

The Portal



Jabari and the King's Heart By Etheridge G. Lovett

An Introduction and Excerpt from Mr. Lovett's new novel!

Sitting at a small table on the second floor patio area of one of London's romantic restaurants known as the King's Place, a young couple, Abasi Mbeki and his lovely date, Jennie Kingsly, enjoyed the full moon as they watched people walk along the sidewalk below. The tall, gentle Abasi, dressed in a tailored blue suit, his skin as dark as ebony wood, but smooth in appearance, released a radiant smile saying in a deep voice, "Visiting London and spending precious time with you Jennie for several months has confirmed to me that you are the only one that I will ever love."

Smelling the sweet bouquet of red roses placed before her, Jennie was touched by Abasi's words spoken. She released an alluring smile as she leaned in closer to the man of her heart's desire, fixing her brown eyes upon him, saying, "Mr. Mbeki, you have been more than generous since my stay here. It is because of you that I feel as if I am now in paradise. You have treated me like nothing less than a queen since my visit to London. I am so blessed that my boss sent me on this two month long trip. She was so impressed with my computer salesmanship that she decided to

select and send me out of many others. There is no possible way that I could have afforded this trip on my own. Perhaps all of this was meant to be in some glorious way. The only problem with my Cinderella story is that unfortunately it is about to end. I'm afraid I will be leaving in one week to head back home to Brooklyn, New York. My family is probably worried about me by now."

"Jennie; that is what this special dinner underneath the moon and stars is all about tonight. Over this past month, I have given our special time spent together some serious thought," Abasi said, pulling a silver case from his pocket while standing to his feet. "Come with me," he said, stretching out his hands towards Jennie.

Jennie's soft hands met his as she stood, cuddling her body within his warm embrace. Abasi guided her towards the railing overlooking the large full moon dwarfing the city as he stood with his arms holding Jennie like a caring mother would her child. Abasi opened the case, revealing a large diamond ring that sparkled by the moon's reflection. "Jennie Kingsly, I humbly ask you to be my wife, forever. I will care for you and fulfill your deepest heart's desire. Please marry me tonight. I have already arranged everything. Once we are married you will never have to worry about anything ever again," Abasi placed the ring upon Jennie's finger then gently kissed her upon her cheek.

"I don't know what to say... And the ring...you spent so much money for this. You drive around town in a taxi. How could you afford such romantic dinners and a stunning ring as this on your salary if you are a taxi driver?" Jennie asked.

Abasi chuckled as he replied, "The taxi belongs to a good friend of mine who is originally from Africa. We grew up together. He now lives here in London. I know his family back home quite well. He allowed me the privilege to borrow his taxi for a while. Stop worrying about money my love, we will be just fine."

Jennie melted further in Abasi's arms as she thought on his words. "Abasi Mbeki, I thought I'd never find a man that would treat me the way you do. Since spending time with you, I have wanted for nothing and I have laughed like I'd never laughed before. I also had the greatest of times. Out of all of the millions of men on Earth I feel that you are truly my soul mate so yes I will marry you this night. I will be your wife, Mr. Abasi Mbeki," Jennie said as her beautiful brown eyes beamed bright while looking into Abasi's light reddish brown eyes. They embraced as others sitting around at tables nearest to them, who heard the great proposal, stood and began clapping for the engaged couple.

Later That Night, St. Paul's Cathedral, London

After reaching the steps of the towering St. Paul's Cathedral, Abasi tapped upon the large doors several times as his knock echoed throughout the building. A short stout man, dressed in a black priest's robe opened the door, saying, "I was wondering what happened to you Sir."

"Reverend Matthew Richards, I am so pleased to know you were able to get clearance on this private marital ceremony tonight. This is the woman I told you about, she's my precious love, Jennie Kingsly, the woman who will be my blessed queen this night," Abasi said.

"Forgive me for staring but you are as beautiful as Abasi mentioned. It is truly an honor to meet you Ms. Jennie Kingsly. You are about to marry a great and righteous man, a man who loves the Lord with all of his heart," Reverend Richards said.

"Thank you for your kind words. I know of Abasi's greatness. I can see goodness beaming from his eyes and his heart. I am comfortable when I am around him, that is why I chose to be his wife forever," Jennie replied.

"Oh dear, I forgot, we must be quick...the Archbishop is waiting on us so I think we'd better hurry before he decides to change his mind," Reverend

Richards said, guiding Abasi and Jennie inside the cathedral down the long aisle leading to the altar of the edifice.

As Jennie and Abasi walked down the polished, marbled aisle, the glory of the cathedral was revealed with each step in its entire holy splendor. Their eyes followed the many ancient carvings and paintings depicting angels and prophets of old that made the cathedral a place set apart from all others. Music filled their ears as they approached the front of the cathedral where the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Cromwell, stood high upon a podium, dressed in a white robe trimmed in gold, holding a certificate of marriage. Sitting upon the podium was a large Bible. "Greetings, Abasi Mbeki. I've known your family for many years. For this reason alone I will allow this wedding to take place at this time within this cathedral. With that said, I now extend my deepest congratulation of you finding each other. Now it is time to seal your love forever. Let us begin this sacred wedding in the sight of our precious Lord," the Archbishop said.

Archbishop Cromwell proceeded in marrying Abasi and Jennie as gentle orchestrated songs filled the cathedral, songs praising the Lord of Hosts. The soft melodies weaved a feeling of holiness and enchantment throughout the cathedral while Abasi and Jennie became one flesh. When the vows were reached and the marriage was complete, Abasi kissed his bride while Reverend Richards and Archbishop Cromwell cheered.

"This is where our life's journey will begin," Abasi said, gazing into Jennie's eyes. She hugged him again as they exited the cathedral. The moment they left the building, Jennie's eyes stretched wide when she saw a long white limousine waiting on them. "I see you're full of surprises. Now that we're married, you must tell me what work you do to afford something like this," Jennie said smiling. "In time, my love...in time," Abasi said as they stepped into the opened door of the limousine. The driver took them to

one of London's most romantic hotels for the night. That night, Abasi Mbeki poured out all of his love upon his beloved wife as the two became one flesh.

The next morning, 7:00 am

When Jennie awoke she noticed Abasi was nowhere near her. She saw him standing on the balcony of the hotel dressed in all white with golden sandals on his feet. The morning sunlight engulfed him as he looked out over the city of London seemingly deep in thought. Jennie became concerned so she sprung from under the white satin sheets and draped herself in a white robe while approaching her husband.

"Good morning honey... is everything okay?" Jennie asked.

Abasi slowly turned, smiling as he said, "Everything is just fine my angel."

Jennie's eyes fell upon Abasi's broad chest. She noticed a light beneath his skin in the center of his chest as if someone was shining a flashlight from beneath. Jennie reached for Abasi's chest but he calmly closed his garment.

With a look of astonishment on her face Jennie asked, "The light underneath your chest... I've never seen anything like it before. What is it?"

Abasi glanced up towards heaven then gazed into his wife's eyes, saying, "There is something very important I must share with you. If our marriage is to be a righteous marriage in the sight of the Ancient of Days then it must be based upon openness and honesty at all times that is why I could not sleep until I share this important secret with you. Only then will my heart be free and at peace."

"You can tell me anything. I love you so much and I want so desperately for your spirit and heart to be free and at ease around me. But I need to know why your chest glows. Is it a part of your secret? What is it you want me to know?" Jennie asked.

Abasi took Jennie by the hand and led her into the bedroom as they both sat upon the soft bed. Abasi held

Jennie's hand as he said, "You remember when you said you would like to know what I did to earn my living? Well, the answer is that I am a king, the head of a great holy kingdom in Africa that rests high upon the glorious Mountain of Kings. The kingdom belongs to my forefathers and now I am in control of it."

Jennie was stunned as she gazed into Abasi's serious eyes as she said, "What? Are you serious? You're a king over a real kingdom? So our marriage makes me a queen? That is a lot to swallow and a lot of responsibility to take on." Jennie thought for a moment. "But I did promise to love you through all things, no matter what. Don't worry my love, I am here to serve as your queen if you'd like," Jennie said as she hugged Abasi tight. But he still seemed worried. When Jennie released him, she noticed the worried look upon his face remained. "There's more to your story and it has something to do with the glow in your chest, am I right?" Jennie asked.

"Yes, it does. The most important part of my story is this... Jennie, I'm born with a special gift burning bright within my chest. It is a blessed holy gift known as the King's Heart. Many years ago, my ancient ancestor, King Nakta, was struck by lightning in the center of his chest by the Ancient of Days and blessed with power from on high. His heart was changed and filled with holy, eternal power. Every firstborn son born through my lineage since then was born with this special gift. My heart glows because I also bear this great gift. Angels communicate with me, and I with them. They even visit my kingdom from time to time and protect the inhabitants thereof. The part of my story you need to know is that when men from my loins who possess the King's Heart reach the age of forty they are taken up from Earth and carried into heaven by the angels as was the prophet Enoch to serve in the Lord's glorious army. If you are to be my queen, you must abandon your yearning to go back to America and come to be with me as my holy queen

and cherish my secret that I have shared with you,” Abasi said. He reached over and picked up a box. “This will prove to you that my words are true.” He opened the box and pulled out the most beautiful king’s crown ever seen, covered in rubies and diamonds. Then he pulled out another crown for Jennie, also covered in precious stones.

Jennie stood to her feet with tears streaming from her eyes as she said, “I cannot live like this. To love you then lose you at age forty is not what I expected from this marriage. I’m not ready for something like this, knowing that you will leave me, even if this story is true. I’m sorry but I can’t deal with this... I cannot remain in a strange and mysterious marriage like this.” Jennie grabbed her things and ran into the restroom and locked the door while weeping.

“Jennie, please don’t cry. To hear you cry is breaking my heart... Trust me, things will be just fine if you come with me to my kingdom... we will be just fine,” Abasi said through the crack of the door but Jennie said nothing. Minutes later, she exited the restroom while dressed.

“King Abasi, I love you like no other woman ever can but I cannot be in love with you then lose you later when you reach the age of forty. I just cannot... I’d rather leave you now to save myself years of hurt and grief instead of sitting in a kingdom I know nothing of, far away from my family members while weeping over a husband I lost through a holy abduction. I’m so sorry but I must leave and go back to America,” Jennie said, grabbing her purse and fleeing out of the door with King Abasi running after her. Jennie dodged into a closet and hid as Abasi passed her, running about looking for her while calling out her name. When Abasi was gone Jennie exited the closet, then the hotel heading for the airport with a broken heart.

Unable to locate Jennie, Abasi returned to his bedroom and sat upon his bed gazing upon his kingdom’s two

crowns, then out of the window at the sun beaming through the patio doorway as he wept bitterly for the loving angel he found then lost.

Chapter One: The Awakening

Twelve Years Later, Brooklyn, New York, Upstairs bedroom of Uncle Joe

The golden sunlight streamed through Jabari Kingsly’s bedroom window, dancing upon his eyelids, waking him from his deep sleep. Joy filled his heart when he thought on the many gifts and hugs he’d receive. For this was no ordinary day... It was Jabari’s birthday. He’d finally reached the age of twelve. The first person he wanted to spend his birthday with was his favorite uncle, Joe Kingsly. Hopping out of bed Jabari ran out of his bedroom. He sprinted up the stairs while storming into his uncle’s bedroom. Little did Jabari know Uncle Joe was anxiously waiting to talk to him.

Joe tossed a golden ball to Jabari as he shouted, “Happy birthday son!” The sudden loud outburst stopped Jabari dead in his tracks. He instinctively stretched out his hand and pinned the shiny ball between his hand and his right leg. The ball then slithered about while wrapping around Jabari’s right hand.

“Whoa, that’s incredible. How did this weird ball do that, Uncle Joe?” Jabari asked. His heart pounded rapidly as he closely examined the unusual ball wrapped like fingers around his hand.

“Ah—huh, I caught you off guard on your birthday,” Joe mused, chuckling. “Consider the ball as a birthday gift from me. It’s perfectly harmless, and it’s no ordinary gift, Jabari, I guarantee you. It’s made out of heavens gold,” Joe explained, rubbing his aging hands through his woolly white beard.

“Uncle Joe, tell me the truth. Where did you get this silly ball from?” Jabari asked, poking the strange ball. The golden ball released Jabari’s hand while dropping to the wooden floor wiggling around like Jell-O.

“I see that you’re anxious to get information from your old Uncle Joe. You really want to know what it is? It’s a Rogma ball, Jabari,” Joe explained.

“Rogma... what’s Rogma?” Jabari questioned further.

“It’s the game I told you that I played when I visited the Mountain of Kings in Africa years ago,” Joe revealed. “Come on, Uncle Joe, please, not the Mountain of Kings again. You told me that story a million times or more and mom said there’s no such place,” Jabari explained.

“I hate to contradict your mother, but there is such a place, little nephew. I walked around the Mountain of Kings while visiting your father’s glorious kingdom. The Mountain of Kings really does exist,” Joe expressed with a serious stare on his face. “See what it looks like,” Joe continued. He pulled back the thick covers of his bed and pulled out a drawing of a tall mountain. “I almost forgot to tell you about the large white eagles. Jabari, you must see with your own eyes, the giant white eagles,” Joe said. He desperately tried to draw the eagles with Crayon markers he had tucked underneath his pillow.

“Uncle Joe, please put that stuff away before mom comes in here and see’s you with it,” Jabari pleaded.

“Okay son, but you must believe me. The majestic Mountain of Kings does exist, one day you’ll see it for yourself,” Joe said with sound conviction. He covered his drawings while stuffing his colorful markers back into the box.

Jabari picked up the shiny ball and tossed it up in the air a few times. When the ball landed in his hand it wiggled about then opened up like a person’s hand.

“I can’t believe this ball is made of heaven’s gold? This ball’s really weird Uncle Joe,” Jabari admitted. The ball crawled around in the palm of Jabari’s hand like a lizard then snapped back into its original shape.

Joe pointed at the ball saying, “That ball’s made of the finest gold ever forged. It’s a special ball that’s made by the precious hands of angels.”

“That’s completely unheard of, Uncle Joe. How could this ball be made by angels?” Jabari asked.

“Angels visit the Mountain of Kings all the time, son, bringing many gifts with them from glorious places beyond the stars. They made this ball and gave it to your ancestors many years ago. Don’t be afraid. I promise you, the ball won’t hurt you Jabari,” Joe explained.

“I don’t know, Uncle Joe, I’ve never seen gold wiggle around like this before,” Jabari said, closely inspecting the ball.

“Jabari, I want you to do me a big favor. I want you to play stickball with the gold ball instead of with the old baseball I gave you earlier,” Joe requested.

“Uncle Joe, I don’t think this ball will function properly in a game of stickball. How can we possibly play stickball with a silly ball like this?” Jabari asked.

“Jabari, don’t worry about the ball. The ball will do its part when the time comes. I promise you it will. You just do your part and win the game for your Uncle Joe. The Street Rats believe they can beat every stickball team in the neighborhood, but the gold ball from the Mountain of Kings will teach them a lesson they’ll never forget. Yesterday the Street Rats tied the game with their cheating habits. Today you’ll win the game with that precious ball you’re holding in your hand,” Joe said, pulling a brand new catcher’s mitt from a box on his lamp stand. “I purchased this catcher’s mitt with a few dollars I’d been saving up,” Joe said.

“Thanks so much for the glove, Uncle Joe. This glove and the gold ball are the best birthday gifts I ever received,” Jabari said, hugging his uncle. However, the thought of where the ball came from continued to weigh heavy upon Jabari’s mind. “Honestly, Uncle Joe, where did the gold ball come from? Will you tell me the truth?” Jabari questioned once more.

Joe stared at Jabari wide-eyed, saying, “What’s this, a police interrogation? What do you want me to

do, get up against the wall and spread eagle while you frisk me? Come on nephew stop asking me so many questions like a detective. The ball is simply your birthday gift, along with the glove, now get out here and put that Rogma ball to good use. Win the game of stick ball for your Uncle Joe.” Joe guided Jabari out of his bedroom while gently closing the bedroom door. Jabari stood in the hallway confused. He gazed upon the Rogma ball.

“Well, if Uncle Joe believes in you then that’s good enough for me,” Jabari said to the ball. He slammed the ball into his catcher’s glove and stormed downstairs. He ran outside to play stickball with his friends, but first, he had to convince them to play with the odd golden ball.

“Listen up everyone. Gather around. I have something important to share with you before we begin the game,” Jabari proclaimed, waving over his teammates and members of the Street Rats.

“What are you doing Jabari, trying to stall and buy more time for your team?” one of the Street Rats blurted out.

“Ah—shut your lips Roderick and hear what my buddy has to say,” Jabari’s best friend, Danny Sanchez warned, sucking on a lollipop.

“Today, we’re going to do something a little different than before. Instead of playing with my old baseball, let’s play with this new ball my uncle Joe gave me for my birthday,” Jabari said, holding up the golden ball. He tossed the ball over to the Street Rats.

“Wow, it looks like real gold but it’s not that heavy. I think its fool’s gold,” the coach of the Street Rats said, pulling out his Cub Scout jackknife, scraping the side of the ball. “It looks like real gold,” the coach of the Street Rats said.

“What are you doing? Give me that ball,” Jabari said, racing over to grab the ball out of his hand.

“How are we supposed to play stickball with a heavy gold ball like that?” another member of the Street Rats asked.

“Believe me, the ball will work when the time comes,” Jabari said, gazing up at his Uncle Joe watching the game from his upstairs window.

The Street Rats formed a huddle and talked about the new ball. After talking it over, they dispersed from the huddle and approached Jabari and his team.

“Okay Jabari, let’s play with the gold ball,” the leader of the Street Rats agreed.

“We’ll flip a coin to see who goes first. We’re heads,” Jabari called. He pulled a quarter out of his pocket and flipped it high into the air. It landed on heads.

“Here, go ahead and bat first, Andria,” Jabari urged his teammate while handing her a stick.

“Thanks Jabari, but step aside. I’m about to knock this ball over the apartment complex,” Andria replied. Crouched down low Andria waited for the pitch.

“Come on Andria, please don’t miss the ball,” Jabari pleaded.

Andria swung at the pitch and struck the gold ball with her first swing. The ball changed from a round shape to an oval shape. It spun through the air and soared around everyone’s head like an annoying fly.

“What kind of crazy ball is that?” Karen Mathis asked while ducking low as the ball zoomed past her head.

“You won’t get away from me so easy. I’ve got you,” one player of the Street Rats said. He jumped up and caught the elusive ball in his glove, but Karen had made it safely to second base.

“Danny, you’re up next. You know what to do. I want you to knock the ball over the apartment building,” Jabari said, handing Danny the stick.

“Thanks Jabari. If you think Andria’s hit was something, watch this one,” Danny bragged, getting into position. “Pitch the ball right across the plate,” Danny said to the pitcher of the Street Rats. He pointed at a crushed soda can in front of him. “This is a home-run hit, I can feel it.”

“Get ready Danny, here it comes,” the pitcher warned. He threw the ball with all of his strength. Danny knocked the ball high into the air. The ball spiraled about in a loop-to-loop fashion, bouncing on the ground. It then flew into the glove of one player of the Street Rats. Danny made it safely to second base and Andria to third.

“Now it’s my turn. I’ll show all of you how to hit a ball,” Jabari said to Karen. He approached home plate.

“Don’t you dare strike out, Jabari Kingsly, do you hear me? You better hit that ball with everything you’ve got or else you’ll taste my knuckle sandwich. I swear, if you miss that ball Jabari, I’ll come over there and slap you silly,” Andria warned from third base. She pointed at Jabari while jerking her head from side to side. The two long braids dangling from both sides of her head looked like rubber horns bouncing around.

“Leave him alone, Andria. We’re on the same team, and besides... Jabari’s the best hitter out here,” Danny reminded, waiting patiently on second base. Danny took a quick bite from a candy bar then shoved it back into his pocket. “Andria, you just get ready to run when Jabari smacks the ball out of the ballpark.”

“What do you mean ballpark, silly? We’re in the middle of a dead end street,” Andria replied, brandishing her fist.

“Relax Andria, Jabari’s a great stick ball player,” Karen said.

“Jabari, focus on the pitch and play ball!” Andria shouted.

“Hush up, Andria. You’re always running your big mouth. Give my buddy time to hit the ball,” Danny said.

“Look, will all of you please be quiet so that I can concentrate on the pitch?” Jabari pleaded. His eyes were fixated upon the pitcher’s every move. Jabari waved the stick in a circular motion while tightening his grip around it.

“Get ready Jabari, here it comes,” said Sam Duke, the chubby pitcher of the Street Rats. The ball flew out of his hand and spun towards Jabari like a stone shot from a slingshot. The loud

crack of the stick against the gold ball could be heard for several blocks. The ball altered its shape once again soaring high into the air. Jabari ran as fast as he could towards home base while sliding into the crushed can. Filled with excitement Jabari and his teammates jumped about and hugged each other. The Street Rats pouted and stomped about kicking cans, bottles, and other trash they found strewn around in the streets. Jabari’s team was finally in the lead.

“Look at him! That’s my boy!” Joe yelled from his upstairs bedroom window. He waved at Jabari and his teammates. With a warm smile stretched across his aged face, Joe shouted again, “That’s my boy! Keep up the good work, Jabari!” After shouting praises Joe took a sip from his cup of cool lemonade while slowly closing his upstairs window.

“Look at him. He’s so excited over your hit. Your Uncle Joe’s really proud of you, Jabari,” Danny said.

“I know that he is. I really love my Uncle Joe a lot,” Jabari said, picking up the stick, handing it to Karen. “Well, Karen, you’re up next. Do you think that you can top my homerun hit?” Jabari asked.

“Sure I can, Jabari. I know that I can. I’ll knock that gold ball on another street just for you,” Karen answered. Her freckled cheeks reddened as she batted her big blue eyes at Jabari.

“Stop playing around, Karen. You must focus on the ball and try not to miss. Your hit can put us in a greater lead,” Jabari explained.

Karen batted her eyes at Jabari again, kissing him by surprise right on the cheek. Boy was Jabari shocked over the unexpected kiss.

“Karen, what are you doing?” Jabari shouted. With a quick jerk, Jabari wiped away the kiss with his forearm. Karen winked at Jabari while walking over to the home plate, waiting on the pitch.

“Jabari, I saw that. Karen gave you a big kiss that time. She really likes you Jabari,” Danny said. Jabari and Danny leaned against an abandoned

Cadillac propped up on bricks near the curb as they watched the game.

“Yeah I know she likes me. I only like her as a good friend, that’s it,” Jabari explained.

On the first pitch Karen struck the odd shaped ball. She swung so hard that she spun around and landed flat on her face. Everyone ducked their heads low as the ball flew by. The stick went one way and the wobbly ball soared high in the air. It flew towards Jabari’s apartment and crashed right through Joe’s upstairs bedroom window.

“Oh no! It broke your uncle’s bedroom window!” Danny shouted.

Jabari’s heart pounded a mile a minute. He thought about how angry his mother would be if she learns that he had something to do with the broken window.

“Happy birthday buddy, but I got to go, Jabari. I think I hear my mother calling me. I’ll see you later,” Danny said. He and the other players ran away to avoid facing the wrath of Jabari’s mother, and his Uncle Joe. Even Karen, whose face was plastered in street gravel, hopped up and fled along with the others. Jabari stood alone in the middle of the street gazing up at the broken window. Just as he assumed it would happen the window slowly opened upstairs. Joe emerged from the dark shadows of his bedroom, a frown forming on his face. He pointed his finger at Jabari while calling him upstairs.

Oh no, Uncle Joe’s going to ground me for sure on my birthday, Jabari thought. He approached the front door of his apartment and slowly stepped inside. His legs felt heavier with each step that he took. Once Jabari finally made it up the stairs, he poked his head into Joe’s bedroom, but instead of seeing Joe’s angry face, he saw his warm smile.

“Little nephew, how’d you like the Rogma ball? Isn’t it the best birthday gift you’ve ever received?” Joe asked in a jubilant tone. He tossed the golden ball up and down in the palm of his right hand. Faint street sounds drifted in

through the large jagged hole of the broken window.

“Uncle Joe, I swear it was a simple mistake. We didn’t mean to break the window,” Jabari pleaded.

“Calm down son. Relax, I know you didn’t intentionally do it, Jabari,” Uncle Joe said with a grin. “I didn’t call you up here to scold you about a silly broken window. I can easily fix that old broken window.” Joe tossed the gold ball to Jabari once more.

“I swear this is the silliest ball I’ve ever played with. What is it really used for, Uncle Joe?” Jabari asked.

“I told you earlier it’s a Rogma ball. I brought it here from the Mountain of Kings in Africa to give it to you as a birthday gift,” Joe said.

“Come on, Uncle Joe. Please don’t talk about the Mountain of Kings again. Mom said that it is an imaginary place that you simply made up in your mind,” Jabari said.

“I don’t care about what your mom thinks. She never visited the Mountain of Kings, I have. I’m telling you Jabari the Mountain of Kings is as real as you and I,” Joe hinted. He picked up a nearby glass vase filled with ice-cold homemade lemonade from a small wooden table at the head of his bed. He poured a glass full for Jabari and a glass full for himself. “Come over here and sit down with me Jabari. Try some of this refreshing lemonade. I promise I won’t bite you,” Joe said humbly.

Jabari sat down on Joe’s soft bed.

“You’re not mad about the broken window, are you?” Jabari asked.

“Oh no, little nephew. I’m an old man now, but I was once young like you restless buckaroos. Your mom can tell you. I was always getting into trouble, and I mean always. I can still remember when I stuffed firecrackers neatly inside your grandfather’s cigars. You should’ve seen the look on his face when he’d light one up. I’d laugh all night when it exploded. I swear those were the good old days,” Joe said, then chuckled. He gulped down the last drop of the cool drink while placing his empty glass on the table. Joe stood up, walked over and shut the door, then

locked it. Wiping his damp hands upon his faded overalls Joe turned about and headed towards an old wooden chest tucked away in his cluttered closet.

“I want you to sit still. Don’t go anywhere. This’ll only take a second or two,” Joe said. He moved back several thick heavy jackets that hung just above the chest. He grabbed the rusty side handles of the chest while dragging it out of the closet to the middle of the wooden floor of the room. When Joe pulled open the chest dust whirled around in the air in front of him. Joe fanned away the dust and searched the chest. He looked like an oversized alley cat rummaging through a waste can for scraps.

“Give me just one minute, Jabari, I’ve got something very important to show you,” Joe said. He sneezed several times due to the rising dust. He reached deeper into the old chest.

I wonder what Uncle Joe’s looking for? What does he have to say to me? Jabari thought. Jabari watched his uncle frantically search for the elusive item tucked away deep inside the chest. Jabari glanced over at the locked doorknob. *He’s always talking about an imaginary mountain, large white eagles, and a kingdom made of gold. Did he really go crazy after suffering that stroke? Am I locked in the bedroom with a mad man?* Jabari thought.

“Oh my goodness, I found it!” Joe shouted. His loud voice startled Jabari. When he turned around Joe held the most beautiful cloth Jabari had ever seen before. Its golden fibers shimmered brilliantly against Joe’s aged ebony hands. He reached over and handed Jabari the cloth.

“This is the cloth of your dad’s people in Africa. They live high upon the Mountain of Kings where love, peace and righteousness reigns,” Joe said.

“Is it a cloth from my real dad?” Jabari asked with his eyes aglow.

“Yes, it’s from your real dad. Jabari, you’re the son of a holy African king

known to many as the great King Abasi Mbeki,” Joe revealed.

Jabari held the silk cloth in his hands. He felt several items wrapped up inside of it.

“You’re twelve years old now, Jabari. You must remember what I’m about to reveal to you. Go ahead, unwrap the cloth. It’s all yours now,” Joe encouraged.

When Jabari unrolled the cloth, a golden ring, sword handle, and necklace, fell out of the cloth onto the wooden floor.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Joe, I didn’t mean to drop it. I’m so sorry,” Jabari said, scrambling about on his hands and knees while picking up the jewels. “Look at it; it’s a golden lion,” Jabari said, picking up the ring, gazing at the green rubies affixed in the lion’s eyes.

“Jabari, the ring, and the other jewels are all yours. And they’re priceless I might add. Your dad sent them. This is clear evidence that your dad is not dead, he’s alive,” Joe revealed.

“Mom said that he died in a car accident,” Jabari said.

“Forget about the old car accident story. Your dad’s alive, boy. Trust me; I’ve seen him with my own eyes. He’s the great King Abasi Mbeki,” Joe said with a grin stretching from ear to ear. “Come over here little nephew,” Joe beckoned. He embraced Jabari for a moment. Tears of joy streamed from Jabari’s eyes when he heard such good news. “I know that it’s hard for you to believe what I’m saying to you, but it’s all true, your father is alive and well,” Joe expressed.

Jabari gazed down at the sparkling jewels while rubbing his hands across their shiny surfaces.

“Uncle Joe, how will I ever get a chance to see my dad?” Jabari asked.

“Your dad said that someone would come to America, find you and escort you back to his kingdom when it is time. However, he gave one warning that when you reach the Mountain of Kings, you must beware of the evil spirit, Cromcrow, and his fallen cohorts. These are evil spirits who fell to this

Earth many years ago from heaven. I ran into the hideous spirits when I last visited the Mountain of Kings and I barely escaped with my life. Beware of Cromcrow and the fallen spirits, Jabari. You must avoid them at all costs once you reach the glorious Mountain of Kings,” Joe warned. A sudden loud knock was heard at the door.

“Hurry up. Put everything away. I think it’s your mom snooping around outside,” Joe whispered.

Jabari quickly wrapped the jewels inside the brilliant cloth while shoving them down into the large side pocket of his shorts. Once the jewels were well hidden Joe unlocked and opened the door.

“Joe, what’s going on in here?” Jabari’s Mother, Jennie Kingsly asked.

“Nothing’s going on. I’m just sitting around shooting the breeze with my little nephew, that’s all,” Joe said.

Jennie stood at the door with her hands on her hips. Her eyes immediately fell upon the broken window.

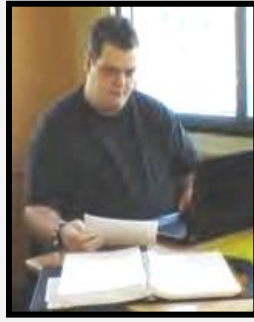
“Oh my goodness! Who broke the window?” Jennie asked.

Jabari glanced over at his Uncle Joe while hoping that he’d come up with a good answer.

“The kids playing stickball outside hit their ball up here by mistake. Don’t worry about the window, Sis I’ll fix the window by the end of the day,” Joe said. He stuffed his clothes and other items back inside the chest and pushed it back into the closet.

“Jabari, I need you to come with me downstairs and help me get things in order before your aunt and uncle arrive,” Jennie said.

“Okay mom,” Jabari replied. He winked at Joe and followed his mother down the stairs with his father’s precious gifts hidden safely in his pants pocket.



Family History

By Edward White/CP Bialois

<http://cpbialois.wordpress.com/>

Catherine Bell sat at her husband’s desk for the first time ever. The eight years since his death had been little more than a purgatory in which she was forced to survive. Over the years she never stepped foot into the room, allowing the maid to clean it regularly instead.

Sitting in his cushioned chair covered with padded leather, she looked over the various items with a curious eye. There was something she was supposed to find, something she needed to find. Madam Trundle had been insistent on that matter. Never one to believe in such things before, Catherine decided on seeing her following a series of disturbing dreams.

“*Find what was hidden.*” She could still hear the uneven, high-pitched tone of the older woman wheezing between her wrinkled lips.

The pompous air of the psychic was more than a blue-blood like Catherine could stand. People not knowing their station in life could be more maddening than most things in life. Due to that and her upbringing, she refused to believe what the woman told her until that night and another of her dreams.

Like the others she had, Catherine was forced to watch her husband be murdered over and over by an unseen assailant hidden by shadows. Each time she screamed and attempted to leap between the two. Whether she was too slow of the men moved, for she never reached her husband in time.

When he was shot he howled in agony, like an animal before disappearing into the shadows like his assailant.

She woke screaming like she had the other times, but her opinion about Madam Trundle changed. That was the reason why she found herself in her husband’s former office, looking for what was hidden. The idea of such a thing was insulting to her intelligence, but if it stopped the dreams she’d do it.

She spent the better part of an hour trying to find the strength to enter the small first floor office in their home. Once inside she found herself drawn to the desk where she sat and stared at the various items on its surface. Her eyes set on each of the items in turn. A small picture of the two of them on their wedding day, an old fashioned clock, a set of pens and ink blotters, and his calendar summed up his remaining belongings.

Her eyes settled on the calendar for a few heartbeats and the date of his death, October 31, 2004. It was a date she never planned to forget but seeing the day in black and white brought the sting of her loss back full force. Forcing back tears, Catherine turned her attention to the drawers and pulled the top right one open first.

All she found was the usual things, blank envelopes, old stamps, and various papers both blank and stationary were piled on top of one another. One by one, she looked through each of the drawers until the only one left was the middle one. By then she didn’t expect to find anything and even thought about suing Madam Trundle for incompetence. That changed when she found an old manila envelope dated six days before her husband was killed.

It wasn’t the first time she saw an envelope without a return address and written in block letters and she didn’t think there was anything strange about it. Wanting to see what was in the envelope, she lifted it and felt an unusual weight. Curious, she opened the end and held it over the desktop. A couple of shakes sent a lone item

***Jabari and the King’s Heart is available at www.amazon.com!**

sliding down the length of the envelope and onto the desk.

A bullet hit the desk with a loud thump and tried to roll away before she caught it. The weight of it surprised her as she held it up to the light. Without thinking about it, she knew the bullet was silver but why?

Feeling confused and inspired, Catherine looked in the envelope and pulled out a small note folded in half. She sat looking at it for a couple of minutes before deciding to open it. Seeing the script on the note was the same as the block lettering her eyes widened in horror at seeing what was written.

“Use this to end it or we will.”

With her hands shaking she lowered the note and wondered what really happened to her husband.

The Disease
By Edward White/CP Bialois

The lines of her face resting on the soft fabric of the satin covered pillow caused his heart to ache. Never before has someone taken his heart with such force, resulting in a devotion he never imagined he could feel for anyone after his first wife passed away.

The memory of her life was as tragic as it was flawed. She had, at one point, been as flawless as the woman sleeping before him. Like her, he spent many a night sitting in the soft padded chair he was currently in and watched her breathe. He thought their love was timeless, but fate stepped in to rob them of even a year together.

The sting remained until he met his bride, Felicity. The mere mention of her name was enough to drive him to flights of fancy. They were wed within three days of meeting and all of his subjects came to offer their blessings. The day was a beautiful one, but his new wife caused it to pale in comparison. The true journey of his life began that day.

Any thoughts of him being cursed like his father began the following month when a traveling cleric paused

before them after paying his respects. The man lingered far too long in front of his wife and when he looked at the cleric to ask what he saw, the man shook his head and continued along his path.

Felicity asked him to forget it as nothing more than an aberration. The King's own clerics had blessed her and she felt fine, so where was the need to worry? With a resigned sigh he conceded but never stopped watching her. Now, as she lay in their bed resting as comfortable as possible he asked himself if she was indeed healthy or hiding something from him.

King Yureu had never been one to harm anyone, even the criminals in the dungeons were often allowed to live instead of being executed. So why then did he now feel doing so was the only way to avoid heartache? His mind had been set on the action since supper, hence the reason he kept the carving knife from their feast hidden within his robes.

His fingers rubbed over the side of the blade in a gentle caress. This knife would save his beloved Felicity from ever becoming sick and keep him from watching another needless death. No, he would never marry again. He couldn't bring the curse on another, to do so would be to follow the footsteps of his father before he took his own life when Yureu was a young boy.

With a steady resolve, he stood from the soft cushioned chair and stepped towards the bed. Despite his effort to remain quiet, his footfall must've been enough to stir Felicity for she opened her eyes and stared at him with a horrific expression. It was the same look his first wife gave him before he was forced to end her suffering as well.



Deadline
By Jamie White

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

Adrenaline surged through Gretchen Edwards' veins as she woke, visions of the characters who'd been dominating her dreams dancing through her mind. She sat up and grabbed the little notepad she kept next to her bed, scribbling every detail she could remember. Within minutes, she had several pages covered with random thoughts and names. *I need fuel...*

She set the notebook aside and stood, her yawn echoing through the room. Her dog, Freddy, snapped to attention, his head tilting as his eyes searched the room. Gretchen leaned over the bed and scratched the dog's head. "It's okay, boy. Mommy just needs some caffeine." Another yawn escaped her lips, emphasizing her point. She turned and left the bedroom, Freddy following close behind.

"Freddy, settle!" She glared as the dog's claw nipped the back of her foot, her tone sharp. Freddy whimpered in response and slowed down. Gretchen opened the kitchen door, and Freddy scooted in behind with his tail wagging so fast she could only see a white blur. She smiled, reaching down to pet him. "You want your breakfast?"

She didn't think it was possible, but Freddy's tail wagged even faster at the magic word. "I guess that's a yes," she laughed, reaching for the bag of kibble. "Here you go boy." She scooped some kibble in his bowl and watched as the dog dove for it, gobbling the food in a

blur of teeth and slobber. *I wonder if he even tastes the stuff...*

That chore done, she turned her attention to her most prized kitchen appliance- her coffee maker. She picked up the canister sitting beside it, putting two scoopsful of the intoxicating blend into the slot. She added water, and pressed the button. While she waited, she walked over to the kitchen table to start up her laptop. Realizing she'd left the notebook in her bedroom, she ran back to collect it.

By the time she returned and pulled a muffin out of the box she'd bought yesterday, the coffee smell permeated the kitchen. She breathed deep as she set her muffin on the table. She decided that she'd check her e-mail while she waited for the coffee to finish. She clicked on her browser, opening the website.

A knot settled in her stomach as she saw the first message was from her editor. *This can't be good.* Sure enough, she groaned as she scanned the text. There was a change in schedule and he wanted the manuscript in a few days early. "Well, boy.... Looks like the plan for today's changed. You're going to have to be happy with a couple trips to the yard."

Her words caused the dog's ears to perk up, but he never turned his head away from the bowl in front of him.

Gretchen poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. She pushed the notebook she retrieved only moments ago aside, and opened the file for her latest book instead. She scanned the first few pages, making a mental note of any suggestions she disagreed with. She'd just scrolled down to page four when she heard a familiar squeaking sound next to her. "I'm sorry, Freddy. I can't play with you right now. My tight deadline just got a lot tighter.

The dog dropped the toy, nosing it against her foot.

"Freddy, I told you I can't play. Go lay down, boy!"

The dog stared at her, his ears down and body slouched. A small

whimper sounded, causing a stab of guilt in his owner.

"I'm sorry, boy. Here, let's let you outside a few minutes so you can run." She stood up to open the back door as Freddy raced after her. A sly smile tugged at her lips as she watched the dog run outside. *I knew that would work...*

That issue settled, Gretchen returned to the computer and continued reading over her editor's suggestions. She only got two pages in before the sound of Freddy's barking carried into the room. *Already?* She sighed and got up to let him in.

The dog bounded into the room, propping up on her as he attempted to lick her face. Gretchen laughed despite her growing annoyance. "I love you, too, boy. Now, go lay down so Mommy can work." She returned to the table, scanning the page to see where she left off.

Before she could read more than another page, a cold, wet sensation snapped her back to reality. She glanced down, seeing Freddy lying on the floor, looking up at her with sad eyes. *Oh, come on now...* "Look, I'm sorry I can't play today, but there's nothing I can do about it." She stood and walked over to the kitchen door. "Scoot." She pointed towards the living room, watching as Freddy slinked out of the kitchen. As soon as he was safely out of the way, she closed the door and settled back down at the table.

She scanned another page, nodding as she read some comments and raising an eyebrow at others. About five pages in, her attention was once again disrupted. This time, the sound of clawing was responsible. She looked around, realizing Freddy was scratching on the door. "Bad boy! Stop that right now." Sweet silence filled the room again, but only for a moment. The clawing resumed, even louder than before. "Freddy! What did I just say?"

She stood, about to open the door and scold him some more. Before she could, the phone rang. "I'll deal with you

in a minute," she warned the dog as she picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Is this Gretchen Edwards?"

"Yes, who's calling?"

"Miss Edwards, I'm Howard calling from Ace Security Services, and I'd like to talk to you about--"

"I'm sorry," she cut in, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice. "I'm not interested." She hung up before he could say anything else. It was really the only way to deal with calls like that; some of the people were pushy!

No sooner had she put the phone down, than it rang again. She rolled her eyes and picked up the receiver again. "Yes?"

"Gretchen Edwards? I'm Mike, calling on behalf of Tyler Communications...."

Not another one... "Sorry, not interested." She left the receiver off the hook, determined to cut out any distraction possible.

That problem solved, she opened the kitchen door to deal with her other major distraction. "Okay, boy, I mean it. You need to settle right now and let me get back to work. I hear one more scratch at that door, and you're not going to like me."

The dog stared at her in silence, his head tilted and a shamed look in his eyes.

"Good boy." She closed the door and sat down, resuming her reading. It only took her a couple of minutes to get fully immersed in what she was doing; the pressure of her impending deadline helping along her focus.

The knock at the door, and Freddy's barking, almost caused her to fall out of her chair. She glanced down at the clock on the bottom of her screen. *Well, at least I got fifteen minutes in this time...* "Coming!"

She stood and walked out to the living room, giggling as she watched Freddy bark at the door. His fur was sticking up and his ears were perked up. "Step aside, boy." She peered out of the peep hole, sighing when she saw her neighbor standing outside. She forced herself to smile before opening the door.

“Gretchen... how are you?”

“I’m alright, what can I do for you?”

“I was just wondering if you have any eggs I can borrow. I totally spaced at the store yesterday, and now I’ve got a couple of hungry kids begging for them.”

Gretchen shook her head. “I’m sorry; I have to get to the store myself.”

“It’s alright. I guess I’m just gonna have to force them to eat cereal this morning.” She laughed and waved as she headed back to her own house.

Gretchen closed the door, leaning against the hard wood. *There is no way I’m getting much done here today.*

Twenty minutes later, Gretchen was on the way to her favorite coffee shop. She drove the short distance to Charlie’s, her heart sinking when she saw all the cars pulled into the lot. She managed to find a space on the far side of the parking lot, closing her eyes. *Please have space, please have space...*

She pulled her computer bag out of the back seat and walked up to the door, glancing inside. Her face fell as she saw all the people crammed inside. She turned around and headed back to the car, deciding to drive to the other one a couple of miles down the road. She barely ever used it, but she didn’t have a choice right now.

You have got to be kidding me. She stood inside the coffee shop, sighing as she scanned the room. There wasn’t a single seat available. She started wondering if someone was playing some gag on her. It sure felt like it at this point. Just as she was about to turn and try another location, she spotted someone packing their stuff up. She smiled, sending a silent thanks out to whatever force had taken pity on her. She watched the man pick his bag up and head for the door. As soon as he was out of the way, she hurried for the table and set down her bag.

Gretchen pulled her wallet out and walked over to the counter to order her favorite deadline fuel- A pastry and a

cup of black coffee. As she turned around, she almost dropped her food. *This has got to be a joke.* Someone was sitting down on the seat she’d just claimed. It took her a minute to act, she was so surprised. Couldn’t the girl see the bag leaning against the other chair?

She walked over to the table, trying to keep her tone as polite as possible. “Excuse me, but that’s my bag there.”

The woman looked up from the book she’d been reading. “I’m sorry?”

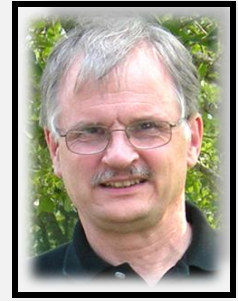
Gretchen pointed to the other chair, trying to keep the anger out of her voice. “That bag, there... it’s mine. You’re sitting in my seat.”

“Oh.”

Gretchen just raised an eyebrow, noting the boredom in the woman’s voice. So far, she’d made no effort to get up. Gretchen cleared her throat. “So... are you planning to move? I did claim the table first...”

The woman regarded Gretchen with an annoyed expression. “Fine...” She stood and gathered her books, taking much longer than Gretchen thought was necessary. She didn’t even bother to apologize before walking out the door.

Gretchen shook her head in amazement as she pulled out her computer. *I’m going to make this deadline or die trying.* She remembered the nasty look on the woman’s face. *And I might not be exaggerating...*



Dawn Patrol
By Rick Weber

There was a slight chill in the air as Dave and Bonnie got out of the car. In front of them was the object which awaited them. On its side, the sound of a propane burner being turned on illuminated the inside of what those in the trade called the envelope. It was four stories long. The inside light revealed a multi-color shell. As they took sight of the growing object near their feet, a voice cried out to them,

“Dave? Bonnie?” Hearing their names, they turned to a man in a bright red varsity jacket with “Lead Balloon Tours” on the left breast.

“Yes,” Dave responded extending his hand.

“I’m Bill, your pilot. It looks like we’ll be having a great morning for a dawn patrol.”

“I’m sure we will. This is my daughter, Bonnie, whose been after me for a balloon ride.”

“Are you ready, Bonnie?” Bill asked as he looked down at the pint sized passenger.

“Yes,” came her timid response..

“Very well, I’ll go over some safety procedures with you and your Dad before we lift off on our journey.”

As Bill went over the features of his hot air balloon, Dave drifted off in thought as to how he got caught up in going on this hot air balloon ride with Bonnie. He didn’t like going up in passenger airplanes when he had to for business or vacation and did so grudgingly. “Oh, well,” he thought to himself, “In a few hours, it’ll be over. I just have to tough it out until then.”

With the help of some others on the ground, Bonnie and Dave were helped

into the gondola or basket. With a hearty tug on a chain overhead, the burner came to life and roared filling the envelope with hot air causing it to rise in the early New Mexico sky.

It was the first week of October and the start of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, the largest hot air balloon event of its kind in the world. Over seven hundred entries would participate. None of this mattered to Dave. He would have preferred to have both of his feet planted on *terra firma*, but this outing was for Bonnie, not him.

Their balloon was not alone. Others filled the sky. Each having its envelope lit up inside by a propane burner. It was a magnificent sight even though Dave viewed it with trepidation. Bill explained the sights below them to Bonnie as she looked on in amazement listening to everything their host was saying. Dave managed a smile and also took in Bill's lessons.

"They call this the Albuquerque Box," Bill explained. "The winds are predictable here this time of year. At low levels they push to the south causing us to head towards downtown. At higher levels they blow north which will push us up toward Rio Rancho. So, by adding heat and letting warm air out at the right intervals, we'll be able to stay inside the box. Pretty cool!"

Bonnie smiled and looked up at the sun coming up in the east, a bright start to a magnificent day. The sun warmed the sky around them. Although he was nervous, Dave managed a smile and took pictures of Bonnie as Bill pointed things out to her on the balloon. He was even able to switch over to his video camera at the appropriate intervals.

The sun came up brilliantly over the horizon, and Dave captured Bonnie on the camcorder as she pulled on the propane lever, causing a deafening noise and the balloon to rise up even farther above the northern ridges of the Chihuahuan Desert. Bonnie smiled, lost her shyness, and peppered Bill with a lot questions.

"How long will we be up?"

"We should be up about an hour."

"How much fuel will we use?"

"We should burn between twenty to thirty gallons of propane."

"How do you steer the balloon?"

"You don't. Balloons are classified as non-steerable aircraft. We're subject to direction of the wind."

"Does that mean we won't land where we took off?" That question caught Dave off guard and made him a little concerned.

"In general, that's true, but we'll be working the 'Box' I told you about which should bring us back near to where we took off. I have a chase car, in this case my truck, ready to pick us up. Hopefully, we won't be too far off." Dave was relieved to hear that as they came close to downtown and Bill turned on the burner causing them to ascend and move north.

This hot air balloon ride was something Bonnie wanted to do for a long time. She planned it all out, even down to contacting Bill prior to the event. Dave had never seen her so excited. Now the day had come and Dave hoped she would not be disappointed.

Bonnie always liked balloons, even the little ones she got at birthday parties as a toddler. As Dave looked at her, any misgivings he had about the adventure evaporated. The day belonged to Bonnie.

The view from the gondola was fantastic. "Bill, this gauge says we're at six thousand feet. Is that right?"

"No, Bonnie, the altimeter is showing how high we are above sea level. Given the altitude of the city, we're about a thousand feet above ground level."

Bonnie's questions kept on coming and Bill answered all of them patiently and completely. Before Dave knew it, their ride was over and Bill had radioed the chase car to pick them up in Rio Rancho. The balloon descended to a smooth landing. Dave helped Bonnie out of the basket, and they assisted the crew with folding up the balloon. On the ride back to their car, they thanked

Bill and his team for their hospitality. It had been a perfect day.

A year later, Dave was home alone going through some things when he found the video he shot that day. He played it, and he broke down in tears. He remembered the trip to Albuquerque, the last outing that he and Bonnie had together. It was made possible by the Make a Wish Foundation. Her medical condition deteriorated quickly after the trip. Bonnie did not make it to see Christmas. Dave was grateful for that time they spent together in New Mexico.



By DiVitto Kelly

It was late February, 1978. Sol Hirsh, age 71, retired deli owner from Queens, New York, was bored as snot. His wife Myrna, a year younger, finally convinced her husband of forty three years to move to Miami Beach six months ago. And tomorrow, both Sol and Myrna would be traveling to Eastern Europe to visit her ailing mother in Romania.

"All our friends are here," argued Myrna, a retired librarian and volunteer crossing guard at her grandchildren's elementary school in nearby Key Biscayne. "We'd be all alone in New York, freezing our collective tukhus' off. And I was tired of hearing you whine about the cold weather year after year."

"Me whining?" said an exasperated Sol. "You're the queen of whining, old yeller." Myrna, who stood five-foot two with towering blue/gray hair, never feared her plump husband, who stood just two inches taller. Myrna never took any gruff from no one.

“Let’s face it Sol, you and I both can’t stand the cold; you know it made me sick in the winter; being cooped up all the time in our apartment for months!” Myrna took a sip of lemonade by the pool at their condominium, both lounging in beach chairs and sporting dark sunglasses. “Is this really so bad?”

“That’s why God invented chicken soup,” replied Sol, who use to brag only God made a better chicken soup than him. He took a swig of Budweiser beer and placed the bottle on the round frosted glass table.

“Florida don’t even got a baseball team. In New York, I had baseball,” said Sol, stretching out both arms, palms pointed up. Spring training games won’t cut it for me! Besides, the Mets play in St. Petersburg – what’s that, six hours from here?” The die-hard New York Mets fan was working himself into another patented Sol Hirsch lather.

“Oh the hardship Sol, no baseball,” said Myrna, sarcastically, noting the Yankees played their spring training games in nearby Fort Lauderdale.

“Sitting by the poolside like this, warm weather. You can watch the games on television – they do have television down here too, right? While everyone’s fighting blizzards, we’ll be here strolling along the beach!” said Myrna, grabbing a healthy gulp of lemonade and holding her husband’s hand. Sol raised his bushy eyebrows, both sprouting above his sunglasses like a shabby, unkempt hedge.

“Yeah, yeah,” her stubborn husband replied then smiled. “The Bushbaums complain about the cold worse than me if that’s possible!” Myrna snickered.

“Besides, as a Mets fan; you barely have baseball, they’re God-awful every year,” said his wife, who secretly rooted for the New York Yankees. The Bronx Bombers had won the World Series a year ago over the Los Angeles Dodgers in six games. She bit her lower lip in celebration.

“I KNOW you root for those bums in the Bronx – Steinbrenner, what a putz!” barked Sol.

“So what?” Myrna replied. “I’ll root for whoever I want to root for. And besides, why should I follow your bad taste in sports teams. I mean, the Mets? Yuck.”

“I knew it; I knew it!” Sol cried out, slapping his hand down on the table. “If you live in Queens, you root for the Met and Jets; you live in the Bronx, it’s the Giants and Yankees – that’s just life in New York.” Myrna gazed upon her husband with a disgusted face.

“Buffoon.”

“This is gonna be their year!” Sol exclaimed, never one to give up on his beloved Mets. “You’ll see; 1978 will be great!” pointing his right index finger high in the sky.

“Oh sure,” said Myrna, laughing. “Like they narrowly missed the playoffs last year by what, thirty-something games? Face it Sol, the Mets blow.” He sat back down in his recliner and exhaled, a beaten fan.

Either way, Sol knew Florida and his tired, achy body was a good match. He’d spend all his life working in a deli, starting in middle school working part time for his father. Yes, after sixty years of smelling pastrami, brisket, corned beef, and garlic pickles on a daily basis, it was time to retire and enjoy the continued warmth of Florida. Floating around in the large rectangular pool like a manatee was alright by the stocky senior citizen.

“Let’s do Rascal House tonight deary?” said Myrna. Both were bi-weekly regulars at the premier Jewish deli, a mainstay for decades in Sunny Isles Beach, serving tasty sandwiches and killer matzo ball soup that met both Sol and Myrna’s approval. Sol became friends with the owner, who gave the retiree a ‘behind the counter’ tour of the restaurant. Sol was impressed, and the chicken soup wasn’t half bad either.

Sol and his wife packed everything the night before. Myrna was neurotic about flying, so instead of traveling with Sol alone, she invited old neighborhood friends Don and Barbara Adams, hoping it would ease her anxieties. Taking such a long flight to Eastern Europe, specifically the region of

Transylvania in Romania, would certainly be a trip to remember. Myrna still had a few relatives there in Swoboda, an isolated country town filled with cobblestone roads, worn yet eloquent structures, and lush forests. Myrna, who had not seen her side of the family in eighteen years, wanted to visit her ailing mother before she “takes a dirt nap” as Sol so eloquently put it.

Sol’s side of the family was filled with headache inducers, specializing in arguing over the most trivial of matters. The best was when Sol’s two younger brothers, Milton and Henry, would actually agree on a subject, yet still find a way of turning it into an argument. That was a special feat.

Although Sol would prefer staying home watching sports or playing competitive shuffleboard, he knew this trip meant everything to Myrna, whom he loved very much. He conceded, knowing at least he’ll be traveling with a fellow Mets fan so at least he’d have something to talk, or argue about.

The group of four travelers flew out of Miami on a sunny Monday morning, arriving in Bucharest almost a dozen hours later. There, they bordered antique-looking silver and rust covered bus left over from the 1950’s. A string of large, red weathered constantans were painted on the side. To Sol’s dismay, the seats had barely any padding, not good for a man just getting over a bout of hemorrhoids.

“This is a Ruski bus ain’t it,” bellowed Sol, who, between baseball and deli meats, followed politics and despised anything Soviet Union. “This piece of crap won’t get us anywhere!” Like any good librarian, current or retired, Myrna let loose with a major shush directly at her annoying husband.

“Look out the window, will you?” she added. A full load of people on the bus were starting to notice.

The two couples journeyed along on the rickety, timeworn bus, observing the pristine green landscapes and farm houses. Sol did his best to suppress his annoyance – with everything, but couldn’t help himself. Complaining was

in his blood. Finally, Myrna turned to her husband squarely.

“I am going to beat you to death with my purse if you don’t shut up!” The Adam’s applauded. Locals on the bus who didn’t know a lick of English, cheered. Sol went back to moping, the bumpy ride jolting his jetlagged body.

The tour group entered the quaint town of Swoboda in the early evening as towering pines threw off eerie shadows. Rather than impose on her family, it was agreed they would all stay in an ancient hotel, surrounded by forests and overlooking an unspoiled black water lake. There was a large wooden dock protruding outward at least fifty yards with a half dozen wooden boats moored. The early spring weather was still cold, but not unbearable.

“Feels like March in the big apple,” said Sol, thinking he’d be up to his knees in snow. He took in a cool, deep breath of air after exiting the bus. “Not bad Myrna; this is pretty nice.” Everyone turned, not expecting a positive statement from the ex-deli man.

No one else got off the filled bus. As the foursome picked up their luggage, Sol glanced back at the bus pulled away; he saw multiple people making the sign of the cross. He stared blankly then headed towards the hotel, a rustic two-story gray mansion that was converted to a hotel a century ago. There were rumors the place was haunted, supposedly home to vampires and other creepy crawlies, at least that’s what it said in the brochure. Locals kept their distance, leaving that to unsuspecting tourists.

The setting sun disappeared behind the forest. A pair of old-fashioned gas lights flicked at the driveway entrance. The large wooden door opened and a tall, thin man, dressed all in black, walked slowly towards the four. He gleamed at the weary travelers.

“I bid you . . . welcome Hirsch family people,” he said in a dreary tone.

“I’ve heard that before,” said Sol. The man did not smile, but then . . .

The man boasted a hearty laugh; his arms flailed open and gave Sol a bear-like hug. “Myrna?” said Sol, trying to squeeze the words out. The man then looked over at Myrna and offered the same hospitality, receiving a hug too, then tried to bite her neck.

“What the hell are you doing?” screamed Sol, taken aback and not appreciating a complete stranger clutching his wife.

“Welcome all of you to the town of Swoboda in the region of Transylvania,” he said with a hearty Bela Lugosi twine, his canines looking a bit longer than most.

“Hey Sol, what’s the story with this guy’s choppers?” said his friend Don Adams, his wife Barbara standing a few feet away.

“I don’t know” replied Sol.

“I’d say he’s a little too long in the tooth, you know what I mean?” added Don.

Another gentleman, short, balding and wearing jeans and sweater appeared. Waddling fast up to the travelers, he called out the man dressed in black. “Barlow, stop that!”

“My apologies Hirsch party,” said the short man. “My younger brother gets carried away sometimes with the Dracula stuff.” Sol and Myrna offered up a nervous laugh, stepping back to be with their friends.

“My name is Lucian; welcome to our hotel!” said the gregarious man. “And you are Myrna – I can see the family resemblance clearly – the face, smile, the . . .

“Alright, alright,” said Sol, figuring out quickly where the hotel owner was going.

“This is some place, huh?” asked Adams. “What’s the story with the second rate vampire act?” he added under his breath. Barlow gave the slender Adams an intense glare. Adams got a sudden chill.

“It beats working in the factory sir,” said Barlow, with a wink. “I take pictures with tourists and make killing,” he added, offing up a creepy, subtle laugh. “Since you stay at hotel, I charge only five dollars.”

“We’ll think about it,” answered Sol.

“Think quickly as I can only take pictures at night you see,” said Barlow, flailing his cape up to his face.

“Of course,” said Adams, turning around and raising his brow, “This guy’s one beer short of a six pack, Sol.”

Lucian and Barlow grabbed the luggage and headed towards the massive iron bullet shaped doors, baseball-sized rusted bolts holding them in place. The two couples entered the cavernous entrance and gazed upon a massive fireplace, complete with a pair of stuffed wolf heads mounted above. Barlow escorted the guests to their rooms upstairs; the foursome dragging their collective feet from jetlag. The Adam’s took the room at the end of the hallway. Sola and Myrna settled in nicely to a spacious bedroom with a morbidly picturesque view of the black lake and small cemetery. A fire was lit in the fireplace. The two sat on the bed, still in their clothes and fell asleep.

The next day after lunch, the two couples headed into town to visit Myrna’s relatives. The house, surrounded by other small one-story homes and cobblestone roads, was quaint and vintage post card material. Sol expected a bunch of ransacked, poorly constructed properties, but everything about Swoboda was charming, despite the prevailing gray colors and ominous trees.

“People seem to stare out of their windows a lot here,” observed Sol. “Do we look freakish of something?”

“We’re New Yorkers,” replied Adams, “People are bound to stare.”

“This is it Sol, my parent’s home,” said Myrna, looking at the façade. “I don’t think it’s changed at all in fifty years, probably longer.”

Before Myrna had a chance to knock on the door, she was greeted with open arms by her cousins, her mother sat by the fireplace in a rocking chair with a cigarette dangling from her mouth.

Myrna walked over and gave her mother, Sabina a big hug, and asked her in Romanian how she was feeling.

“Not too bad,” she replied, in English. Sol and his friends were taken aback.

“She speaks English?” asked Sol. “Myrna, I though you said your mother didn’t speak English,” questioned Sol. Sabina gave her son-in-law a hug and pinched his cheek.

“It’s not against law to talk English, ain’t it?” Myrna’s mother replied, feisty and healthy looking at age 91.

“No, no, of course not,” chimed Myrna, “When did you learn English?”

“I learn here and there, no?” she added, “But mostly I read Sports Illustrated. How are Cowboys doing? I like cute star on helmet!”

She offered the two couples tea and cookies and all four enjoyed the sights and sounds of Transylvanian hospitality. The families talked for hours, even taking a walking tour of the town, visiting antique shops and a macabre book store. One book that caught Myrna’s eye was *Swoboda: Land of Bats and Vampires*. She purchased the hundred page book and added two postcards.

They returned to the house, a bit weary from walking on the uneven bricks, but still in good spirits. “Holy moly, time flies when you’re having fun,” boasted Sol, noticing it was nearing dinnertime.

“Oh my,” bellowed Myrna’s mother. “It’s getting late. I don’t want you alone on streets at night. Go now to hotel and be safe.” She handed each of the visitors a cross.

“Mother, what’s this for? We’re Jewish, not Catholic,” said Myrna.

“Show it to anyone with big teeth,” said Sabina, whose mastery of English was on borderline par with any New Yorker.

Don and Barbara, who were Catholic, took the crosses and thanked Sabina, who gave both a hug and kiss on the cheek. “Wait for the bus to take you to hotel!”

“Stay safe; I see you tomorrow,” she added, “Now go!” Sabina escorted all four out of her house, pushing her daughter out last. She blew kisses to her one and only daughter.

The streets were quiet, no one in sight. The bus stop was only four blocks away from Sabina’s home, a semi-rugged trek if you were wearing heels, which Myrna was wearing. All storefronts were closed. One restaurant was open, along with a pub called The Fang.

“A beer would be nice right about now,” said Sol, licking his lips. “What’ll ya say everybody?”

“We should really wait for the bus,” said Myrna, feeling uneasy about her mother’s behavior. “She seemed spooked about something.”

“One drink dear, I’m sure the bus runs here all night,” boasted her husband, in a cheery mood. “It’s a beautiful evening.” Don and Barbara nodded in agreement.

The four strolled over to the pub, a rustic looking place with a charcoal painted front and lampposts stationed at each end of the building. A wreath of garlic hung from the door. Sol noticed people laughing through the tinted yellow windows.

“What a quaint name,” said Barbara, looking up at the toothy sign, with the canines pointing extra sharp.

“I could really sink my teeth into a lager myself,” joked Don, a master of bad puns but good company. Sol thought it was funny and was eager to try something local on tap. Myrna was still apprehensive.

They entered the pub, three-quarters full of locals. Some mingled along the dark oak bar while other sat around the dozen-plus tables. Sol spotted an open table by the fireplace. The four sat down, adapting easily into the Swoboda way of life. The warmth from the fire felt good.

“Myrna, we should ‘a come here sooner, my apologies for being so stubborn,” said Sol, who hadn’t complained or discussed baseball once all day. The pub owner came over to take their order, but didn’t speak any English. Myrna, still somewhat fluent in Romanian, ordered for everyone. A few minutes later, both Sol and Don were enjoying their beers, Myrna and Barbara enjoying a cup of tea.

“Sol, my mother is worried about something here, but I don’t know what,” said Myrna, feeling uneasy herself.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” said Sol, rubbing her shoulder with reassurance. “Let’s eat here and enjoy the night.”

“Sounds good to us,” said Don, speaking for his agreeing wife.

“Maybe we should go now, I’m worried about taking public transportation. What if nothing goes to the hotel?”

“Oy vey Myrna, you’re starting to sound like me,” joked Sol. “We’ll find a way home.”

A tall, slender man wearing mirrored sunglasses sauntered up to their table. “I bid you welcome . . . again.” The four looking up at the man, recognized the voice and black cape.

“Barlow, how are you?” asked Sol, taking a sip of his beer. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“Neck, did you say neck?” replied Barlow, taking off his sunglasses and holding a tall glass of red wine. “That sounds appetizing.”

“How’s the tourism business?” asked Don, smiling.

“Deliciously good,” replied Barlow, resembling a younger version of rock singer Alice Cooper. “I trust you like our hospitality, yes?”

“We like; yes,” said Don, Sol and Barbara nodding in agreement.

“Mrs. Myrna, you are not happy, perplexed?” Sol’s wife was gazing into the fireplace.

“I’m sorry Mr. Barlow,” replied Myrna. “My mother was urgent for us to get back to the hotel before nightfall. Why is that?”

“Vampires of course,” replied Barlow, Sol choked on his beer. “Be careful with beer here Mr. Sol, it is more potent than watered down American brews.”

“We got great beer in America,” said Sol, defensively, but agreed whatever he was drinking was damn good. “Hey Barlow, can we hitch a ride with you back to hotel?”

“You said -- back to hotel Sol; you’re starting to sound like him,” said

Don, sensing something a bit askew with his friend of over forty years.

“No problem Hirsch and Adams party,” replied Barlow. “Eat, drink, and be merry here at The Fang; we leave in one hour, no?”

“Yes?” said Don.

“Yes. Good. Yes” replied Barlow.

He put on his sunglasses, bumped into a chair and sat down at the bar. He turned towards their table and tipped his glass.

“See, we got ride home – let’s eat, drink and get merry like he said,” joked Sol, who convinced Myrna to order a glass of wine. An hour later, the four travelers were laughing and enjoying dinner. A few patrons who understood English, reveled in their heavy New York accent, doing their best to imitate vintage Big Apple lingo, from saying the word dawg to . . . bada bing.

Barlow devoured a whole roast chicken and another tall glass of red wine then walked over to the ‘New Yorker’ table as it was dubbed by the bar owner. “Time to go Hirsch and Adams people.”

The four left a hefty tip and sauntered out of the Fang, basking in the effects of stronger alcohol content. “What an evening,” said Sol, stretching out his arms and summing up a playful howl.

“That was good howl,” said Barlow, but I can do better.”

“Oh yeah?” joked Sol, “How about a little wager?”

“Sol, don’t be foolish,” said Myrna. “I’m sorry Mr. Barlow, I think my husband’s had a few too many.”

“We make friendly wager,” replied Barlow. “If I win, I get to bite your neck and drink your blood. Just kidding. No, you walk around whole lake at night. If I lose, I have to listen to Don’s bad jokes for hours straight. No, just kidding, I will swim across lake alone myself!”

“Sounds fair,” said Sol, “Let the howling begin. Patrons from the pub poured out onto the street to see the show. Sol took in a deep, passionate breath, closing his eyes and exhaling, letting loose with a monstrous howl. The patrons applauded, not thinking an

American would act so foolishly in public, especially in a strange county.

Barlow limbered up, stretching his arms and legs, shaking his head from side to side. His eyes got dark and he pounced on all fours, growling. The two couples stood back; they noticed many of the patrons holding their ears.

“This guy’s serious, Sol,” said Myrna.

Barlow let out a bellowing howl that made the glass windows of the pub vibrate. Sol’s face dropped.

“That is how we howl in Swoboda Mr. Sol,” gleamed Barlow, standing up and wiping the road dirt from his hands. The patrons seemed apprehensive, like they were nervous of the tall man in black.

“Sounds like you’ve been practicing,” said Don, mouthing the words, wow.

“Only when moon is full Mr. Adams,” said Barlow, “Or when people make bets they want to lose. I’m a capitalist at heart.”

“Well, let’s get going and I’ll do my end of the bargain,” said Sol, never one to welch on a bet. The five people piled into Barlow’s four-door 1969 ink black Pontiac Bonneville.

“Nice car Barlow, where’d you get this?” asked Sol, sitting comfortably in the front seat. “They don’t make ‘em like this anymore.”

“I win car in bet with wealthy American business-type,” said the wirily man. “He even ship it to me!” The ride home was quiet and chilled. The heat didn’t work too well and one of the headlights was out. Barlow pushed in a cassette tape of The Who. “I hope you like rock music! He blared the song, My Generation, singing loudly, looking back at Myrna and the Adam’s in the back seat, smiling. “Hope I die before I get old!” The New Yorkers held their collective ears, wincing.

“You do not have to walk around lake,” said Barlow, “It is much too dangerous.

“I ain’t afraid of nothing Barlow,” boasted Sol, the alcohol still providing the retiree with backbone.

“They all say that,” answered Barlow, grinning. Sol’s eyes sobered up. “You may bring friend Don if you want. If you walk around lake tonight, and I make rest of trip free!”

“Are you saying the rest of our trip we won’t have to pay a cent?” replied Sol, always eager to get a good deal.

“Except food,” said Barlow, “But yes, that is correct Mr. Sol, everything free on house!”

“Let’s do this thing Donny my boy!” said Sol, feeling particularly upbeat, Don not so much.

“I don’t want to do this Sol,” said Don, moping.

“In no shape or form do I want my husband walking out there in the pitch black of night,” said Barbara. Myrna seconded the motion.

“Twenty minutes tops,” said Sol, thinking the fresh night air would sober him up quickly. “Then we’ll enjoy the rest of our free vacation!”

“Fool,” barked Myrna.

“It will not take long,” said Barlow, directing his assurance to the wives. “In fact, both men are in luck; there is full moon so journey is easy to see!”

Sol gave Myrna a hug and headed down the path with Don, who lit up a cigarette. “You owe me for this, Sol.”

“Ladies, shall we retire by fire and have drink?” Both Myrna and Barbara looked at each other.

“Why not!”

The evening air was heavy, the fog marching in off the lake. The water was dark as oil with the moon reflecting off it like a Hollywood spotlight. “See, this ain’t so bad Don; we’ve already walked a quarter way.”

“You know what? I should be back at the hotel with a brandy in my hands by the fire,” said Don.

“We will, we will,” assured Sol, focusing on the task at hand. “See, almost halfway – it’s not like it’s Lake Michigan or something. You’re a bird guy, right?”

“Yeah, why?” asked Don.

“Check out the interesting birds in those trees.” Don looked up at the lines of leafless trees, looking like skeletons. The branches seemed painted in black,

with an occasional brief flutter. Minuscule, high-pitched squeals blended in with the wind whipping off the lake, the subdued evening air a distant memory.

“What the hell happened, Sol,” said Don, holding down his black-haired toupee from blowing off. That wind came out of nowhere! The two men started at a leisurely pace around the lake, but now felt an air of urgency. “Let’s pick up the pace, shall we?”

“It’s just unpredictability, Donny. I mean, who the hell knows what the weather is like here? We’re this close to a free vacation – a burst of cold air I can handle.” Don threw his finished cigarette butt in the lake.

Sol looked up to see the shifting charcoal gray clouds block out the moon. “Almost there, Donny.”

“Stop calling me that; you know how much I hate it,” jabbed Don, pissed off as he stepped into a mud puddle, his cordovan loafers stuck. “Will you look at this Sol? You’re paying for this!” Don slowly pulled each shoe out, both making a prolonged sucking sound.

“Did you hear something?” asked Sol, looking in every direction.

“No, nothing,” answered Don, using a stick to scrape the mud off his shoes. He dropped the stick and bent down to pick it up. As he did, a torpedoing line of black bats headed towards Sol.

“See, I hear something,” he boasted again. As he turned towards Don, the bats pelted the man like hail. Sol frantically swatted away. Don, stunned, picked up a bigger stick and teed off on the flying mammals. One by one, he wacked them off his friend. A larger bat burrowed closely at Sol’s neck. He screamed. Don sized up the target and swung the stick like a golf club, launching into the bat. It fluttered on the surface of the lake then abruptly sank.

“In the hole, baby,” said Don enthusiastically. He quickly bent down to see how his friend was. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine; just help me up already,” yelled Sol. “Ugh,” he said, placing his right hand on the left side of his neck. “What the hell?”

“What’s wrong?” asked Don.

“I think I’m bleeding,” said Sol. “Let me see your lighter, quick, quick.” Don fumbled for his lighter in his buttoned up navy blue coat. He pulled it out and rubbed his thumb along the top of the Bic lighter.

“Stop fidgeting,” said Don, trying to see the injury.

“You see anything?” inquired Sol, anxiously.

“Ah, it’s nothing, a couple of little marks on the neck, you’ll be fine,” said Don, with a reassuring tone. Can we get back now?” Sol rubbed his neck, a bit shaken, but eager to get back to the hotel.

“So ladies, you like place here?” asked Barlow, adding a couple of logs on the fire. Barbara, feeling tipsy and taking bigger sips of red wine now, was cracking jokes about her husband’s hairpiece.

“I call him ferret head,” she said, blurting out laughter and touching his arm. “Oh I’m sorry Mr. Barlow, yes, this place is very nice. This fireplace is to die for.”

“You don’t need to die; just enjoy warmth,” he said. “And you wife of Sol, Myrna, did you enjoy family visit today?”

“Yes, yes, we had a lovely time Barlow, but my mother was worried about us returning to the hotel at night. What was making her so upset?”

“Maybe she not want you to get lost in strange town,” he replied. “There’s nothing strange here, but me. This is act for fun and to make money. Tourists love Dracula.” The two women had almost forgotten about their spouses somewhere lost in the woods.

The grandfather clock let out a boisterous chime, midnight! “Oh my, shouldn’t they be back by now?” asked Myrna, suddenly feeling nervous. “Barbara, aren’t you concerned Don might be lost?”

“Concerned? No, just hopeful!” she and Barlow laughed uncontrollably.

“You people remind me of Honeymoons show!” joked Barlow. “And you, wife of Don, you are Trixie!”

he laughed, spilling his wine on the hardwood floor.

The creaking front door opened as both men appeared, Don’s shoes a muddy mess; Sol rubbing his neck.

“Oh honeybunch, we were so worried,” said Barbara, trying to keep a straight face, but then erupting into laughter again.

“How much wine this time dear,” asked her husband, who slipped off his ruined shoes.

“No worry Mr. Adams, I clean them for you tomorrow,” said Barlow.

“Sol, you seem quiet, are you okay?” asked Myrna, incurring a headache from too much wine.

“I’m fine, I’m fine Myrna,” said Sol, unconvincingly. “I could use a stiff drink.”

“Then it would be frozen, no?” laughed Barlow, pouring himself another glass of wine.

“Oy,” said Don, “a standup comic you ain’t.”

“I thought it was funny,” said Sol, strolling wearily over to the cozy maroon fabric chairs near the fireplace. “Scotch on the rocks, and hold the rocks Barlow.” He picked up a damp napkin being used as a coaster and pressed it against the marks on his neck. He removed it, revealing two light pink spots about two inches apart. “Where’s that scotch!”

Don and Barbara walked up to the second floor room, exhausted. Myrna stayed with her husband; sitting in the chair next to Sol. Barlow had fallen asleep on the love seat.

“Are you coming to bed?” asked Myrna, yawning.

“I’ll be up in a second, you go, I just want to watch the flames burn down.” It had been years since Sol experienced a real fireplace. Their apartment in New York City was fireplace-free so every holiday season; he turned on Channel Eleven and watched the Yule Log. Somehow it just wasn’t the same as the mammoth-sized fireplace before him.

“You could burn a whole tree in this thing,” thought Sol, who took a sip of his drink before dosing off.

The rest of the trip, on the house as Barlow promised, flew by. Actually it ended up being fifty percent off, but Sol could live with that. On the last day, the couples stopped by Myrna's mother's house.

"I wish you all great trip home," said Sabina, wearing a heavy white wool sweater and long skirt. "Now don't be stranger and come back soon!" She gave the two couples bear hugs.

"I miss you already mother," said Myrna, tearing up.

"You're husband don't look so good," Sabina added. "Come here Sol, let me look." The woman put her hands on Sol's chalk-white face, tilting his head every which way, then peered deep into his eyes before pulling away quickly.

"What is it," Sol asked, unnerved by the peculiar inspection. He felt lightheaded.

"What is it ma?" said Myrna, her bold accent emphasizing her concern.

"Uh, nothing dear, nothing at all. Now go before you miss bus and plane." Myrna gave her mom one last hug before waving goodbye. The Adam's were already outside, patiently waiting. Sol felt cold. Sabina offered her son-in-law a quick shot of whisky before leaving the house.

He paused for a moment, looked back at Myrna's mother, and headed outside. He could see it in her facial expression something was wrong.

Stay tuned for part two in the April issue of The Portal!



In Celebration of National Poetry Month, SR/BC Poetry Club is inviting you to submit your poem for a **poetry contest** (Ages 16 and up).

Submissions are open until Sat. April 6. The winners & participants will read their poems at an award ceremony from 6:30 to 7:30 pm, Tuesday April 16. (1st Floor Audit).

Guidelines: Contest participants may submit one poem each. Poems can be in any style, but no longer than two pages in length. Type/Print your full name and contact information (phone number/email) at the bottom of each page.

**Prizes: 1st place \$25 gift card
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All the winning poems will be published in the SR monthly Portal!

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Submissions: Send your poems to Sadiq Alkoriji salkoriji@broward.org OR submit them at the Adult Reference desk. Thank you.

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