a coming. Hold your horses," said the voice. A radio playing classical music wavered from inside. He stepped back off the mat so not to seem too intrusive.

The person removed the simple latch on the screen door. "May I help you?"

"Uh, hi, ma'am," said Brickman, acting polite as a southern gentleman. He even had a little 'below the Mason-Dixon line' twang in his voice. "My name is Alex, how are you today?"

The seasoned citizen, in her late sixties, swung the screen door open and stepped outside. She sported a tasteful celery green dress and sported what looked like a denim blue apron. She appeared like an older version of the mother from the Happy Days television show. "Sorry, I was just in the middle of preparing dinner."

"That's fine ma'am. It certainly smells good," said Brickman, already in schmoozy modus

operandi. The smarmy charmer was working it.

"Thank you kindly, sir," replied the woman, with peppered gray hair and not an inch over five-foot three.

"It's a hot one today, huh?" Brickman said, the southern twang slipping just a bit. He was formally of the Garden State, New Jersey. He had little patience for 'middle America' types, but business was business.

Brickman immediately dug his chances of snagging the English roadster, already picturing himself speeding along the beltway loop, waving at his buddies. Well, stuck in traffic most likely, but still. He might even take a road trip back to his hometown of Summit where he grew up as a kid. He'd impress a lot of people there with that sweet ride; a lot of people.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "You look a little thin, must be city folk -- always eating on the go, never taking the time to savor good home cooking. You need food that sticks to your ribs as my momma used to say. None of that sushi shit for me." She burst out laughing.

Brickman always had an issue with his whisper thin frame, especially during his high school years. The word 'buff' was not in his repertoire. He worked out at least three times a week now, mostly cardio, and didn't think of himself as skinny anymore. He assumed people out in the middle of the boonies were all grossly plumpafied so anyone under 160 pounds would be considered malnourished. Good thing he kept his stereotypical thoughts to himself.

The woman observed beads of sweat raining down on both sides of his manicured facial scruff. His pale

yellow Lacoste shirt was already drenched. “Sorry I ain’t got no air conditioning right at the moment, but I do have ice cold lemonade. How does that sound?”

“Sounds pretty good, ma’am,” replied Brickman, taking out a handkerchief and dousing his brow.

“Take a seat, take a seat,” she insisted, before retreating back into the kitchen.

Brickman sat on the wicker hanging swing, each end supported by partially rusted chains. He glimpsed over to the barn. He was so close to the jag he could smell the leather interior. Patience, Mr. Brickman, patience, he reminded himself.

The woman, fresh-faced and upbeat, returned with one tall glass of freshly squeezed lemonade. She handed it to Brickman. In her other hand was a chilled bottle of Corona with a sliver of lime resting on top.

“Beer?” asked Brickman, rather surprised.

“What, old ladies can’t indulge in a cervesa to wet their whistle?” she chuckled. “To each their own, I say.” The two clinked receptacles.

“So what can I do for you, son?” asked the woman. “I’m sorry, how rude of me. My name’s Alice, Alice Conway. And your name again?”

Brickman,” he replied, “Alex Brickman. I was just driving and got lost and needed directions to get back to the Interstate.”

“Oh, thank God,” said Alice. “For a moment I thought you was an insurance salesman or some other kind of salesman. God I hate salesman.” She squeezed the lime and jammed it into the beer bottle. “My late husband was a salesman

and I swear there were times when I hated him too.” She giggled.

Brickman managed a half-hearted laugh but assured Mrs. Conway he was no salesman. “Actually ma’am . . .”

“Alice to you, young man,” she said, patting his knee.

“Okay – Alice,” said Brickman, taking a sip of lemonade, a bit on the tart side. “Uh . . .”

Alice took an undignified gulp of beer. “Man, that is a good tasting brew, light yet flavorful. Maybe I should do a commercial.” She giggled. “I think the heat’s making me just plain silly today.”

Brickman offered up a half-hearted laugh again. “Alice,” he paused. “That car you have in the barn. Would it happen to be for sale?”

“That old junker?” she replied, taking another gulp. “Piece of crap couldn’t haul hay if its life depended on it. I’m strongly thinking about it.”

Brickman licked his chops. “Do you drive it?”

“Oh hell no, son,” growled Alice. “It belonged to my late husband. And hell no again would he let me drive it. Truth is I get around quite nicely in my Reliant. At least it’s got air conditioning.”

The ringing chimes of ca-ching rang loud and clear in Brickman’s head. He quickly regained his thoughts in a split second. “I’m sorry about your loss,” said the man. Inside, he was doing backflips of joy. Patience Mr. Brickman, patience,” his inner voice begged. “What happened?”

“Oh, he died of a heart attack about three years ago,” she answered.

“Drank like a fish. Keeled over one day sitting in his checkered La-Z-Boy watching that Barrett-Jackson

car program again. My late Alex loved that damn car so dang much. I swear if he coulda, he’d try to . . . never mind. I just don’t get it: men and their car. Hey, you both share the same name!”

“That we do,” replied Brickman. “I’m sorry; you were saying about . . . Alex?”

“Oh, my late husband,” replied Alice. “Funeral home wanted a boatload of money so I ended up burying him in back yard.” Alice took the man’s hand and guided him around to the uneven landscape. “Over there, near the tallest pine. Thought I’d at least give ‘em some shade. He’ll need it where he’s going!” She let out a boisterous cackle. Brickman simply smiled.

As they walked back, the man gave the gravesite a second look. “What’s with the hubcap?”

“Oh that’s his tombstone,” said Alice. “Fitting don’t you think?”

“I guess so, replied Brickman. The two started walking towards the barn. “You got yourself a mole problem?”

“Mole problem?” snapped Alice. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just noticing all those little hills,” said Brickman, trying to make small talk.

“Yeah,” said Alice, finishing off her beer and plopping it in the hardly-used recycling bin the county dropped off years ago. “Been fightin them furry bastards for a year and a day.”

Brickman wiped his brow again. “We seem to have a problem with rats in our neck of the woods.”

“And where’s that?” asked Alice.

“The DC area.”

“Of course you got a rat problem,” blurted out the woman. “That’s ground zero for politicians!” Both laughed.

After a brief moment, Alice finally asked THE question. “So you want to see the car?”

“Sure,” blurted out Brickman in excitement, sounding more Jersey than Sothern gentleman. His inner voice reminded him to be patient, but he couldn’t. He was too close now. It was beginning to feel a lot like Christmas.

The two shuttled over to the decaying structure. “Help me with one of the doors, son.” Brickman obliged. They swung the heavy rotted doors open. In seconds, he rushed over to remove the tarp when he was reprimanded by the woman.

“That’s my job,” said Alice, a touch of that rosy cheer evaporating from her voice

“Sorry,” said Brickman. “It’s just that my grandfather used to own a car like this and . . .”

“Patience Mr. Brickman, patience,” chided Alice. She walked by the man and offered up a peculiar smile.

Alice started from the front of the car; parked nose first and carefully, methodically rolled the tarp back, treating it like a treasured Egyptian rug. Brickman salivated in anticipation. He could barely contain himself. He was biting his inner lip to not explode in excitement. Almost there! Almost there!

The former high school English teacher folded up the tarp and placed it on her late husband’s

workbench, still full of tools, some of the old-school wooden variety.

“Well, there she is.”

. “Wow, it’s in really really good shape,” commented Brickman, his voice elevating, his knees weakening. And somehow, that southern drawl was non-existent.

Brickman walked the length of the car, savoring each and every step. He managed to eye his Grinch-esque reflection in the deep cherry red paint. “Uh, is this all original?”

Brickman eternal strategic voice beckoned, remembering that phase one was always important to classic car shopping: Find the God-damn car! But phase two was equally key. Time to locate the imperfections. How could I possibly lowball you if the car is mint condition?

“Um, I think so,” replied Alice. “My late husband use to say something about all the numbers matching up, whatever that means. You know what the heck that is?”

“Matching numbers?” Brickman knew exactly what that meant. It’s a term used in the collector car industry to describe the authenticity of top collectibles or investment quality cars. “Uh, no, no idea,” he replied, playing up his ignorance. An educated showoff, Brickman hated dumbing himself down like that, but for the good of the deal, he had to act like a meathead.

Alice turned on the lights for better visibility, a series of long-tubed fluorescents hanging above the car that lit up the place like a movie set. She walked over to the barn doors. “Maybe I should close ‘em just in case anyone else drives along with a wondering eye.”

“That’s a good idea,” replied Brickman, half paying attention,

totally oblivious. He didn’t even notice Alice’s sleight of hand, picking up the wooden mallet from under the tarp.

She closed both doors and placed a slat of wood to keep it from opening. “You know, maybe it is time I got rid of this car. Ain’t nothin but a heap of trouble. Any idea what it’s worth?” Alice hated dumbing herself down too. It pained her to no end to use the word, ain’t.

The woman was as knowledgeable as any mechanic, even more so about the Jaguar E-Types. God knows she heard it every day for the last forty years from her late husband. She knew that famous quote too from Mr. Enzo Ferrari -- that Ferrari, who stated it was the most beautiful car he’d ever seen. On one (and only one) occasion, did the couple actually venture out for ice cream in the jag. Unfortunately, she accidentally dripped part of her rocky road on the car’s ruby red interior. Her husband went ballistic. Looking back, she realized what a wonderful metaphor it was to her marriage.

“What’s it worth?” asked Brickman, now inspecting the wheel wells like a detective. He was looking for any sign, any indication, that would justify a lowball price. So far, no rot or rust; not one goddamn flaw whatsoever to be found.

“Well, it’s an old car and will probably need a bunch of things replaced underneath,” said Brickman, not sounding totally convincing. It would certainly need a tune up, and those were expensive. “I’ve got about thirty-two hundred dollars in cash. How does that sound to you?”

Alice held her hands behind her back and moseyed towards

Brickman, who was now buried head-first inspecting the monstrous V-12 engine. “Uh oh, there’s some rust under here. Better make it an even three grand.”

Alice smiled an evil smile. “Oh, that sounds reasonably fair . . . for a 1965 Jaguar E-Type SI 4.2, 2dr Coupe 6-cyl in mint shape.” She knew that car, her husband’s true love, was valued at close to eighty grand. But hell, who was counting.

Brickman shuttered to a screeching halt. His breathing intensified. “Think, think,” he said to himself as he rose up from the beastly engine. In his front left pocket he carried a small pistol, just in case he couldn’t persuade the seller a bit more.

He turned to face the woman. “Maybe we can . . .”

Alice raised the mallet high and brought it down on Brickman’s forehead, whacking it like a croquet ball. He dropped like a felled tree. She stood over him in defiance like Ali/Liston II. “An even three grand? I don’t think so, ALEX.” The widow’s voice was filled with vinegar. “Rust? I’ll give you rust, nipple head.”

Brickman lay motionless on the damp cement floor, blood oozing from his wound. Alice pulled out an old blue tarp from underneath the work bench and rolled the unconscious man on top. She cleaned up any excess blood and scrounged for the rope. She’d been through this scenario before.

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Four hours later, the lobbyist found himself tied up. He was seeing double, still trying to decipher where he was. It was dark. Was he in a closet? He felt cool and cramped. Brickman shook off the rest of cobwebs. He felt Earth. It was firm

yet clammy. He began to focus upward and noticed the sliver of amber moon. There were footsteps coming.

Alice planted the gas-lit lantern down by the edge of the makeshift grave. She pulled out a small flashlight and directed the beam directly at Brickman’s bloodied face. “Here’s your jaguar, Alex.”

Alice dropped a red die-cast model E-Type, falling right into his lap. He grimaced in pain. “And thank you for the three grand . . . I’m sorry, you actually had thirty-nine hundred bucks on you. Now that’s a sweet deal.”

Brickman cried out. “Why are you doing this? Look, I’m sorry I tried to . . .”

“Swindle me? Because what, I’m an old lady who doesn’t know a damn thing about cars? No, it’s a bit more than that, son.”

“More than what? What did I do?” his voice cracked in fright. Despite his arrogant flair, the lobbyist was one hundred percent puss, a true weasel of a man.

“You think you’re the first a-hole who tried to con me from that car?” roared Alice, revving up her entrenched hatred for her late husband.

“My husband treated that Jaguar like gold. It’s all he really cared about. After he died, with a little help from yours truly, I decided this retired school teacher was going to cash in. Now don’t get me wrong Alex, it is a beautiful car. And yes Ferrari was dead on balls accurate; it is the most beautiful car ever made.”

“Well, maybe not the most beautiful . . .” ached Brickman.

“Zip it, putz,” barked Alice. “You interrupted my train of thought; don’t do that again.”

“Sorry,” recoiled Brickman.

“So where was I,” she said. “Oh. Rather than selling it right away, and since the car keeps appreciating, why not nickel and dime you parasites a little at a time, eh? A couple of grand here, four thousand there – or in this case, thirty-nine hundred, I’ll keep enticing maggots like yourself and . . .”

“You keep that barn door open as bait, don’t you?” said Brickman. “You bastard!”

Alice shot back. “Like a lure, trouser trout.”

“And all those hills in your backyard?”

“Ah, the hill are alive with the sound of . . . oh, I’m sorry, they’re all dead, so no, the hills are not alive with the sound of . . . well, anything, except maybe crickets and frogs. I believe I’m up to thirteen or fourteen. I’ve lost count, actually.”

“You’re insane,” cried Brickman.

Alice shook her head. “You know what the worst part is?”

“The fact you’re killing men over a car?”

“No, no. After the first half dozen you kind of get into a rhythm,” smiled Alice. “No, the worst part is these hellacious calluses on my hands, see?” She held up her hands for the man to see. “But on the bright side, digging is good exercise.”

“The cops are gonna find out about this you sicko,” shouted Brickman. He continued to scream hysterically.

“No, I don’t think so, Alex,” replied Alice. “You see, our lone cop in town is somewhere out here too. And with all the budget cuts, no one’s replaced him so it’s gonna be a while.”

“And the cars? What the hell do you do with the cars?” cried Brickman.

“Now those I DO sell for an unbeatable price, no questions asked. I’ve found that people will generally keep their flaps shut for a totally awesome deal.”

Brickman was suddenly startled by a familiar voice approaching. “Hi honey, how’s it going down there?”

“Joyce? What the hell are you doing here? You gotta help me! Help me from this lunatic!”

“Hmm, I’ll have to think about that one my philandering husband of mine.”

“She didn’t mean anything,” yelled Brickman.

Joyce grinned. “Oh, I’m sure of that. Actually, did you know the nice Mrs. Conway and I have two things in common.”

“What could you possibly have in common with this psycho killer?” he replied in disbelief, struggling with the thick rope.

Mrs. Brickman cleared her throat. “Well, annoying husbands who love cars more than their spouses . . .”

‘And? And?’ yelled Brickman.

“Patience honey, patience,” Joyce replied. Alex begged his wife for help.

“Oh, I’m sorry, the other thing?’ said Joyce, joining Alice with matching shovels.

“Dead husbands.”

## ***Portal Poetry Corner*** ***Check out the winners of this year’s poetry contest!***

### **\*First Place Winner: Green**

By Alice Kashuba

Carpet of green  
greeted my eyes  
awakening images  
forests, hills  
wearing cloaks  
of green.

Odor of green  
filling my nostrils  
mowed lawn  
potted herbs  
sage, rosemary  
mint green.

Taste of green  
crunchy lettuce  
tart apples  
peppers and peas  
sprouts and beans  
all green.

Feel of green  
soft silk skirt  
rough wool sweater  
smooth beads  
escaping fingers  
emerald green.

Sounds of green  
rustling leaves  
waving palms  
tranquil lullaby  
drifting off  
field of green.

### **\*Second Place Winner: War** **By Debbyette Ruiz**

The moon entices the calm of the desert,  
Peace of mind for the hurt.  
The winds sing for love, they sing for you.  
Three cheers for the Red, White and Blue.  
I walk in a world with no face,  
My footprints leave no trace.  
In a world of my own,  
I stand alone.  
Lying in a bubble that won't break,  
Living a nightmare that won't wake.  
The smile that hides a body so bold,  
Yet, inside my blood runs cold.  
You are sickness, and you are death,  
And like a thief, you steal my breath.  
On the outside looking in,  
God, where have I been?  
So far away from home,  
Far away from what I know.  
Who am I? I stand for you!  
Three cheers for the Red, White and Blue!

### **\*Third Place Winner: Desolate Luisa** **By Lisa Romer Math**

So long awaited, this private encounter of two souls,  
each tracked time with immeasurable pace, with impatient desire.  
Excitedly they approached the moon-like landscape reserved for small creatures and lovers with little needs.  
Breathless, desperate, they decided on a secluded dock as the refuge to exchange their long held passion.

He backed up against the railing, looking to support his quivering body.  
 She approached him slowly, knowing the impact that first kiss would have.  
 It began slowly, as lips danced, and hands explored hidden silken skin.  
 As moments passed, she felt tingling coursing through her and suddenly she was no longer standing but was gliding over the dock,  
 the warmth of the sun causing her cheeks to turn a playful pink.  
 The subtle breeze brushed over her raised arms while she tickled her lover's hair.  
 The sway of the sea grass harmoniously danced with the water lapping against the bank.  
 They could no longer conceal their desire.

The sun began to set over the barren park, creating yet another backdrop for nature's stage.  
 Content and satisfied, the lovers moved to the porch to witness the beauty of desolation.  
 Colors softly danced across the sky, just as the wine being shared on the swing danced across their tongues.  
 Above, pinks, blues, and grays melted into shades of orange and cloud formations appeared like far-off islands in the terra cotta sky.  
 The crickets announced the lovers' dreams to the world.

Awakening to the misty morning, the lovers once again moved to the swing.  
 Slowly they caressed, as if following the movement of the flowing wisps of moisture.  
 The quiet of abandoned life gave way to their private, isolated retreat as

the movement of the swing brought rhythm to the world they were in.  
 The silence was punctuated only by the sounds of winged explorers chirping their impressions of the dewy scene.

The day unfolded, giving way to the perfect unblemished sky.  
 The lovers strolled, hands locked, among the barren forest, as they explored forbidden topics in the foreboding surroundings.  
 Walks and talks themed the afternoon.  
 Tender moments, filled with tears of promises lost, gave way to playful banter while butterflies bounced from nectar-induced euphoria.  
 A small lake mirrored the empty, desolate surroundings that enveloped their escape.

But it was too quick, too soon an ending.  
 Their exclusive world disappeared into reality and the desolate land gave way to empty hearts.  
 They would have to relive these moments through conversation and verse until they could find another escape.  
 Desolate Luisa would once again know the pain of separation and the despair of love so true, yet unresolved.

**\*Third Place Winner:  
 THE BATTLE IS ON  
 By Suzanne Thompson**

It's spring in tropical South Florida  
 Alas! The palmetto's are back  
 Last night I saw my first for this new season  
 I almost had a heart attack  
 For some reason  
 This ugly bug scares the hell out of me  
 She was on my rug  
 I pounded her with my hard-soled shoe, to no avail  
 She began to crawl away,  
 somehow, doing the backstroke  
 While lying on her mangled back  
 I wrestled her onto my smooth tiled floor  
 I think I might've heard her cry  
 "No more! No more!"  
 Did I care?  
 No! No!  
 This battle of ours was clearly unfair  
 My panic, no match for her manic  
 She was back on her feet  
 Trying to skitter away again  
 Her head half off of her beaten body  
 Missing a leg and part of her wing  
 This ugly thing was making me shout  
 Words not allowed in most dictionaries  
 She was backing me into a corner  
 I called for my cat  
 She came, but, she just turned her back  
 Too classy and hoity-toity  
 To bother with that --- that big ugly bug  
 Clearly, I was on my own  
 The sole protector of my little home  
 My shoe in one hand, bug spray in the other  
 I had to think fast  
 Afraid that I'd miss  
 Yet, if I hit, dreading the squish  
 My decision was made  
 I sprayed, I sprayed and I sprayed

At last - success for me  
Victory!!!  
Yup! I so killed that "mother"  
With spray enough left for her  
sister, her brother  
Her father, her mother, her  
daughters, her sons  
Aunts, uncles, cousins,  
grandparents, In-laws and friends  
Who AM I kidding?  
It's tropical South Florida  
It's spring, a new season  
My battle has just begun.

**Happy Father's Day!**  
**By Barbara Jean Kaufman**

He doesn't have to be your father  
Or a relative  
And not even a man  
They just have to be great  
I told my friends  
Mom wore the pants in the family  
No meant no!  
Mom took care of "EVERYTHING".

She did the best she could. I  
forgave the rest.  
I forgive my father -- almost  
I was scared  
I stuttered for years  
A violent, loud and ugly man  
We left him  
Growing up I had male mentors.  
Uncle Jack, Grandpa, Wayne, and  
Jay  
We took nature trips, camping, and  
picnics.  
Just spending time  
Here's what happened  
A love of animals, nature, and  
respect

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

**Upcoming dates 2015:**

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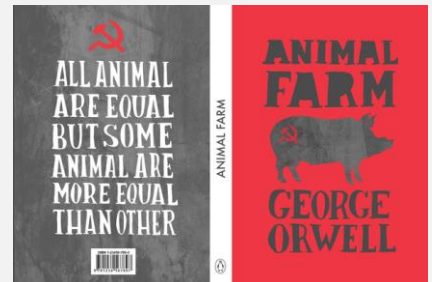
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