

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



Ghostwriters By Rick Weber

U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander James Powell was feeling pretty good walking into his office at the base in Norfolk, Virginia. He just came back from a hostage rescue with his Special Warfare team in the Middle East. James Powell was a SEAL. The latest operation went according to plan. An American aid worker went home to her family safe and sound, and she would never know the names of her rescuers. This was

the way James and the rest of his colleagues on “The Teams” liked it. Anonymity was their best ally. The post operation debriefings were done, and he sent his subordinates off to be with their families for some well-deserved downtime. As for James he was the boss and had to go to work. He made it to his desk when he heard his phone ringing. The caller ID showed it coming from the commanding officer’s or CO’s office. He answered and found himself summoned upstairs to meet with the CO.

The CO had already congratulated James and his crew on a job well done. To him, this meant something new was in the hopper. The CO did not waste any time and told him, “You’ve been reassigned to Cyber Command.”

“What?” James asked rhetorically. “Why do they need me there? Don’t they have enough geeks there already?”

“Geeks, yes, but geeks with real world experience, no. Your curriculum vitae finally caught up with you.”

James did not need any further explanation. He grew up dirt poor in the Poe Homes projects on Baltimore’s west side. Teachers picked up on his academic potential early on. After graduating from Baltimore’s Polytechnic High School, he received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. Annapolis was a big change for him. No longer did he have to look over his shoulder to see if he would be robbed on the street. He only feared for the safety of his mother and siblings left behind. James majored in computer science at the Academy, but got assigned to Special Warfare upon graduation.

SEAL Team training was tough and he relied heavily on his life in the ghetto to get him through it. Twenty years with The Teams and a Master’s Degree in Computer Science from Johns Hopkins finally did catch up with him.

“Commander, they didn’t share anything more with me. You’re going to have to get the rest when you get to Fort Meade. You’re to report there in two weeks.” The CO dismissed him, and James left to close out this part of his career. He knew he would have to take a desk job someday, but he hoped for the E-ring at the Pentagon, not CYOPS in Fort Meade.

Besides the Army’s large presence at Fort Meade, it was also home to NSA and the U.S. Cyber Command. To him, this was a gig for an intelligence weenie, not an operations guy like him. Inside the Cyber Command building, James was escorted by a civilian staff member. He walked into his new CO’s office and saw a familiar face. Commander Lorraine Ritter went through Annapolis with James and they formed a close sibling like relationship which lasted throughout their careers. Unlike James, Lorraine tracked in submarine warfare and had been the Navy’s first female attack submarine commander. Like James, she also majored in computer science.

“Big Bro,” Lorraine shouted when she saw him. “Come here and give a girl a hug.” Coming around her desk they embraced warmly.

“What’s this all about, Lorraine? I got no info when I was told about this new job.”

“I know,” Lorraine said in her Texas drawl. “The powers that be

here wanted that way. They're pretty skittish about it. Have a seat, a cup of Java, and I will lay it all out to you."

After they each got a cup of coffee they sat down facing each other in chairs in front of Lorraine's desk, and she explained everything in her own inimitable style. "James, they brought me here six months ago. One of the higher ups saw a gap between getting actionable intelligence and using it. The country is getting hacked to death from folks overseas, mainly in China and Russia. Our intellectual property and people's identities are getting stolen in droves. Complaints are rolling in here from all corners; Congress, private industry, banking, even lobbyists.

"They collect tons of crap here every day but no one knows what to do with it all. Anyway, someone got the bright idea of putting together a small unit here that will go out and bag these rustlers. I got permission to set up a team on a trial basis that'll do just that."

"This sounds more like a law enforcement venture, not military. What about the FBI? Shouldn't they be handling this?"

"They're on board. I got an agent from the Bureau coming here next week to help out. I need you to help set up the missions and do the targeting. When they pulled me in here, their idea was to have someone with tactical covert military experience and a high security clearance who could skulk around looking for targets of opportunity, like a sub commander. After seeing what they were after, I told them that we needed someone who not only knew computers, but also, knew how to put an endgame

together, which is where you come in."

Sitting up in his chair smiling, James said, "So, any possibility of an extraordinary rendition makes them skittish. It should. There's nothing worse than having an op go bad. Do we have anyone from Langley lined up? We need an analyst who can read the tea leaves if you want this to succeed. I worked with one there who really made a difference in the last couple of missions I was on. She's great!"

"Give me her name, and I'll make it happen."

The following Monday, Bradford Freeman and Sheila Cummings showed up for their first day of work at what was now known as "Operation Ghostwriter". Bradford Freeman, or Brad as he liked to be called, had been with the FBI for twenty-five years spending his entire career, as well as, the rest of his life in New York City. A law degree from Columbia University and a Jesuit education did nothing to cool his New York temperament or attitude. He now worked at the Bureau's Cyber Crimes Division.

Sheila Cummings was a fifteen year veteran analyst with the CIA, mostly working in the Middle East. It was hard to believe that the diminutive girl from Dubuque, Iowa worked on some of the most sensitive cases Langley ever handled, even traveling to far off places, such as, Quetta, Pakistan when needed.

After a morning of briefings, the Ghostwriter team held its first meeting after lunch. James was the first to speak.

"You know our mandate. We're in uncharted waters. We need to get a couple of grounders under our

belt before we can take on the harder jobs."

"I hear you," Brad said. "What do you have in mind?"

Lorraine answered, "We have to select a group who are ripe to be picked with an ironclad indictment around their necks, but who aren't too streetwise. Our first mission won't be eight seconds on a bull, but it will set the tone for what we will do in the future."

"Do we have anyone or a specific group in mind?" Sheila asked.

"No," Lorraine said, "That's why we're sitting here. We have to come up with a method of matching targets with real time intelligence. Do you have any suggestions?"

Brad took the opportunity to answer. "I worked a lot on Russian Organize Crime gangs in New York. An old partner of mine from up there called me last week and told me about a guy we put away for life wants to cooperate. He's doing time on RICO charges in Lewisburg. He had his fingers in everything; drugs, loan sharking, prostitution, DVD pirating, you name it. He pled guilty straight up to the racketeering indictment about five years ago. Now, he's having second thoughts about dying in prison."

"Sounds, good," Sheila chimed in. "If he's like the Russian mobsters I heard about, he probably still has strong ties to the homefront. I can work up what you give me and we can all take a look at it."

"Now, we're cooking!" Lorraine boomed. "Let's get on it!"



Over the next couple of weeks, Brad traveled to the U.S. Prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and interviewed his source, whom they referred to as “Rico” after the federal racketeering statute. Sheila took Brad’s information from Rico and ran it through the various databases at Langley coming up with an analysis.

Brad and Sheila did a joint briefing with James and Lorraine of what their findings were. Brad began the briefing.

“Our boy, Rico, is on the bus. Five years ago, he wouldn’t say anything. Now, you can’t shut him up. He knows he can get a sentence reduction, if he’s truthful. His tenure at Lewisburg, let’s say, has softened his past position.

“He gave us a group of three guys he knew from his old neighborhood in Yekaterinburg. About eight years ago, before Rico took his fall, he ran into them while he was on vacation in the Caribbean. They knew Rico was mobbed up in the Big Apple and they hit him up for some work. They were still undergrads at the Ural Federal University and making names for themselves in the hacking world.

“Rico heard them out and said he could use their services to get some money back owed by a drug dealer who was ducking him. Rico told the kids that if they could get back what the dealer owed him from the dealer’s off shore account, he’d pay them ten percent. Two hours later, they met with Rico again in a hotel bar on the island and told him the job was done. The whole amount was already in a shell account Rico had in the

Caymans. Rico did his money laundering voodoo on the spot and paid the lads a cool million dollar commission. Rico was ecstatic. He didn’t have to break any legs to get repaid, while the boys made their bones in the Russian OC world.”

“Who are these ‘lads’?” asked Lorraine.

“Sheila will put their full names under their photos during her PowerPoint presentation. I never could get the hang of keeping long Russian names straight. So for the sake of simplicity and operational security, we’ll call them ‘Flopsy’, ‘Mopsy’, and ‘Cottontail’.”

Everyone chuckled as Sheila took over the briefing from Brad. “The lads, as well as Rico, are all from Yekaterinburg about 1000 miles east of Moscow in the Urals. Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail teach at the Ural Federal University in town. Information is that their using the school’s mainframes and servers to hack foreign companies, mostly in the U.S. Europe, and Canada, stealing intellectual property for resale to the highest bidder. Safe to say, their night jobs pay a lot better than their teaching positions.

“Apparently, these guys aren’t overly greedy. They choose their targets carefully, working only in short spurts to get a project done start to finish.”

“Is there any method to their madness?” James asked.

“None, we found out yet. The lads can lay dormant for months at a crack. Then, they go after a target, work for weeks around the clock, and then, without warning, go back into hibernation. Our human assets are not that close to them.

They can tell us when they’re active, but that’s it.”

“By then, it will be too late to take a run at them,” James commented.

“But, now the moment you all have been waiting for,” Brad piped up. “Sheila, bring on the lads.”

Sheila advanced her Power Point slides to show their individual photographs with captions. “This is Flopsy. Just to warn you, none of these guys are easy on the eyes. Flopsy is 28 years old, single, and still living at home with Mom.”

“Tall, lean, but no fightin’ machine,” commented Lorraine. “Who’s next?”

“That would be Mopsy,” Sheila said bringing up the next slide. “As you can tell by his photo, Mopsy eats no lean. He’s 27, lives alone, and with few outside interests outside of his two jobs and food, which brings us to subject #3,” bringing up the next photo of a thin man with thick glasses.

“Cottontail is also 27, single, living alone, with no known vices we can use to bait him.”

“So, where does that leave us?” Lorraine asked. “Each of them could be on a recruitment poster for a monastery.”

“I said that they had FEW outside interests, not NONE,” Sheila clarified. “Mopsy and Cottontail each have a few girlfriends the hook up with on weekends, probably making up for celibate childhoods. Flopsy, on the other hand, has a steady girlfriend I call ‘Jaws’. They have been seeing each other for over a year, but they’re not real serious, yet.”

“Which brings us to?” Lorraine asked showing some impatience.

Brad jumped in. “This part was my doing. When the taps on their cell phones yielded nothing, I asked Sheila to go up on to go up on ‘Jaws’ line. When I worked in New York, a lot of the bad guys didn’t talk much on their phones, mostly because they knew better and talked face to face. However, I found out that girlfriends were a wealth of information. Besides being social conduits, they also said things to other girlfriends on the phone that would have gotten them killed if their beaus found out. How do you think we bagged Rico? I didn’t mean to butt in. Sheila, please go on.”

“No offense taken. Jaws phone is a gold mine. Besides talking about their love life, she lets on what Flopsy is doing with his money; the usual off-shore accounts, condos in Italy and Monaco, his love for fine art to list a few. Brad is having the Bureau track down these assets. The ‘money trail’ is not a bad place to begin.”

It was James turn to ask the questions. “Following the money is great, but where does the proactive phase begin? This crew lies low, becomes alive in short bursts, then drops off of the radar before anyone catches on to them.”

“How about this?” Brad asked to no one in particular. “What if we plant some seeds to get them moving when we want to?”

“If you mean a sting, how do you propose it be carried out?” Lorraine asked.

“I’ve been bouncing some ideas off of Sheila, and we came up with this. We set up a fake company

with some highly prized intellectual property, also fake, and get word back to our three professors that this stuff is really hot and highly sought after. We give them some chickenfeed to pique their interest and send them on the way looking for it. Once they have it, we let them know that we have a ‘buyer’, us, willing to pay top dollar. When the deal is finished, the lads get indicted.”

“Sounds overly simplified,” Lorraine said. “How are we going to get their attention to do this without blowing everything from the get-go?”

“Rico is still in a position where he can facilitate this, even though he’s behind bars. These kids still look up to him and know that jail never keeps an OC guy from working. Deals still get done.

“The proposal calls for Rico to reach out to the lads via an intermediary to say he knows someone with a specific interest in another company’s project and will pay the right sum upon delivery. We can set it up where there will be no entrapment issues when it comes to court and that sensitive sources will not be disclosed. The hard part is coming up with a product that these guys will spurn these guys to get involved.”

“I see where you’re coming from,” Lorraine said. “It’s doable but will require a lot of work to backstop the mission. James and I can take care of that. We’ll get with the appropriate entities here in the building to see which type of ‘product’ will sell best and get them working on the ‘packaging’.”

“That will be the hard part,” James said. “We not only have to make them believe that the product

is for real. We, also, have to make the ‘packaging’ i.e. the program they have to crack is just as real. If we make it too easy, they’ll smell a rat. Likewise, for the same reason, if it’s too hard, they’ll know a foreign power is after them.”

After the meeting broke up, Lorraine and James spoke with their colleagues at Cyber Command about getting support for their new project. Surprisingly, they encountered no opposition. Their bosses loved the idea, and the other sections embraced the concept offering suggestions about the ‘product’ and the ‘package’.

It took longer than expected, but with Lorraine’s and James’ input, they finally had a product worth ‘selling’. It was now time for Lorraine and James to tell it to Brad and Sheila.

Without any fanfare, James started the briefing with some other interested parties from Cyber Command also in attendance. “This is what we came up with. We stayed away from weapons systems, communication technology, or anything else that may send up either a red flag or promote interest from other would be buyers. We kept it simple so the lads would only want a quick turnaround for their time and get their money upon delivery of the item with no future transactions on the horizon. The proposed item is new quick charge lithium battery with a lifespan far exceeding what is on the market now. The potential for this new product will be great, but venture capital available is thin.”

“Our hope is,” Lorraine commented, “that the lads, who don’t have manufacturing backgrounds, won’t dig too deep

into the ‘product’. The only question is when to bait the trap?”

Brad scratched the top of his head slowly and said, “My old partner has been talking to Rico, and feels that Rico can initiate contact whenever we want. Rico does not know what the plan is, but he is willing to be a part of it if he gets to see daylight at the end of the prison tunnel.”

Sheila took the opportunity to add, “The lads haven’t had a side job in a long time. At least, that’s what Jaws has been saying on the phone. She wants them to make some money so they can all cruise the Mediterranean on a yacht.”

“Jaws?” asked one of the Cyber Command section chiefs. “Why that name for a girlfriend?”

“This woman is a hard core gold digger,” Sheila said. “She’s just along for the ride, and she chews up everything on the way. Hence, the name Jaws, she’s a shark. She doesn’t care what she says on her phone as long as she gets what she thinks she has coming.”

There were a few laughs and nods at Sheila’s remarks then Lorraine asked, “Is now too soon?” James, Sheila, and Brad shook their heads and Lorraine added, “Let’s get this locomotive rolling.”

The following week, Brad advised that Rico made the initial contact through some middlemen and the reception was warm. Sheila reported that Jaws was still cranky. James and Lorraine did a final inspection of the product and the package. The train was moving down the tracks.

Another week went by and Sheila learned that Jaws let it be known Flopsy, Mopsy, and

Cottontail finally had work, and went on to describe the route of their Mediterranean voyage on the phone. Lorraine and James kept tabs on the shell company website to see if entry was being made. Rico’s feedback to Brad through the FBI in New York was that undercover negotiations were going as planned. The Ghostwriter team held its breath.

Hurry up suddenly replaced wait. Cyber Command reported that the package had finally been opened and the product removed. The FBI in New York reported contact by the lads to their undercover agents that the item was ready for delivery. A hefty chunk of change was wired to a Swiss bank account the lads set up for the transaction. An hour later, the product was delivered to an encrypted undercover email address at the FBI Cyber Crimes Division. This part of the operation went smooth. The ball was now in the FBI’s hands to get the case indicted.

A week later, Brad came into the office and announced, “Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail are toast. The grand jury returned a true bill on all counts including some additional charges in a few other cases that the Bureau tied them to as a result of our operation. The indictment is under seal until we can get our hands on them.”

“Which I hope is soon,” Lorraine groaned. “What’s next?”

“It may not be too long,” Sheila said. “Jaws has been telling her girlfriends that they got a yacht booked for a month long cruise, which will be soon. I’ve been tracking what she’s been saying about the route, the boat, and even

finding out that Mopsy and Cottontail will be with them. I passed on what I had to James.”

James then said, “They’re picking up the boat in Trieste with them going down the east coast of Italy, stopping in Sicily then continuing up the west side of the peninsula. I’m setting it up the takedown with the Italian Coast Guard who will board the vessel in Palermo for an ‘inspection’ and take the lads into custody.”

Brad added, “This will be based on provisional arrest warrants filed by our embassy in Rome, but nothing will be done until we know for sure they’re all on board that yacht. The passenger manifest filed by the boat’s captain in Trieste, will give us time to verify that while they are underway.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Lorraine howled. “Let’s keep our fingers crossed and votive candles lit.”

Since the active investigation was led by the FBI in New York, the Venture Capitalist team had to sit on the sidelines and wait. The Naval and FBI Legal Attaches in Rome were handling the endgame. No one on the team was used to this. They knew that the lads with Jaws and two other women were on the vessel. It took what seemed forever for them to get to Palermo, but the day finally came. The lads actually traveled under their own passports and were arrested by Italian Authorities.

When the call came, the team was shocked that it went so well causing Sheila to ask, “What do we do for an encore?”

“Field a few more grounders. We’ll know when we’re ready for the big game,” James answered. James liked the anonymity of his

new job. He found ghostwriting satisfying. What he didn't like was that he was not out there doing it himself. *No more hands on*, he thought and he heard Lorraine shout.

“Attention on deck, another request for our services just came in. Apparently, the word is out. We've got job security.”

.....and so it goes.



Strange Days By DiVitto Kelly

It was nearing eight at night. Robert Eckles, branch manager at the secluded Mangrove Public Library, stared out the panoramic view from the employee lounge. He glanced down at his watch and took a sip of tea. “Almost closing time,” he sighed.

The brisk winds were angling the driving rain and tossing falling leaves like confetti. “Damn storm’s gonna be a pain in the ass to drive home in,” he uttered in his

hardened voice. The quaint town of Mangrove, Florida was still reeling from last week’s tropical storm. “What the hell?”

The first one hit the window full force, cracking it like a thrown rock. The next one hit even harder. Scores of them began pounding the three thousand square foot building from the sky like falling bricks. Eckles jumped back in stunned surprise, dropping his prized Florida Gators orange mug to the floor. The screams of patrons inside the library echoed throughout the tiny chamber.

Eckles rushed to the door leading to the circulation desk. Two staff employees huddled under their desks in stunned fear. The motion sensor to the front glass doors froze, leaving the building wide open. Whatever was attacking the building was starting to find its way inside. The seasoned employee rushed over to the entrance, hurdling over a chair. He pressed the button but nothing happened. The branch manager grabbed the doors with his bare hands and started pulling them together. Halfway in, the power kicked on and did the rest.

Almost instantaneously, blood splattered against the glass as a man begged to get back inside. Eckles tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge. He could only stare in horror as they engulfed the man like ravenous piranhas in a feeding frenzy, literally tearing the man apart at the seams.

“Everybody, take cover in the back, quickly, quickly,” ordered Eckles. He picked up a dropped umbrella from the floor and opened it, doing his best to shield himself against the aerial assault.

“What the hell is going on?” cried Annie Croft, a 60ish slender woman, who worked the circulation desk with her younger counterpart, Elaina Greer.

“They look like some sort of mutant bats,” screamed Greer, who managed to swat away one strafing creature with a copy of Maurice Sendak’s picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

“I don’t know,” answered Eckles. “But let’s move -- now!” A handful of people rushed into the back office. The manager took count: three staff employees including himself, two adult patrons, and a middle school aged boy.

Eckles directed everyone to the kitchen. “First of all, anyone hurt?”

“Tis but a scratch,” Croft replied, who suffered a minor wound on her right hand.

A man in his late sixties sporting a ponytail displayed scratches on both arms but appeared to be okay. The school teacher, a woman in her early thirties, and the young boy appeared to be fine. Greer, the young mid-twenties part-time employee, had a scrape on her forearm. Eckles advised each of them to clean the wounds with soap and warm water.

Greer finished washing up then placed a band aide on the wound. “I wish I had my gun right about now.”

“You and me both,” said Eckles, a veteran hunter and weekend angler himself. Thirty years ago he briefly held the record for catching the largest snook off of Sanibel Island.

“You’re Michael Wagner’s younger brother, right?” asked Elaina, trying to make the scared boy more at ease.

“Uh huh. “I’m Chris.

“I don’t know what the hell we’re dealing with, but we need to secure this building – windows, doors, understood?” The towering six-foot-three inch Eckles looked at the boy and patted him on his shoulder. “Son, why don’t you grab a seat and try to relax. Are you with a parent?”

“Um . . . no,” the tween stammered. “But my mom’s supposed to pick me up any minute.” The boy, slender build with short black hair, was doing his best to stay calm. He cleared his throat. “There were more people out there.”

Eckles nodded. “Stay here folks.” He reached for a broom and tin dustpan in the kitchen then headed for the work area door. “Armed and dangerous,” he mused. Just as peeked outside . . .

Wham! The assault started up again, sounding like thumping kettle drums as the objects pelted the building. The four shifted towards the window, mesmerized by the flying creatures.

“There must be hundreds of them,” said the boy in astonishment, turning to the adults. As he looked back, a creature splattered against the glass, sending the boy to the floor in startled fright.

“Maybe we all better step back,” added Croft as she helped him up.

The black winged creatures were a foot in length. Their rough, textured bodies appeared lizard-like, a throwback to prehistoric times. Their mouths resembled barracudas, lined with oversized dagger teeth. The eyes were neon yellow with dark green slits for pupils, their wiry tails whipping

through the air like stingrays. And they kept on coming.

Eckles peered through the crack of the employee doorway. Through the darkened building he could hear the frenzied barrage of the creatures. He stepped out and slid past the circulation desk. He crouched up behind a rounded column and poked his head, surveying the scene. He stepped just past the reference bookcases when he found two adult patrons, mauled and mangled to death. The emergency lights provided just enough light where he could decipher the heavily blood-soaked carpeting. He inched closer to see if he knew who they were. He didn’t recognize what was left of their faces, tourists most likely.

As Eckles stood up, a creature shot out like a clay skeet, striking him in the right shoulder. He managed to partially block it with the dust pan, but it left a gash near his collarbone.

“Holy Christ!” He fended off the creature, swatting it with the broom. A six handicap in golf, Eckles teed off on the stunned animal and sent it flying into the glass door. With his adrenalin flowing like river rapids, he stormed over, raised his right foot and brought down his size twelve Timberland boot on the creature’s neck, killing it instantly.

“Little shit.” Breathing heavily, he double-checked the front door then surveyed the rest of the building. The branch manager found two more dead people then stumbled across an eight-year-old girl balled up under a computer desk, terrified. Eckles reached down extending his hand. “It’s okay, I got ya.”

The girl’s eyes got big, staring at the ceiling. Eckles froze. He slowly turned around and glanced up. There, three creatures were clinging to the square ceiling tiles with their elongated claws.

“Oh sugar,” uttered the branch manager. He quickly snatched the girl, picking her up like a hefty bag of mulch and ran for the back door. The three creatures darted after them. He picked up the umbrella left on the circulation desk and fought off the creatures as the young girl screamed.

“Damn you!” Eckles yelled, desperately trying to open the back door as one of the creatures snapped at his hands. The door burst open as Elaina unleashed a double-barrel of buckshot, killing two of them. The frightened young girl raced directly towards the teacher.

Elaina fired once more, obliterating the lone remaining creature as it flew towards her, before darting back inside. “Piss heads.” She locked the door and headed to the kitchen to wash the blood off her hands and face.

“Where the well did you get the gun?” asked Eckles, grimacing in pain, his hands a shredded mess.

“My truck,” answered Elaina. “You think I’m gonna take this crap from a bunch of flying aliens? Besides, you remember my dad’s an ex-marine. You think I grew up playing with Barbie dolls?”

“Thank God they didn’t attack you out there in the parking lot,” replied Eckles. How’d you manage that?”

“Ran like hell, boss.”

The branch manager smiled then went into the kitchen and

washed up. He snagged the package of gauze bandages from the first aid kit and mummified both bleeding hands. Thirsty, he reached into the olive green refrigerator and popped open a Coke, guzzling it before slumping down in a chair. “These pesky little buggers are . . .”

“Aliens,” blurted out the elderly man. Maury Worthman, balding hippie with long gray hair wrapped in a distinguished pony tail, was an eccentric oddball. He routinely explored information about government coverups, aliens, and the CIA. He was one of the library regulars and resident conspiracy theorist, a retiree from the U. S. Postal Service.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Croft, a steady, no-nonsense T-squared librarian. “It’s probably some sort of . . .”

“Sort of what?” prodded the retiree. With her pencil-thin frame and uncontrolled frizzy peppered hair, Worthman had earned the endearing nickname ‘Mop with a Masters.’ She hesitated. “Well?”

“If you ask me, I think there’s something very weird going on in the ‘Glades,” said Elaina. “You take all that pesticide runoff and irresponsible people dumping all kinds of exotic animals there. It’s a class A recipe for weird.”

“Yeah, like that sounds more plausible,” chimed Croft.

“Maybe the storm brung ‘em,” said Worthman.

“Folks, whatever it is, we need to find help or we’re in deep trouble,” said Andrea Gonzales, a fourth grade teacher at Gator Elementary five miles west of the library.

“Well, the electricity’s been spotty at best,” said Eckles, “and the phones are dead.”

“And as we’ve come accustomed to out here in the middle of the Amazon, the cell phone reception blows,” added Elaina, formally of Gainesville, Florida and a staunch Gators fan.

“Thank you for putting it so eloquently,” jabbed Croft.

“I’m telling you it’s aliens!” said Worthman. The four argued around in circles when the boy spoke up.

“Stop it!” Please, just . . . shut up.” Everyone quieted down.

“My mom could be out there and I don’t want her attacked by these flying freaks. I need to see if she’s okay.”

Eckles looked over at the boy. “You’re right kid.” The branch manager decided a different line of defense. He gathered up two pairs of scissors and wrapped duct tape around them to the end of the broom. Elaina was more than eager to volunteer her shooting expertise.

“What, no dustpan this time?” said Elaina. Eckles offered up a mild smirk. “I feel like we’re in one of those God awful SyFy Channel movies.”

The two slipped out the side employee entrance. It was dark out, not a sound, except for croaking frogs and ringing crickets. The library was surrounded by white and black mangrove trees, along with towering sea grapes. The night air felt humid and heavy, typical for October in southwest Florida.

“I don’t see any of them; that’s a good thing,” boasted Elaina.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” replied Eckles. “I think they’re

hiding, ready to attack us. We need to be quiet, not a sound.” Just then, he snapped a fallen branch in two.

“So much for being quiet,” whispered Elaina.

The two half circled the building. There, a small SUV with one of the headlights busted, sat idling. The windshield was a mesh of shattered glass. “The boy said his mother drives a red Subaru, right?” asked Eckles.

“Damn,” said Elaina.

They crouched down and scurried up to the battered passenger side door. The woman was slumped over on the steering wheel. “Oh God, no,” sighed Eckles, cupping his hands around his eyes. There was a groan.

“Holy crap, she’s alive,” said Elaina. She tapped on the glass and called her name. The woman slowly lifted her head. The woman jumped in surprise, mouthing the words, thank God. Still in a daze, she finally unlocked the doors. Elaina hopped in the back seat, Eckles in the front.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” asked Eckles.

The woman cried out. “My son, where’s my son?”

Eckles could tell the woman was in borderline shock. There was blood on the left side of her head and a cut just above her right eye.

“Ma’am, your son Chris is safe inside the library.”

Elaina perked up. “You hear that?”

“Hear what?” replied Eckles. “I don’t . . .”

“Get in!” yelled Elaina.

There was a hovering black mass just above a trio of sabal palms.

In seconds, the bombardment commenced, pounding the all-wheel drive wagon. Eckles shielded the young boy's mother as Elaina reached over to lock the back doors.

A larger creature hit the back window, cracking it. Another slammed into the rear passenger side next to Elaina, penetrating through. The young woman took off her black jean jacket and covered her hands for protection. She grabbed the thrashing creature by the neck and slammed it down on a pointed shard of glass. The creature gushed a deep purple blood all over the back seat. "Need a little help here, boss!"

"Let's switch seats ma'am," barked Eckles. The woman slid behind the branch manager. He pushed the seat back and started the engine. "Hold on!"

Eckles looped around the back of the library and headed for the employee entrance. More creatures engulfed the windshield blocking his vision. He placed the wipers on high, clearing the view momentarily, but then . . .

Slam. The wagon crashed against the building setting off the airbags. "Christ almighty!" said Eckles. "I'm gonna get us all killed. You two okay?"

The injured mother nodded she was a bit shaken but otherwise fine, Elaina the same. Eckles laid on the horn. Moments later, Croft opened the door a crack and noticed the dented hood of the car. She scanned the night sky. "Hurry, hurry!"

"On three," said Eckles, as he counted off. They dashed from the vehicle and spilled into the safe confines of the musty library.

"Mom, mom," cried Chris, hugging her like he hadn't seen her in a year. The boy helped her into a chair and rushed to the kitchen to retrieve some paper towels. "Are you alright?" The boy grimaced at the sight of the wounds. He'd never seen his mom or dad hurt in any way, ever.

"I'm fine son; I'm fine, thank you." She hugged him, collecting her thoughts before turning to Eckles. "What are those things?"

Annie turned to Worthman who was about to spout his theory when in patented old-school librarian fashion, she shushed him. He shook his head, irked.

"Our best guest is those flying freaks came from the glades," said Elaina.

"Or aliens," added Worthman, eyeing Croft, who directed her soured face at the seasoned hippie.

"That actually sound more plausible," said Chris's mother. Worthman gloated. Croft seethed.

Another wave of creatures pounded against the panoramic window, etching out more and more cracks. "Damn it," boasted Eckles. "Another barrage like that and the window's gonna go."

Elaina tried her cell again. Nothing. "Hold on folks, I finally got a signal!" The phone rang . . . and rang. "Come on, come on, pick up daddy."

The electricity flickered on. "Alright," smiled Eckles. His face suddenly turned to marble as he heard a motorized sound. "Oh shit."

He stumbled over to the door leading to the circulation desk. He turned to everyone. "We've got trouble."

The boy ran over first, followed by Elaina. The two poked their heads out. "What?" called out Annie.

"The front door is open," said Eckles. "All of you better get inside my office and close the door just in case that back window breaks."

"You got two shells left," said Elaina, as she handed her boss the gun.

"I gotta make this quick. Go now everybody – go!" The five scurried back to Eckle's office as he rumbled his way towards the front door.

The lights inside the library dimmed. He sprinted over, seeing nothing but a big opening leading into the darkened parking lot. Eckles pressed the button repeatedly to close the doors but they remained frozen. He placed the gun down and stood between the open doorway and reached out to pull them together. There was a screeching metal sound.

Eckles paused for a moment – and only for a moment when they swooped down and attacked him. He screamed, falling to the ground to cover up. Eckles tried to reach for the gun but was overwhelmed by the sudden attack. Elaina rushed to the door only to see her mentor being mauled to death, blood painted all along the scuffed linoleum tiles in the front lobby. She screamed seeing Bob's hand trying to reach out to her.

"You fucking bastards!" Elaina was about to dash towards her boss when Worthman clutched her upper

arm, trying to shield her from the horrific scene.

“There’s nothing you can do for him.”

“But he’s my friend,” shouted Elaina, her face full of tears and rage. “I’m gonna kill those mother . . .”

“What’s that?” said the boy.

“You hear it too?” boasted Annie.

Elaina and Worthman stayed by the door while Annie, the teacher, and the two children rushed to see out the large window.

A helicopter buzzed the library, circling again and again. “What’s it doing?” asked the teacher, holding the girl protectively in her grasp.

The helicopter was spraying something, a heavy florescent mist that lit up the night sky like bioluminescence. Suddenly they heard a thud . . . then another. More fell, pelting the library building and the surrounding parking lot.

“Wait,” said Elaina. She dashed over to a side window near the supply room. “It’s a poison!”

“It’s what?” squawked Annie. “Did you just say poison?”

The young woman perked up. “Whoever’s up there is spraying those little shits like they’re mosquitoes.”

“And?” asked the teacher.

“They’re dropping like flies,” cried the boy in delight.

“But who’s going it?” inquired Worthman. “The CIA? FBI? The men in black?”

Elaina’s phone rang. “Hello? Daddy? I’m so glad you were able to get a hold . . . What? I’m fine, I’m

fine. Uh, okay. I promise.” Her dad’s voice was partially drowned out from the sound of the whirling chopper. “I PROMISE!”

“What did your dad have to say?” asked Annie. The rest of the survivors gathered around the young woman like a vintage EF Hutton commercial. She cleared her throat, feeling totally puzzled.

“My dad . . .” Her voice trailed off

“He what?” asked Worthman.

“Um, he strongly insisted we all stay here until they’re finished.”

“That’s it?” asked Annie.

“Uh, finished with what?” asked the boy.

“The extermination process.” Elaina then turned to Croft. “Oh, and we need to keep all this quiet . . . or else.” She paused, and then eyed the ex-hippie.

“Seems like you’re not crazy after all Mr. Worthman.”



When the Music’s Over By Jaime White

Some songs bring back the worst kind of memories. Sarah only had to hear the first few notes and she was brought back to that day. It hurt so much, she stopped listening to the radio altogether. Wouldn’t it be her luck the song she hated most had to be one of the biggest hits ever? So, she loaded up her music player and took it with her everywhere she might listen to music: in the car, while cleaning the house, or working on an assignment.

That day, she was running late, so she didn’t notice she’d forgotten to pack her music player before she left. Her hand hovered above the radio dial as she decided whether or not to turn it on. Finally, the prospect of a long, silent drive forced her to turn the dial.

What are the chances, anyway? She thought.

Several songs went by and Sarah began singing along, enjoying the ride. The song stopped and an announcer yammered on about things Sarah didn’t care to pay attention to.

Just as she was about to change the station, the announcer shut up and the music started again. The notes caused her hands

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to shake and Sarah had to pull off the road. She put the car in park and reached for the dial, stopping the horrible sound before she had to hear another note.

Images of another time and place assaulted her, bringing with them a sense of loss that made her throat constrict and phantom pains to hit hard. That damn song.

She'd been listening to it the day she died.



Break on Through By CP Bialois/Ed White

Whack. Whack. Whack.

"Damn, that thing's tough." Stan lowered his ax while gasping for breath. He wasn't used to this much exercise. The only perk in life he wanted was a day on the couch watching television gave. At least until that rat bastard came into his house and dared to talk to him like he was little better than a dog.

Of all the things that could've happened, that pushed Stan over the edge.

It wasn't that he didn't know it was coming. He knew his wife was cheating on him or the last year. He just didn't know with whom. Now he

did. Their neighbor. The wonderful, ever helpful, constantly kind Alex Miller.

Stan knew he had no one to blame but himself. He was a lazy, no good slacker that had never worked for anything in his life. To him, it was living the American Dream. Where else would he have been able to live off his wife's money without a care in the world.

To be honest, he expected her to cheat on him years earlier. The fact she didn't gave him a sense of security that she wouldn't leave him. After a while, he expected her to stick around for, if no other reason, some idiotic idea of changing him.

So much for that, he thought several times over the years. *She won't leave. She has it too good here.*

And that was something he truly believed. He never lifted a hand or harsh word toward her. He allowed her to do what she wanted without a second thought. She worked hard, and when she came home he rewarded her as best he could. The fact he got his jollies didn't deter him in the slightest.

Stacey never once uttered a complaint. Not a single one about him or her job, at least, not that he ever heard. She was a paralegal to some big shot in the city, so she was gone most of the day and made damn good money. When she was home, they mostly ate takeout so she wouldn't have to worry about doing dishes. To Stan, it was an ideal situation for them both.

Those were happy times. Times when he could do whatever he wanted and she left him alone. All that was ruined when good old Alex

came over half an hour before. At first, things started off polite enough, but then Alex had to shove his finger into Stan's chest and inform him he was going to lose all Stacey's money. That Stacey was leaving him for someone that actually cared for her and treated her right.

That was going too far.

No one messed with Stan's money or his woman. For the first time in his life, Stan felt the urge to murder someone.

To his credit, Alex wasn't one to give up easily and allow his brains to be bashed in, so after a brief scuffle he managed to lock himself in the bathroom.

The bathroom door stood mocking Stan's efforts as those thoughts raced through his mind. It didn't occur to him that this was the first time he ever used an ax. He didn't even stop to realize he went outside and took it from Alex's garage. All he knew was Alex needed to die as bloody and painfully as possible.

Simple.

Except the damn door wouldn't shatter like it did in the movies.

How the hell am I supposed to get him if I can't get through such a crappy piece of wood? Stan shook his head to clear his thoughts and raised the ax once again.

"Put the ax down! Now!"

The voice behind him echoed in Stan's ears as he tried to figure out how Alex got out of the bathroom.

"I said, put it down! Do it, or so help me..."

A name connected with the voice in Stan's head. Living in a

small town made being an ax-wielding murderer a little interesting.

“Lou? What are you doing here?” Stan half turned to the local sheriff, but he didn’t lower the ax. “I don’t have time to talk now, I’m taking care of a cheating rat bastard. If you don’t mind...” He turned back to the bathroom door and brought the ax down as something tore into his back before exploding out of his chest.

Stan didn’t hear the gunshots as three more bullets found their mark. Instead, he could only focus on the funny looking holes in his chest. He looked to his hands, but the ax was gone. Somehow he dropped it when he was struck four times. Try as he might, he couldn’t remember doing that. Deciding he’d ask Lou what happened, he turned and fell.

He couldn’t understand what had happened to him as all sensation left his body and the sound of people speaking sounded muffled, as though Lou spoke through a mouthful of cotton. Then he saw him.

Alex stepped out of the bathroom with his cell phone in hand.

That rat bastard turned everyone against me. I’ll get him for tha...

Darkness overtook Stan in mid-thought.

Portal Poetry Corner

People Are Strange By Jim Morrison/The Doors

People are strange when you're a stranger
Faces look ugly when you're alone
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted
Streets are uneven, when you're down

When you're strange
Faces come out of the rain
When you're strange
No one remembers your name
When you're strange
When you're strange
When you're strange

People are strange when you're a stranger
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Faces come out of the rain
When you're strange
No one remembers your name
When you're strange
When you're strange
When you're strange

Wishful Sinful By The Doors

Wishful crystal
Water covers
Everything in blue
Coolin' water

Wishful, sinful
Our love is beautiful to see
I know where I would like to be
Right back where I came

Wishful, sinful, wicked blue
Water covers you
Wishful, sinful, wicked you
Can't escape the blue

Magic risin' sun is shinin'
Deep beneath the sea
But not enough for you and me and
sunshine
Love to hear the wind cry

Wishful sinful
Our love is beautiful to see
I know where I would like to be
Right back where I came

Wishful, sinful, wicked blue
Water covers you
Wishful, sinful, wicked you
Can't escape the blue

Love to hear the wind cry
Love to hear you cry, yeah, yeah

End of the Night By The Doors

Take the highway to the end of the
night

End of the night, end of the night
Take a journey to the, bright
midnight

End of the night, end of the night

Realms of bliss, realms of light
Some are born to sweet delight
Some are born to sweet delight
Some are born to the endless night
End of the night, end of the night
End of the night, end of the night

Realms of bliss, realms of light
Some are born to sweet delight
Some are born to sweet delight
Some are born to the endless night
End of the night, end of the night
End of the night, end of the night

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

Upcoming dates 2015:

**Mar. 9, April 13, May 11,
June 8, July 13, Aug 10,
Sept 14, Oct 12, Nov 9,
and Dec 14.**

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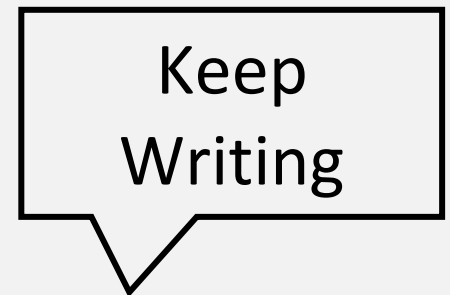
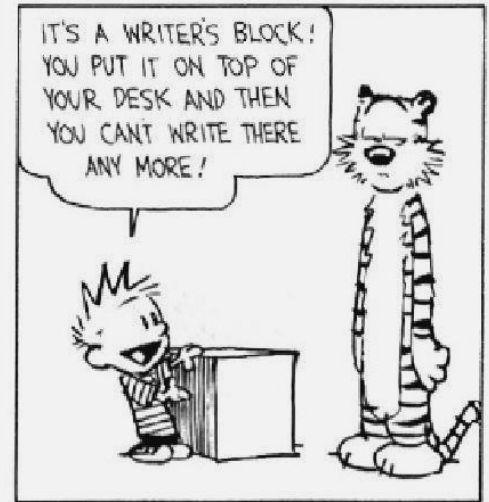
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