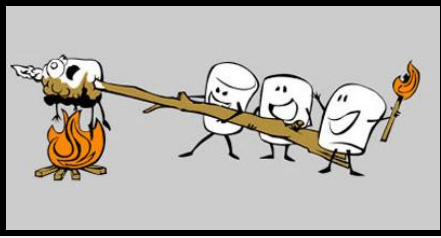


The Portal

Short stories about dinner, and more!



Home Body Buffet By DiVitto Kelly

"I'm famished," proclaimed Bob Unger, eager to chow down with his wife and two children as they patiently waited to be seated at the restaurant.

"We'll, you've come to the right place," replied the spunky brunette hostess, overhearing the hefty man wearing blue jeans and red checkered flannel shirt. "This way, sir."

The Home Body Buffet was a favorite dining jaunt for the Unger's, feasting at the popular restaurant at least once a month. The four sat down at their familiar table stationed near the main buffet spread for easy access.

"Okay kids, you know the drill, take your plates and silverware. And Toby, absolutely no cutting in line," said Mom to her weeble wobble framed eleven-year-old son. "Last time was embarrassing, jumping in front of that old woman, just for another thigh!"

"Alright, alright, I promise -- sheesh," said the miffed boy, a mirror image of his old man.

"Alice, please don't be so finicky this time," said Mom, addressing her slender daughter. "You father spends a pretty penny coming here."

"Yes mommy dearest," the surly mid teen replied, a Goth replica of her favorite TV show character, Gloomy Gladys.

Three of the four family salivated as they circled the large buffet table like sharks.

"Ooh, look!" said Bob, fresh CEO, musta got 'em from the city today."

Helen passed, preferring a sampling of sports athletes – something lean and trim. She'd been dying to lose twenty pounds, even trying the Adkins diet, but at some point, "you run out of Adkins's," she blurted out laughing, snorting like a pig.

Bob glanced to his right at a sign and cringed. "Politicians? Man oh man this joint is scraping the bottom of the barrel. Son, stay away from that or you'll be on the can for a week. I wouldn't eat 'em if they were the last living people on earth."

Alice never ate much, preferring fruit and vegetables. All her friends and their parents were doing it, but her mom insisted. "Dear, if you're not too hungry, try the librarian – it's low-calorie."

"Librarian? Ha," laughed Bob. "Why don't you just gnaw on a tree limb or something!" Mr. Unger was in fine comedic form. A full time comic, Unger literally killed his audience.

"Maybe if you'd stop chomping down on those slow-moving Wal-Mart types Dad you wouldn't be such a porker," said Alice, always aimed and ready with a verbal barb.

"Hey, I'm in good shape, kinda" he said as looked down at his protruding gut.

"Well I'm going to change my diet – no more people!" boasted Alice, an independent thinker who never shying away from an opinion. Both parents were hoping no one else overheard their daughter.

"Sorry folks; our daughter's a bit under the weather," said Mom, sporting a half-hearted smile.

"Son, I wanna test out a new joke -- actually it's an old joke but with a new take." Toby shrugged, preferring to fill up his garbage can lid of a plate. He never laughed at his dad's jokes.

"Okay Pop, spill your guts."

"Hey, I like that; mind if I use it tomorrow night at the Friars Club?"

"Sure, why not," Toby added, drolly.

"Okay, a horse walks into a bar." His son was already rolling his eyes. "Hang in there, son, okay? Now, where was I? Oh, a horse saunters into a drinking establishment. The bartender says, 'Hey, why the long face?"

"Come on Dad."

"The horse replies. 'Cause my wife was just turned into glue! Haaaaa!"

A single mother, properly dressed, gasped. "Sir, that was in absolutely poor taste!" She proceeded to select a healthy looking shin for her son and stormed off.

Seeing the restaurant completely full, the always effervescent Mr. Unger called out, "You know why cannibals don't eat clowns? 'Cause they taste funny!" Haaaaa!" The whole place erupted in groans.

"Why does he have to do that lame joke all the time; it's so embarrassing," quipped Alice.

"You've only experienced it for a few years dear, try twenty-five," added Mom.

The Unger family filled their plates and returned to the table. Alice stuck with a large salad and some finger food. Toby dug into his plateful of organs. Mom dined on biceps and triceps while dad devoured a whole teacher, hoping it would make his smarter.

"You know it never use to be this way," said Alice, well-mannered as she finished off her healthy meal. People use to eat regular foods; fruits, grains, chicken and beef.

"That was two hundred years ago dear," said Mom. "You should know from history – how viruses wiped out the food supply all over Earth. And the fish, they got smart and swam into deeper waters, unable to be caught. In desperation, people turned on each other, and in due time, we liked it."

"I heard it was because humans were so filled up with preservatives and chemicals it was the only thing still fresh to eat," joked Dad. "It was fat people who were eaten first – those couch potatoes never had a chance."

"I read people use to eat barbecued ribs . . . from pigs!" added Mom.

“What’s a pig?” asked Toby.

“Dad,” Alice answered, coldly.

“So what are you saying, we start grazing on our front lawns?” asked Dad. “Maybe pour some thousand island dressing and sprinkle a few croutons on our fine Kentucky bluegrass? Ridicules!”

“Try this?” said Alice. She took out a small plastic container from her cute panda shaped purse and handed it to her dad.

Dad opened it, grimacing at the tan object. It had a crusty texture, still warm. “What is it?”

“Just give try it Dad. You’re not scared, are you?”

“I’m not scared of nothing, except your mother when she’s really upset at me. Okay, okay.” He took the object and bit into it. His eyes lit up in approval and continued munching. “Wow! What is this?”

“Chicken,” said Alice. “For our school project our group recreated a farm from saved DNA. We’ve got chickens, turkeys, pigs, goats, and cows; they’re all stored at the abandon barn behind our school.”

“I think I’m in love with chicken,” drooled Dad. “You got any more?”

“Yep, at home. We’re going to expand the project so we don’t have to eat people anymore. Aren’t you getting tired of chasing the postal worker for breakfast, or preying on my teachers? We can’t find a decent substitute anymore. And besides, it’s messy too.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” replied Dad. “You really think we can all survive on this?” He eyed the chicken leg bone, cleanly stripped of all the meat.

“Yes!” Alice replied emphatically. Toby was barely paying attention, munching down on liver.

“Well, good for you!” said Mom, proud of her honor roll daughter.

“Always the smart one.” Alice smiled.

“Well, let’s blow this Popsicle stand and eat chicken!” said Dad. The family of four paid their bill and headed outside.

“I think this a good time to put the top down, don’t you think?” asked Dad,

proud of his hundred year old blood red convertible.

“Maybe we shouldn’t” said their daughter.

“Ah, it’s perfect out honey, and besides, I feel like we’ve all been reborn or something. We’re swearing off people!”

The family of four blissfully drove in and around the neighborhood, enjoying the crisp spring evening air before stopping at a red light. From behind, a gang of famished cannibal thugs jumped the Unger family, devouring them like a school of piranhas.

They left nothing but the bones.

Car Talk By DiVitto Kelly

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

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

“I knew you’d show up on time,” Nagle said laughing, wiping fake perspiration off his brow.

“Sorry I’m cutting it so close,” Michael replied, shaking hands. “The main highway is closed off.”

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

“Always a pleasure venturing out here in the jungle, joked Michael, who thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of giving back to the local community where he grew up. “I’m sure you know the story be heart; it’s where I really began my writing career – here after school working with a certain librarian.”

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

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

“Well this year it’s forest fires,” added Nagle. “It’s been so dang dry we’ve got ‘em popping up everywhere. Every time lighting strikes, boom, you got yourself a fire.”

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

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

“Yeah, got a ginger ale for me? You know how I like my ginger ale when I do a book talk.” The two went into the library and headed towards the exhibit hall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dang, you attract in an interesting group of people," joked Mark, observing his friend peeking through the door window.

"What have I done?" mused the writer with a laugh. An unassuming mid-framed man with black wavy hair and three-day old bristly scruff, the nearly six-foot Kearns looked more like an accountant than horror novelist.

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

"So what's the next book you're working on," asked a woman with black

frizzy hair, heavy-set, and full of anticipation.

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

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

"Next question?" Kearns asked.

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

"Good question – I'm sorry, your name?"

"Tommy," he answered politely.

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

"Well, both my children love calamari and while I can't stand the stuff, I was thinking, what if an evil scientist zapped them – I mean the squids, not my kids, with radiation. Somehow people start eating the tainted cephalopods and turn into, well . . . tentacle heads." Kearns made a zany gesture with his wiggly fingers.

"You know it always sounds a tad goofy when I have to explain it, but it's really a fun, creepy story; I know you're gonna like it," said Kearns. The audience laughed, except one person, who was frowning. The man stood up, cleared his throat and spoke up loud and clear.

"You can do better."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" answered Kearns.

"I said you can do better." The man wore a blue and white checkered shirt with sleeves rolled up, olive colored khakis, and a bleached out Miami Dolphins baseball cap. His glasses were red wine tinted and his shoes didn't match.

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

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

"That's right," Michael answered. Many of the attendees looked at the man in disgust. He looked homeless and probably never even finished high school. And yet this guy was being critical of a celebrated novelist.

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

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

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

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

"It's Jay, but that's as far as I'm gonna go!" Mark Nagel walked over and whispered something into Michael's ear.

"He's a regular here – loony as a bed bug and such." Kearns nodded.

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

"Its' all so stupid," he hollered back, wanting no part of the conversation. He mumbled the title again and left the library in a huff.

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

Nagle cut in. “Well, I think that’s about it folks. We all appreciate Mr. Kearns giving us extra time; a big round of applause for Michael Kearns everybody!” The attendees roared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What was funny about it?” asked Mark.

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

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

“Thanks my friend.” He took another swig of soda and let out a small belch. “The thing is, I could never write like John. He was especially good; knew his craft inside and out, but he never thought it was good enough, always dissecting paragraphs to death. I never told him this, but sometimes you gotta lighten up, write like people talk – be more down to earth, even if you’re writing about . . . tentacle heads.”

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

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

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

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

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

The main highway was closed due to raging fires burning on both sides. Michael barely made it to the book talk due to its closing. Sometimes at night when crossing Alligator Alley, the stretch of road linking the east and west coast of south Florida, you could easily spot fires in the distance; some caused by lightning strikes especially during the winter dry season, some man-made -- purposely torching fields of spent sugar cane.

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

The road wrapped itself around and through the Florida Everglades,

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

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

Bored already, Michael clicked on the radio and started searching for anything free of static, which meant, unfortunately, either religious talk or country music, two things Michael was least fond of. Still probing, Michael stumbled upon a cool fifties tune and kept the radio dial there. The DJ’s voice announced a weather bulletin and some local news, his voice was deep and raspy, yet pleasant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I promise," said Michael.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael slowed down to a near stop and looked up. "No, it can't be . . . can it?" A deluge of the strange objects were falling, some big as Nerf footballs. The road was littered with them; now they were pelting his car. One stuck to the windshield. It had beady eyes and a sinister looking mouth. It was . . .

"Poriferas from Outer Space?" God no, not them," Michael shrieked. They were falling everywhere, including right into the mammoth back seat to his prized classic car. They were nothing more than teeth housed in a sponge body: simple yet deadly. In his novel, a

once peaceful coral reef turns into a blood bath as the supposed peaceful sponges are replaced by evil replicas and soon begin devouring everything human in the ocean sanctuary.

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

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

"You can do better."

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

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

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

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

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

"Come again?"

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

"Put that pen and paper away, pronto!"

"Pronto?" replied Michael. "That's not a word you'd normally use."

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

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

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

Michael was exasperated. "You what?"

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

"Yes you did; I even commented it to Mark."

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

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

"What is that?" Michael asked.

"See ya monster man."

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

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

One by one, the silver-sided fish whooshed past Michael. In an instant, the gargantuan shapes suddenly

vanished. He sat up and scanned the night skies, first to his left, then to the right. Optimistic the coast was clear from his fictitious creations; Michael backed out of the ditch and sped away. After a few minutes, he repositioned the rear view mirror, feeling relieved before taking a deeper look. Then he screamed.

Right behind him was a rogue flying fish, eyes angry with gulping mouth wide open. In his novel, *Night of the Flying Fish*, an unscrupulous company dumps toxic waste onto a school of flying fish, which quickly absorb the contaminated substance throughout their bodies. Soon, the flying monsters begin their reign of terror on a quaint seaside town until an ex Gulf War vet saves the day.

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

Michael roared, pumping his fist. "You don't mess with your maker!"

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

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

For the next ten miles, a rain cloud hovered over the embattled writer who was now soaked. "No more convertibles, I swear," said Michael, eyeing the dark gray cotton ball of precipitation above. Michael looked

down at the gas gauge and noticed he was running on fumes. “Ratones.”

Up ahead, Michael spotted a dilapidated gas station, tattered with white peeling paint and missing shingles. The Bonneville sputtered as he prepared to dock it at the lone pump; nothing digital, just the old spinning number kind with a bleached out Mobil logo painted on the front.

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

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

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

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

Michael finished up, the total just under twenty dollars. “Geeze this thing

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

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

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

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

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

Michael jumped through the passenger side, sliding over to the steering wheel on the slick vinyl interior. He scrambled for the keys deep in his jean pocket.

“Come on you nipple head.”

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

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

The creature lunged at the vast car with its elongated limbs. As Michael pulled away, the barbed suction cups

stuck to the trunk of the car like Velcro. Back on the road, Michael turned in horror as the tentacle head reached closer.

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

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

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

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

“Congratulations Michael, now drive home safely.”

A year later, Michael was back at Everglades Public Library finishing up a signing of his latest book.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What the . . . ?”

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

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

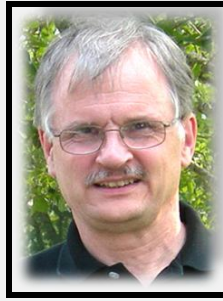
“I know. I still think you could’ve done better, but I guess it’s a start.

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

“I believe there’s a farmers market up ahead; I’m sure they’ve got carrots.”

“Maybe I should try non-fiction.”

“Better hop to it, son.” Click.



**The Repast
By Rick Weber**

“What to serve? What to serve?” Jason Pardo asked himself repeatedly. Standing alone in his designer kitchen with cookbooks strewn across the counter, he spoke out loud again. “Today is the day and I haven’t decided yet on a menu. Not to worry, I’ll go over last year’s selections. At least, I’ll know what not to serve.”

It was early Saturday morning, and Jason needed to prepare for his annual feast to take place that evening. From the printed menu, he reviewed last year’s accomplishment, Spice-Glazed Lamb Chops with Red Wine-Coffee Pan Sauce. This was compromised of Ancho chili powder seasoned lamb chops topped with a sauce made with beef broth, red wine, and coffee. He felt lucky that he got the recipe from Food and Wine magazine. An awkward mixture of ingredients, Jason remembered, and he received not a single complaint. “Will I be that lucky again this year?” He asked himself out loud.

The guests, he thought to himself, were all family members, and some were picky. Aunt Gert, Uncle Bob, cousins Lana, and Mike had always been the toughest of the lot. “If I can serve them, I can serve anyone,” Jason let out. He knew his parents, Joe and Sally, would be the easiest of the bunch, along with his wife Camille. To him, a group of eight to feed presented no problems.

Jason stopped and reflected. What became an annual event started out three years earlier on his parents’ thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. Camille and

Jason invited his parents to their place outside of the City. It was to be an intimate group of four doubled when Mom’s sister, Aunt Gert, invited herself along with Uncle Bob, cousins Lana, and Mike on the train ride to get out of town. Aunt Gert always invited herself along. The chime of a grandfather’s clock in the living room brought Jason back to the present and the realization that he still had a meal to plan.

“Aunt Gert and Uncle Bob, no matter what I put out on the table, it won’t be good enough for them. I might as well focus on Mom and Dad. After all, it’s their anniversary,” Jason concluded. He went over their favorites. Dad liked Beef Wellington while Mom favored Arroz con Pollo. It had been a long time since he served either of these dishes. *Which one should I prepare?* Jason thought. “Why not do both?” he said out loud. “After all, they are my parents.”

With the entrees decided, Jason had only side dishes and dessert to work out. “Not a problem,” he declared. Grabbing a pencil and a sheet of paper, he compiled the list for his trip to the market.

Cooking had always been an avocation for him. He started as a teenager busing tables in a neighborhood restaurant near the family’s apartment in the City. The owner saw that young Jason not only had an interest in cooking, but also, a talent for it. Jason went from busboy to salad chef all before graduating high school. He continued working at the restaurant rising to chef de partie while he was getting his degree in business administration. This impressed Camille whom he met when they were undergraduates. Jason remembered Camille telling him that he was the only boy she ever met who could actually cook.

Cooking became a diversion for him after graduation when he got an entry level position on Wall Street. He quickly found out that his talent in the stock market equaled that in the kitchen. He married Camille, and they were able to buy an apartment in the



City and later a house out on the Island where he now finished his grocery list. With one last look around the kitchen, Jason felt it was complete and off to the store he went.

It was mid-morning, and Jason made it to his favorite gourmet market which had just opened for the day. He no sooner walked through the door when he heard his name being shouted from behind the meat counter.

“Mr. Pardo, it’s good to see you. What can we do for you today?” belted out Tony the butcher as he weighed a cut of prime rib for another customer.

“Tony, I’m having a get together at my house tonight and will be serving both Beef Wellington and Arroz con Pollo. When you get a chance, can you pack me up a couple of pounds of beef tenderloin and a couple of three pound broiler-fryers. I have some other things to get and will pick them up on my way to check out.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Pardo.”

Jason pushed a cart to the produce section to look over the vegetables for his side dishes. On the way he picked up a box of rice. Arroz con pollo was definitely the easier of the two dishes to make. Although with his culinary skills he could do more challenging dishes, he would serve his parents’ favorite meals. Five pounds of Yukon Gold potatoes would more that sate his father’s love for mashed potatoes. Roasted carrots would round out the main course. A bag of flour was added to the cart so Jason could make his own fresh rolls for the feast and German Chocolate cake for dessert. With his meat order in the cart, Jason headed for the cashier.

Once he made it home and had everything arranged on the counter, Jason went over the menu again to make sure he had what he needed. Satisfied, he began the process of making his parents’ thirty-eighth wedding anniversary an event to remember.

Jason started by doing what he felt was the hardest task of all, making dessert. He preheated the oven, and as it warmed up, he sprayed several

baking pans with vegetable oil and dusted the insides with flour. In a mixing bowl he poured boiling water over the German Chocolate, stirred it, then set it aside before grabbing another mixing bowl for the flour, baking soda, cocoa, and salt. A large mixing bowl came out for him to blend it all together along with other ingredients before filling the baking pans and getting them into the oven. As the cakes baked, Jason mixed his own brand of coconut-pecan filling to connect the layers of what would become two separate cakes. He then put together his own dinner roll dough which he would pop in the oven when it came closer to the appointed hour.

Looking at the kitchen clock, Jason took pleasure to see he was ahead of schedule. He now focused on the Beef Wellington. After seasoning the tenderloin with salt and pepper, he seared both sides until it was golden brown while working on a mushroom puree at the same time. He finished wrapping them together in a puff pastry sheet.

With the Beef Wellington ready for the oven, Jason intently focused on the Arroz con Pollo. He cut the two boiler-fryer chickens into serving pieces and worked on getting the rice prepared. In two large skillet, he first browned the chicken pieces and removed them. The rice mixture replaced the chicken in the skillet as Jason stirred them carefully from a recipe he had long committed to memory.

In two carefully choreographed actions, Jason put the Beef Wellington pastry puff into the oven and then quickly added the chicken to the frying pans containing the rice. This left him with only the mashed potatoes and carrots to finish. Since his parents did not care for appetizers, Jason did not have to worry about soup or salad. He only needed to get himself ready because he had set up the dining room for the feast on Friday night.

After showering, shaving, and donning a blue serge wool suit, Jason was ready and went back to the kitchen to put the food into serving dishes. He

made it out to the dining room filling Waterford crystal glasses from bottles of red and white wine according to the preferences of his guests.

Jason stepped up to his place at the table, raised his glass, and proposed a toast. “To my parents, Joe and Sally Pardo, who sacrificed so much for me and helped me get where I am today, Happy Anniversary!”

Sitting down, he announced, “Now, let’s celebrate!” and started a conversation.

“Mom, how was the train ride up from the City? I thought you’d be late. How’s the Arroz con Pollo?”

Looking across the table he said, “Dad, how’s the Beef Wellington?”

Taking a deep breath, he let out a well modulated remark. “Aunt Gert, Uncle Bob, is there anything I can get you? Lana, Mike, dig in. There’s plenty.”

Glancing down to the end of the table, he commented, “Camille, don’t worry about cleaning up. I have it under control.”

Jason dominated the evening with light-hearted conversation and had everything cleaned up with the dishes put away by midnight.

The next morning carefully packed up the leftovers and headed to a local soup kitchen where he was known for his generosity. The director greeted him and asked a couple of volunteers to bring in the food from Jason’s car before speaking to him.

“Mr. Pardo, what was the occasion this time?”

“My parents’ wedding anniversary, I made their favorites and had plenty of leftovers.”

The two volunteers who unloaded the food looked at the director and nodded before taking the donation inside.

The director smiled at Jason. “I didn’t know it was that time of year again. We appreciate your generosity as always.”

“I’m sorry I can’t stay and help you serve lunch. I have to get back home,” Jason said as he turned and left.

When he arrived at his house, no one was there. He did not call out to anyone. The silence did not bother him as if he expected it. He entered the study and walked past a front page newspaper article mounted in a large picture frame.

The headline dated three years earlier to the day was: "Seven Family Members Killed by Drunk Driver." Part of the accompanying article read:

"A large sport utility vehicle driven by Camille Pardo and occupied by her in-laws, Joe and Sally Pardo, were killed last night when they were hit head on by a drunk driver. Also killed in the accident were Sally Pardo's sister Gert Robinson, her husband Robert, their son Michael, and daughter Lana who were also in the SUV. Camille Pardo had picked up the occupants at the train station right before the accident. They were here to celebrate Joe and Sally Pardo's thirty-fifth wedding anniversary at Camille and her husband Jason Pardo's residence. Jason Pardo, a respected member of the community and an accomplished chef, was home preparing dinner at the time of the tragedy. A spokesman for Mr. Pardo reports that he is devastated and unavailable for comment."

Jason sat quietly at his desk looking at the menu from the evening before. Reaching for an open folder, he placed it with the previous years' menus. After closing the folder and dropping it into the bottom right hand drawer, he locked the desk with a key he had in his vest pocket



Thanksgiving with Lucky Brown

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

Lucky Brown lifted his head at the timer dinging above the oven. With his ears half raised and the saddest look he could manage plastered on his face, he wagged his tail to get the attention of his boy's mother.

Jill looked down at him and shook her head, "No."

While spoken with a soft gentleness, the word forced Lucky's head back down on the tiled floor. For the better part of the day he stayed close to the kitchen, even going so far as to ignore his boy's calls to go outside and play, in the hope something of the sweet smelling food would fall to the floor.

A large sigh escaped him as he watched his boy's mother move about the kitchen working on various treats. Had he understood what was happening he could've taken solace in the fact it was a yearly ritual. All he knew was his boy and his parents called it Thanksgiving and the smells were too delicious to leave.

"Lucky! Come here boy!"

Lucky raised his head and looked towards his boy while wagging his tail. He loved his boy and he didn't want to hurt his feelings, but how could anyone think of doing anything besides eating the wonderful smelling food? After a moment, he decided his boy needed him more and pushed himself to his feet. Tommy had always taken care of him by slipping him some food underneath the table and Lucky was certain he'd reward him.

After a silent, forlorn look over his shoulder towards the kitchen, Lucky trotted into the living room where Tommy sat with some of his father's friends watching something on the big box called football. With little effort, Lucky hopped onto the sofa next to his boy and settled in. When Tommy started to rub his ears, Lucky's eyes rolled into the back of his head from pleasure. To reciprocate, he gently licked his boy's hands, arms, or any piece of skin he could find.

"Tommy, get that dog off the sofa. We're trying to watch the game." Jim entered the room from the direction of the front door with Frank, one of Jim's friends, with him.

Lucky wagged his tail at hearing Tommy's father's voice, even though it wasn't a pleasant tone. He belonged to Lucky's boy, and he was intent on taking care of the whole family.

"Awe, Dad. He always sits here with me."

"Frank needs a place to sit. Why don't you take Lucky outside to play?"

Play? Did he say play? Lucky's ears perked up at hearing the word. Maybe playing wouldn't be such a bad idea while he waited for a treat.

"See? He hasn't been out all day."

"Fine." Tommy slid off the sofa and ran towards the door. "Come on, Lucky!"

Without hesitating, Lucky leapt from the sofa and followed his boy.

"Don't forget your coat!"

Tommy grabbed his coat from its resting place on the back of the chair by his mother's desk and paused at the door looking at Lucky. "So, you want to go out and play, boy?"

Lucky let out a half bark, half snort sound and pranced backwards a couple of steps. For a seventy pound Black Lab/Akida mix, his grace was unmatched by any in the house. Even Tommy's cat Mittens paled in comparison.

Chuckling at seeing Lucky's excited reaction, Tommy opened the door and the two burst into the back yard. Until the scent of the cool fall air, Lucky hadn't felt the need to go outside. Now,



with the air filling his lungs he hurried to the first of a handful of spots where he marked his territory. By the time he reached his third one, a spot in the middle of the chain link fence separating the Browns and their neighbor's yards, a bark caught his attention.

Since Lucky arrived in the Brown household a couple of years earlier, the neighbor's dog, an elderly Irish Setter, was his biggest rival. Due to his size, most dogs had little wish to push Lucky, except the old man, as Lucky came to know him.

After he adopted the Browns, Lucky made it a point to do what puppies do best: play. When he first met the old man, the old man's people talked about putting him to sleep because of his age. While Lucky didn't know what that meant, he felt it was wrong to approach the older dog but he did it anyway. His boy's parents seemed worried the old man would bite him, but Lucky was an inquisitive and curious pup. After their initial sniff, the old man got to his feet and began to play with Lucky.

The sight seemed to shock everyone and they talked about how the old man hadn't been able to walk more than a couple of steps without having to lay down. Within minutes, the old man was chased down Lucky before allowing him to do the same. Since then they were the best of friends and heated rivals when it came to the fence line.

Seeing Lucky marking the fence, the old man hobbled over and was sure to re-scent the same spot. At seeing his friend do so, Lucky moved to another spot to mark and waited for the old man to head there before going back. For several minutes the two of them did their dance even when they were dry and couldn't mark anymore. Going through the motions was an important part of their day as neither one wanted to admit defeat.

"Lucky, come on boy!"

Lucky looked towards his boy as Tommy stood by the backdoor. For a brief moment, Lucky felt a pang of guilt shoot through him at not having played

with his boy, but at seeing Tommy's face, he understood his boy enjoyed watching him. Wishing nothing more than to please his boy in return, Lucky hurried towards him. As luck would have it, the smell of the finished dinner greeted his senses.



**Ginger's Protest
By Jamie White**

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

"Hey, watch it! How many times do I need to tell you to knock that off?" Julie glared at the cat who'd just darted in front of her feet for the second time that morning.

Ginger sat on the floor, looking up at her human with wide, innocent eyes. She cooed as she stood and walked over, head butting her human's leg with a light, firm motion.

Julie laughed. "What am I going to do about you?" She kneeled down and scratched the cat's head. After a minute, she stood again and reached for the bag sitting on the floor. "Are you ready for dinner, sweetie?"

Ginger's purr grew louder as she jumped on the table where her bowl was kept. Her meal times were the highlights of her day. Well, except for the long naps she took. She walked over and rubbed against the bag as the kibble fell into her bowl.

Julie laughed again. "You're lucky you didn't make me spill it." She pulled the bag away and motioned to the bowl. "Go ahead, sweetie. Eat up."

Ginger approached the bowl, cocking her head as she inspected the food. It didn't look right. She fixed her human with an accusing look.

"What's the matter, girl? Don't you like it?"

Ginger sniffed at the kibble and took a bite of the food before looking up at her again and letting out a plaintive mew. What was her human trying to do, poison her? No, this stuff wouldn't do at all.

Julie sighed, pointing at the bowl. "That's what you're getting, so I suggest you eat it. Vet's orders."

Ginger cocked her head again at the familiar "V" word. It was that awful place where they stuck her with sharp things and made her stand on some cold thing they called a "scale". Ginger looked back at the food. There was no way she would eat anything the vet thought was good. She wanted her usual food back and she was going to get it.

"You heard me." Julie nodded to the bowl again. "Now, eat up."

Ginger watched as she opened the thing called a "refrigerator". Now that was promising; a lot of good-smelling stuff came out of it. Ginger jumped down from the table and walked over, propping her two front paws in the edge of the doorway, her tail swishing.

"Hey, get out of there."

Julie shooed her away with a gentle shove, causing Ginger to mew in protest. Ginger jumped back on the table and sat down, her tail swishing back and forth in a sharp motion. How dare her human take away her favorite food and shoo her away from much more appetizing smells?

The cat watched as her human carried some containers to the counter Ginger liked to sit on. The sound of the can opener made Ginger's ears perk up. Now, that sounded more like it. She watched as her human set a can down, her eyes widening as she recognized the can.

Ginger waited until the human's back was turned to open another can before she jump onto the counter. Before she could sample the tasty treat before her, the human's voice boomed through the kitchen.

"Down!"

Ginger leaped back to her table and sat in front of the bowl, staring at the human with an icy glare.

“Now, that’s it. You stay down, Ginger! Bad kitty!”

While the human busied herself with the other ingredients on the counter, Ginger glanced down at her bowl. How could something that looked so good taste so horrible? She didn’t understand these humans and how they worked sometimes. Ginger reached a paw out, scratching at the food container.

“Girl, stop that. Eat your food instead of scratching at it!”

Ginger refused to back down, continuing to scratch harder at the disgusting joke of a dinner she’d been handed. Didn’t humans know a cat needed something better than this? They deserved it far more than those big, noisy beasts humans called dogs, that’s for sure.

“Enough already! Girl, I know you don’t like it, but this is how it’s going to be. You’ll eat it when you’re hungry enough,” she promised.

Ginger doubted she could ever be hungry enough to eat the vile stuff before her. Instead, she jumped down and walked up to the counter to catch anything that may fall. As the human moved about, fixing her meal, she bumped Ginger with her foot a couple of times.

“Ginger, really. Stop pestering; you are not going to any of this and that’s final.”

Ginger mewed again in protest, taking her place back on the table to get a sip of her water. Trying to get her message through to this stubborn human was hard work. A few sips later, and Ginger felt refreshed and ready to make another attempt. She watched her human with a keen eye, not missing a movement as she waited for another opening.

Julie stirred something in a bowl that Ginger assumed was the stuff she’d tried to eat before. It was called “tuna” and one of her favorite things to eat besides her old kibble. Ginger tensed her muscles and licked her lips as she

watched other things get poured into the bowl, the mixture being stirred even more. That just had to be good—the human sure seemed to enjoy it enough!

As Julie turned to put some stuff back, Ginger saw her opening. Without wasting a second, she made a graceful and silent leap onto the counter. She dipped her head into the bowl, taking a small bite of the mixture. It was even better than she’d imagined.

Before she could get any more, her human hurried over and gave her a gentle shove off the counter. “Alright, alright. You win for now.”

The woman took another can out and added a small amount of tuna to the mix. “There. Happy now?”

Ginger purred, rubbing against her owner’s side before turning her attention to her hard-fought prize.



Poetry Place



Here are the top honors from the Poetry Club Awards in April. Congratulations! Enjoy!

First Place Fannie Green By Marvin Purse

Fannie Green
Had many keys
In both her bony hands,
Attached to them
A written note
To remind her of her man.
When she was sad,
She would sit and
Jingle them a while
To rhythms
Only known to her
In tunes
That helped her smile.

Then after a spell,
And if she felt well,
Fannie Green would sit,
Rocking away
By a crackling fire...
Rocking and humming
Her old and warm memories
Then slowly,
She would retire.

One quiet evening
The old piano sat
Silently all alone.
No one was there
On the long black bench
For Fannie Green was gone.

And all the keys
 In their lonely rows
 Jingled not again,
 And the chair next to the
 Cold and dusty hearth
 No longer rocked
 Where Fannie Green
 Had been

When Morning came
 With fog and dew,
 A tiny girl
 The age of two
 Peeked
 Into the half-dark room.
 Then slowly
 She climbed on
 The long black bench
 And pounded out a tune:
 First one note,
 And then another,
 To rhythms
 Only known to her
 And Grandmother,
 Gone too soon

Second Place
Dying Flower
 By Sharla Jeffereson

I remember a long time ago when I
 was bold and young,
 When my words were loud and
 piercing, when my body moved like
 a song.
 My hair was thick and flowing, my
 heartbeat steady and strong.
 Constantly walking with strides that
 were sure and long.
 I remember when the bliss of ignorance
 shone on my face and I didn't give a
 care about my place in the race.
 Wild flower, anemone, tumbleweed,
 shrub, moss now has gathered.
 I am no longer a rolling stone.
 Vultures lay in wait to pick at my bones.
 My smile has vanished, my grace
 erased.
 Drooping, wilted wallflower, lost in time
 and space.

Third Place
Sunrise on the Intercostal
 By Ann Hallett

Drip... drip... drip...from the boat's
 bulge across the canal
 Soft laps of water upon the seawall
 Crimson sneaking slowing over the
 horizon
 The distant wurr of a motorboat
 Warmth rising in my body
 A hot mug of Hazelnut coffee, and a
 sunrise over the Intracoastal
 A school of jumping fish demands my
 attention
 A plane, in the distance, makes not a
 sound,
 Gliding in and out of the clouds,
 As flapping and squawking parrots, a
 gift of Andrew,
 Fly in unity from tree to tree.
 The sun gets higher and brighter,
 so I look away
 At a neighbor with his steaming mug of
 Joe visually inspecting his sailboat
 And another preparing his engine for a
 day of fishing.
 The sunrise is almost complete when a
 groan from down the canal comes
 closer and louder on its way to a roar,
 And the cigarette, a jarring alarm clock,
 wakens a few more neighbors.
 The rumble of the garbage truck
 coming down the street announces the
 beginning of new day.



Another day, another sunrise...
 I see no sunrise
 Just soft pink filling the gaps between
 grey clouds
 And clouds aren't drifting today, but just
 hanging overhead
 Reminding me to take my umbrella
 today.
 Parrots are heard, but not seen this
 morning.
 Wind, thunder, or the roar of a jet in the
 distance
 Interrupt the rhythm of sailboat ropes
 Stretching tight against their moorings.
 A drop of rain on my bare arm
 A sip of coffee that smells too strong
 and bitter this morning
 Palm trees blow in the wind threatening
 to drop dead brown fronds
 No barking dog comes out for its
 morning "toilette."
 And no neighbors stroll with their cups
 of joe..
 No fishermen or pleasure boaters
 prepare for a day on the sea
 More drops on my face. I feel a slight
 chill.
 And the internet beckons me inside
 Maybe today there'll be an email from a
 long lost friend amongst all the junk.

Third Place
The Only Time is Now
 By Martin E. Gonzalez

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

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

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

 The only time is now,
 While we are still in Spring,
 To hug the friend,

Forgive the foe,
To dance, to laugh and sing,

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

Thank you everyone for your participation!

Join the Writer’s Portal today!

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

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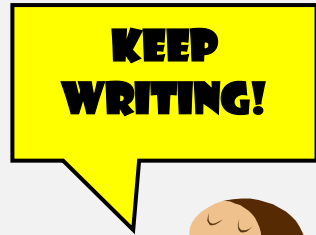
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FEEDBACK CORNER

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!

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



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