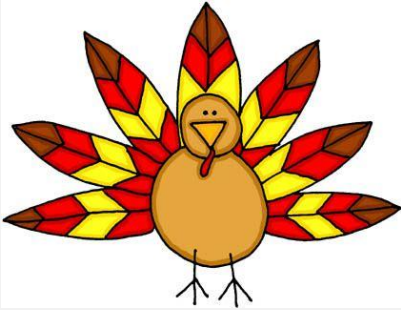


# The Portal



**Private TAHA**  
By Etheridge G. Lovett

“Listen up Marines; we’re heading into the city of Fallujah. As you all know, many innocent Iraqis have already lost their lives to the insurgents. This is why it is necessary for us to help crush their aggressive infiltration. I want all of you to remember your training and cover for each other. Do you hear me Marines?” Captain Richard Brown questioned, his deep voice competing with the loud twirling sound of the Chinook helicopter blades.

“Yes—Sir!” the platoon of Marines shouted back to their fearless leader.

“Private TAHA, since you recently arrived, I want you to stay with my squad until you learn the ropes out here,” Captain Brown ordered.

“I’m at your disposal, Sir,” Private TAHA replied in an almost child-like voice.

The other Marines snickered as one of them blurted out, “I’m at your disposal? What kind of response is that for a Marine?”

Unable to hold back their laughter, the Marines exploded with jeers and taunts. Private TAHA dropped his head, remaining silent.

“Alright, that’s enough clowning around... Calm down and get focused... Let’s keep our minds on the mission at hand,” Captain Brown reminded.

Some of the Marines continued to laugh as they checked their weapons, ammunition and other combat gear.

Feeling sympathy for young Private TAHA, Staff Sergeant Ronald Smith approached him saying, “I gather that this is your first mission to Iraq.”

“Yes, it is,” TAHA answered.

“Don’t let the boys get to you. They’re like a bunch of children sometimes, but they’ll give their lives for you when the time comes,” Sergeant Smith explained, patting TAHA upon the shoulder.

“So will I,” TAHA said to Sergeant Smith as he continued checking his combat gear.

“So, where’s your hometown?” Sergeant Smith asked in an attempt to create conversation.

“The Pentagon,” TAHA answered.

“So, you served at the Pentagon before you arrived here?” Sergeant Smith asked.

“No, the Pentagon is my home... I was born there,” TAHA answered, releasing a slight smile. He then tightened the straps on his ammunition vest.

“Well, so much for an honest, in-depth conversation,” Sergeant Smith said.

“Listen up Marines; we’re now crossing into the city of Fallujah. Everyone look alive and put on your helmets and prepare to exit the Chinook as soon as we land,” Captain Brown said to his platoon.

No sooner than he finished his statement, something struck the side of the helicopter with a deafening blow. The smell of fuel permeated the aircraft, filling everyone’s nostrils. Thick, black

smoke billowed from the helicopter spiraling radically towards the ground.

“Everyone hang on, we’re going down!” One of the pilots shouted back in the cabin.

The Marines held on with all the strength they could muster. The heavily damaged helicopter struck the earth with a bone-crushing thud, instantly killing several of the Marines on board. Fire and smoke spread throughout the downed aircraft. Only ten Marines emerged unscathed, but confused and dazed. Once they regained their senses, with no thought for their own safety, the surviving brave Marines scrambled to pull the bodies of their comrades away from the rising flames. They covered their dead with tents gathered from the wreckage. Many of the Marines wept bitterly for their fallen friends. They watched aimlessly at the surreal and gruesome scene playing out before them like an epic horror flick.

“Tell me, what the hell happened?” Captain Brown asked in anger while looking upon the bloody carnage.

“By the large hole in the side of craft, it looks like we were hit by a shoulder fired missile, Sir,” Sergeant Smith informed.

Many of the surviving Marines fought back their tears for the loss of their friends, but it was useless. The warm tears ran like a summer rain shower.

Like flying arrows cutting through the wind, machinegun fire whizzed past them through the black smoke rising up from the helicopter’s charred remains.

“The insurgents are coming after us and we’re sitting ducks out here... Follow me, let’s run for cover and set up shop inside that old bombed out building up ahead and return fire!” Captain Brown shouted.

The Marines ran with their gear and weapons in hand until they made it safely inside the bombed out, concrete edifice.

“Sergeant Smith, take half of the men and set up a sniper’s nest upstairs, I’ll setup the remaining Marines down here. Anyone who comes within several yards of this building, I want you and your men to cut ‘em in half with the .5 caliber Barrets and M249 SAWs, you

got that Marine?” questioned Captain Brown.

“I got it, Sir!” Sergeant Smith shouted back. He was determined to survive Fallujah at any cost. As he thought of his fellow Marines lost in the crash, tears rolled down Smith’s dusty, ash covered face. Anger and revenge quickly replaced the sadness he felt in his heart for his men who were killed. Checking his ammunition and weapons, Smith led his men up the stairwell, taking their positions near various windows.

“TAHA, I don’t know what you’re capable of doing, but you came to me highly qualified from the US Pentagon... I want you to stay near me,” Captain Brown said.

“Those are my initial orders, Sir, to protect the top brass, as well as all fellow Marines,” TAHA said.

A loud explosion followed TAHA’s response, sending dirt and black gravel through the window of the already battered building. Sporadic gunfire followed from the insurgents, pinning the Marines down inside the building. The Marines returned heavy gunfire with their lethal weapons, causing the insurgents to run for cover.

Competing with the loud rapid gunfire, a man’s amplified voice praying in an Arab language could be heard filling the smoky air. Gunfire from the insurgents ended abruptly.

“Cease fire! Cease fire Marines!” Captain Brown shouted to his men. “Count this as a blessing because we’re now in the eye of the storm. The insurgents are summoned to their daily prayer, so save your ammunition. As soon as their prayer ends, you better believe they’ll be on our asses like flies on cow dung so remain prepared and alert!”

“Captain Brown, do we have a moment to smoke a cigarette?” Private Shane Johnson questioned.

“Go ahead, but smoke in intervals... While two are smoking, the others must stay on watch at the windows,” Captain Brown said.

“If you have cigarettes, light ‘em up... TAHA, I know that you’re not a smoker so keep an eye on any

suspicious activity outside the window,” Captain Brown ordered.

“I will, Sir,” TAHA said, grabbing his weapon, kneeling at the window, peering out.

The other men sat alongside one wall, pulling out their cigarettes. They lit them, and smoked them in order to calm their nerves. Some of them drank water from their canteens. Even the Captain smoked a Cuban cigar he brought along from headquarters.

“TAHA, what kind of weird name is that?” one Marine asked, as the others snickered, blowing smoke from their cigarettes towards TAHA.

TAHA glanced back at them; then gazed back out of the window as instructed without responding.

“Private Reyes, have you reached anyone on that radio yet?” Captain Brown asked.

“Sir, I’m afraid it was damaged in the helicopter crash, but I’ll keep trying to fix it and eventually be able to contact someone,” Reyes answered.

“Good idea... Carry on, Marine,” Captain Brown said, patting Reyes on the back.

Staring at the almost perfect haircut and doll-like smoothness of TAHA’s skin, Private Chuck Andrews tossed a small pebble over, striking TAHA on the side of the face to get his attention as he asked, “TAHA, you look like a Mama’s boy. How long did it take you to cut your neat head of hair, or shave your smooth little girly face?”

“I was created with smooth skin and neat hair, Marine,” TAHA answered.

“Created? How weird... Are you kidding me? So I guess you were created with a full head of hair,” Private Andrews said.

“Yes, I was,” TAHA answered.

Everyone who was in earshot of hearing TAHA’s response, laughed aloud.

“Okay, knock it off... Knock it off Marines... We’re supposed to be like brothers out here... Don’t forget your training,” Captain Brown reminded.

As quickly as it began, the praying in the mosque ended. The surreal silence was followed minutes later by a heavy barrage of gun and ear-pounding explosions. Before they could

effectively return gunfire, many insurgents poured out of nearby buildings, running towards the building where the Marines were held up.

“Shoot them—kill them!” Captain Brown shouted, but it was too late. The building was successfully overrun by the insurgents. All of the Marines in the building were captured and quickly taken to be interrogated.

“You can strike me until your hands turn raw, I don’t know a damn thing!” Captain Brown shouted to ten men wearing black fatigues with a black scarf tied around their faces.

A frown formed in the reddened eyes of the insurgents, the only part of their face visible. They continued beating Captain Brown for information. One by one, they bound and shoved each Marine into a dingy, blood-stained room, beating them mercilessly.

Crouched down in one corner of the room with other battered Marines, TAHA carefully observed the three insurgents guarding them with Ak47’s in hand. TAHA whispered to the Marine nearest to him, saying, “When I begin my attack, you help the others get out of here.”

With blood soaked lips, the Marine beside TAHA whispered over to him, “Listen up you nerdy little twit, don’t you make one foolish move or else they’ll kill all of us.”

“They plan to kill all of us regardless,” TAHA whispered. He snapped the thick restraints from around his feet and wrists like strands of thread, standing to his feet. He also snapped the restraints from around the Marine sitting beside him. The Marine was shocked. A frown formed upon TAHA’s child-like face. The insurgents were stunned to see the young, slender Marine standing to his feet in defiance.

“Hey—you American... sit down!” shouted one of the insurgents in a demanding voice, but TAHA only stood, gazing at the insurgent and his comrades.

Aiming his weapon at TAHA, the insurgent yelled again, “Sit down before I blow your American face off!”

One of the Marines nearest to TAHA tried to pull him downward by his pant

leg, but couldn't. TAHA's legs were as stiff as a board. With a look of anger burning in his green eyes, TAHA approached the insurgent who ordered him to sit down. The insurgent squeezed off several rounds from his Ak47, but the rounds fired didn't harm the fast approaching Marine. Each round ricochet from his chest like rice flung against steel. TAHA grabbed the man, tossing him around the room like a rag doll. He then flung the insurgent's lifeless body out of a nearby window. TAHA then grabbed the weapons from the other insurgents with lightning speed, snapping the weapons in half with his bare hands. He also attacked the other insurgents, tossing their bodies out of the window.

"This is not happening... What the hell is this I'm seeing?" questioned Sergeant Smith with his eyes stretched wide in amazement.

TAHA proceeded to the next room where other insurgents were on the verge of beheading the defiant Captain Brown, who was blindfolded on his knees before them. TAHA caught the wrist of the machete wielding insurgent, crushing his wrist just before the blade touched the Captain's neck. One insurgent approached TAHA from behind with another machete in hand; swinging the blade across the back of TAHA's neck with great force. The blade struck TAHA's neck, but didn't penetrate his pseudo flesh.

"You really shouldn't have done that," TAHA warned, his voice deepening to a robotic tone. He grabbed the man, lifting him up over his head. With one effortless pull, TAHA snapped the man's spine in half like a twig, tossing his lifeless body to the ground.

One insurgent grabbed a bazooka, firing upon TAHA, completely severing his right arm. TAHA struck the insurgent so hard that he slammed up against the wall, snapping his neck and back.

Glistening steel and computerize components, all covered in blood, rapidly grew out of the wounded area of the severed arm, creating a new arm.

One insurgent was stunned as he watched TAHA's new arm emerge.

The arm that was severed by the bazooka blast, lying on the ground, dissolved in the sand before everyone's very eyes. Seeing this, all of the insurgents yelled aloud in a panic as they fled out of the building.

"Captain, you and your men stay in here until I finish eliminating the insurgents... I'll give you the all clear signal when I'm done," TAHA commanded in a deep, robotic voice.

"TAHA, tell me... what will be the all clear signal?" Captain Brown asked.

"You'll know when it happens, Sir," TAHA promised. The young Marine bolted out of the building after the fleeing insurgents. He was met with the heavy pounding of rapid gunfire and grenade explosions. Amidst the black smoke billowing up from each explosion, TAHA continued to charge and attack the insurgents. His artificial green eyes were seen glowing through the billowing smoke as he fought courageously against the enemy. Eerie bone-chilling yells were heard coming from the insurgents as the sound of explosions, gunfire, and bones cracking, followed. Hundreds of insurgents died at the hands of the once shy new Marine recruit.

Curious over the incident, Captain Brown remembered what he had read in TAHA's initial top secret, highly classified documents sent when he first arrived under his command. He remembered reading the words – android-Marine, written at the bottom. It all made sense now. Captain Brown smiled.

"Sir, we should go outside and help TAHA... he can't fight the insurgents all alone," Sergeant Smith said.

Captain Brown wiped blood from his split lip, saying, "TAHA won't be in need of our help anytime soon."

"Why not, Sir?" Sergeant Smith asked in a voice of concern as the other Marines looked on.

"TAHA's definitely no coward, as you Marines first assumed. Fear has no place in him. He's a new breed of Marine sent to protect all of us.... TAHA's a god-damn one man Marine Corps... T A H A actually means **Technically Advance Human**

**Android**... Fallujah's already in our hands, thanks to those intelligent minds up in the Pentagon... HOORAH!" Captain Brown shouted.



### Watcher

By Edward White/CP Bialois

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

John Hampton breathed in the cold, crisp mountain air before exhaling in a puff of white steam. This was what he lived for. Nothing was better than the smell of fresh air, especially in the higher climates similar to those of the Rocky Mountains. Out here there was life, here one could feel themselves breathe and see the beauty of the land. In the city, where his daughter and her boyfriend chose to spend a majority of their time, there was nothing to see aside from fumes, trash, and the depravity of what the human race had become.

He fought back the tears the cold and beauty of the land tried to bring out of him. It was the same every time he ventured out on one of his hikes. He knew how most people thought of him when he began one of these endeavors. It was the same thing his daughter, Rachel and her boyfriend Chad Li, said when he first told them about his plans for the weekend. He could remember the surprised looks on their faces as easily as he could hear them huffing behind him. After pausing for a minute to enjoy what was around him, John turned to them smiling. Rachel was leaning against a tree trying to catch her breath while Chad was

bent over with his hands on his knees. *Kids nowadays.*

“Almost ready? We’ve got a few more miles to go before we make camp.” John’s voice carried through the air with an ease he was certain didn’t exist in the city.

Chad let out a groan while Rachel managed to open her eyes and pleaded between gasps. “Why not here?” She motioned around them. “There’s plenty of room for us.”

John sighed and shook his head, “You can’t camp on a slope like this. One false step and you’ll roll right on down.” He nodded towards the steep hill to his left and the falling slope to their right. The pair shared a brief sense of vertigo before nodding their agreement.

Pleased his point was understood John smiled, “Good. Don’t worry, another mile, two at the most and we’ll make camp.”

Chad and Rachel shared a look and she pattered him on the shoulder to urge him on. “It’s only a little further.”

“Yeah.” Chad managed to catch some of his breath in their brief rest stop. “Isn’t that what he said a mountain range ago?”

Rachel smiled at him, “You think this is bad? You should’ve seen him when he was younger.”

They began following her father as close as they could but their out-of-shape bodies held them back. Chad didn’t want to imagine keeping up with the old man when he was in his prime. As it was, John’s every footstep was secure on unmoving earth while he and Rachel found every loose bit of ground and tangle in their path. He would’ve thought such a thing was impossible given everything was frozen. The only conclusion he could make was nature was conspiring against them. Shaking his head, Chad pushed himself to keep up as best he could. He always thought he was in shape but at least Rachel wasn’t doing much better.

After another three torturous miles, John brought them to a stop by a large fallen tree and clearing set off to the left side of the path where the slope leveled off. Used by other hikers as a camping spot a small blackened fire pit was in

the center. Someone else had been there since the last snow fall which was a couple of days earlier. With no one within shouting distance they were truly alone just as he wanted.

John had been wrong in his estimation but by then neither of his charges cared, Rachel and Chad dropped onto a smaller log between the fallen tree and the burned out fire. They remained there gasping for air while John busied himself about the clearing by pulling out the small two man tent along with a pack of water proof matches and magnesium stick. He set his tools aside and pulled his canteen from its harness on his belt taking a deep gulp on his water. Before they set out he made sure each of them had a full canteen, snack bars, and beef jerky along with flashlights and a small aluminum cup. While they were only planning on being there that night, it was a bit much but when one went into the wilderness it was better to be over prepared than under. The difference was often measured in life and death.

Rachel and Chad finished catching their breath and feeling this would be the perfect time to earn some brownie points with the old man, especially after it was his wiseass mouth that got him and Rachel into this mess. If he hadn’t mouthed off about the older generation not knowing when to sit down and rest John wouldn’t have come up with this camping excursion. While he wasn’t a woodsman in any sense of the word, he knew no one; absolutely no one went into the wilderness this time of year unless they needed to. Last he checked John didn’t need to go hunting for food or firewood.

His final thought gave him the perfect idea so he turned to Rachel who was working on settling in on the log. “We’ll get the firewood.”

Rachel looked up in surprise mouthing, *we will?*

John looked up from where he was working to set up the tent and nodded smiling, “Good idea. It’ll be dark in a few. Best to get that taken care of now.” He looked towards Rachel, “You know what to look for honey, try to keep him out of a bear den would you?”

After a brief pause she smiled and

nodded, “Sure, no problem dad.” She shot her boyfriend an irritated look which he shrugged off as best he could.

Once they were a short distance away from the campsite Rachel shook her head still irate. “Do you have anything else you’d like to volunteer us for? We could be home, *warm*, and comfortable.”

Chad rolled his eyes; he didn’t let her see him doing that of course, and shook his head. “I’m sorry, alright. I don’t know what else I can say.”

Rachel turned around to face him, “You could start by learning when to shut up. God, you’re the dumbest smart guy I know sometimes.” With a growl she turned back around and continued their trek for firewood.

Chad knew he screwed up but for the first time in his life he didn’t have an answer. Not even a hypothesis came to him as he tried to catch up with Rachel. His left foot punched through the snow covering an overhand of twigs sending him sliding and rolling down the side of the mountain into a shallow valley. He stopped only twenty feet from where he and Rachel stood a few seconds earlier but his body didn’t want to cooperate so he remained there on his back looking up at the canopy of leafless trees and gray skies.

“Chad!” He heard Rachel’s call and tried to answer but at first his voice came out as a croak. By the time he was able to move he could hear the snow crunching under her feet near where he landed. “Chad!”

“Yeah! I’m alright!” He pushed himself into a sitting position then struggled to his feet with Rachel’s help. Once he was standing he was amazed at how well he felt considering he came a foot or two from bashing his brains out against a couple of trees during his fall.

Rachel helped brush the snow and small twigs off of his coat. Despite herself she couldn’t keep from chuckling at the whole situation they were in. “Leave it to a city boy to step on the wrong spot.”

“How was I supposed to know? The snow’s covering every damned thing...”

“That’s why no one in their right mind goes into the mountains this time of year.”

He eyed her not believing what he just heard. “Then why are we here?”

Rachel finished brushing off Chad’s coat, “We’re here because someone challenged an old woodsman.”

Chad rolled his eyes, “So he’s not in his right mind, right?”

She took a step towards the way she came down to help him. “That’d be you, dear.” Without another word she headed back for the path and after a moment he followed eating a dose of humble pie.

After reaching the path he heard what sounded like something being beaten against a tree trunk. The sound echoed in the woods around them. “Did you hear that?” Chad had a sudden rush of energy brought on by his rising fear.

Rachel shared his fear but to a lesser degree, she’d spent her youth in those mountains and refused to allow it to intimidate her. “Yeah. Come on, we’d better get some wood and get back.” She wasn’t spooked so much from the sound as she was by Chad’s reaction to it. At any other time she would’ve laughed but after seeing the look of fear in his eyes she felt it was the wrong thing to do. “It’s probably some other idiots out here cutting down a tree or something. Nothing to worry about.”

By the time they returned to the campsite Rachel and Chad each had a good amount of wood in their arms. John greeted them with a smile upon their return and the amount of wood they managed to find. Scavenging wood was never a fun or easy thing to do, especially when everything was wet and they didn’t have a saw. The latter thought brought a smile to his face. He really stuck it to them on that one.

“Good to see you two didn’t run off and leave me.” While they were gone John finished setting up camp. He put up the two-man tent, cleared the area beneath the fallen tree and used a tarp to create a lean-to. He even had a small fire going from some of the scraps he found proving they could’ve left him and he would’ve been fine.

Chad was never so happy to see John Hampton as he was right then and there. “No problem Mr. Hampton. With Rachel’s help we gathered plenty of

wood to keep the fire going all night.

John nodded, “I hope you’re right.” He gestured for them to sit the wood by the fire and have a seat. “Come on, time for dinner.”

Dinner. Of all the words in the English language to use that was the most deceptive one that could’ve been used. Beef jerky and snack bars washed down with warm water was their feast. John and Rachel ate heartily while Chad had trouble biting through the tough dried beef. After his third or fourth bite he gave up and grabbed a couple of snack bars. Seeing Rachel slicing the jerky apart with a pocket knife and eating the smaller strips he couldn’t help but shake his head.

“How can you eat that?”

She looked at him in surprise. “It’s good. And better for you than the packaged crap they sell in the stores.” Her comment brought a chuckle from John and left Chad without much to say.

After a few seconds of quiet John couldn’t help but feel a bit of sympathy for the young man. Sure, he was stubborn and ignorant in the ways of the world but what could he expect of a college graduate? At least he made a good living and would take care of his daughter. After a few minutes he noticed Chad looking around them into the darkening woods.

“What’s got you so jumpy?”

Chad opened his mouth to answer then decided against it. Instead Rachel snickered, answering for him. “We heard some noises when we were out getting wood. I never saw anyone go as white as he did.” She chortled at the memory.

In an effort to limit the amount of damage to his pride, Chad ignored Rachel as best he could. “What kind of animals are in the mountains?”

John couldn’t help but smile. “They’re full of ones that make noise, son. You have to be more specific.”

“It was like someone was hitting a tree with a bat over and over.” Rachel somehow controlled her laughter enough to get the sentence out before she slid off the front of the log from laughing.

John’s eyes clouded over for a second or two, not enough for either of

his party to notice. He heard rumors about such things before but as most woodsmen he didn’t pay them any heed. Bigfoot, Sasquatch, whatever name one wanted to give them he thought they were nothing more than the occasional bear someone saw and mistook for something else.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Probably some bear trying to shake something out of a tree or someone cutting a tree down. Nothing to be worried about. Still, if it makes you feel better we’ll take turns keeping a look out. I’ll take first watch.”

That seemed to be what was needed to take away some of Chad’s fears and as the hours passed by the threesome were laughing at jokes and anecdotes about John’s earlier days and even Rachel’s embarrassing childhood moments. By the time they were ready for bed Chad and Rachel were beginning to fall asleep in each other’s arms by the fire forcing John to chase them into the tent.

Once he was alone John settled in on his spot on the log. To help chase away the cold and sleepiness that threatened to overtake he pulled out a small packet of magic black powder and dumped some into his cup of water. After swirling it around in his hand he took a sip. The bitter taste caused him to grimace but what did he expect? Coffee always tasted like that in the mountains and he didn’t think he’d ever get used to it.

It didn’t take long for the caffeine to fill him with a rush which he controlled as best he could by whittling on a piece of wood from the firewood pile. With each passing minute he began to think they imagined hearing anything. While a creature such as Bigfoot could exist, he doubted the rumors as local propaganda. It was an old hunting technique where local residents claimed they saw a huge beast of some sort to scare away any competition. Fewer hunters meant more opportunities for them.

Shaking his head he turned his attention back to the piece of wood and knife in his hands. He was so engrossed in his carving that he didn’t notice the sound coming from just

outside the circle of light from the fire. At first when John paused to listen, he thought it was a deer or some other animal investigating them but the sound was different. It wasn't difficult to hear the weight of the creature as it stomped through the snow. John's first thought was that it was a bear but there wasn't the usual sniffing or casualness about its stride. Whoever or whatever it was it was cautious enough to stay outside his vision but curious enough to come in close. To him that meant only one thing, it didn't have a fear of people and that was a dangerous recipe for a wild creature.

After another few strides the sound stopped where, by John's estimation, was directly in front of him. The fire burning between them gave him a sense of safety as well as entrapment. He and the others had nowhere to go if the beast decided to attack. Whether it was a bear or a big cat, their fear of humans would only last so long as their hunger wasn't too bad.

Looking away from the fire John stared into the darkness around them trying to gain some night vision. When he was more comfortable he let his eyes settle on the patch of darkness outside of the circle of light. What he saw took his breath away. Across from him, probably no more than twenty feet away were a pair of large eyes reflecting the light of the fire. John sat watching the pair of eye watch him not sure what to do or could do. In the end his fear got the better of him so he remained where he was, only moving to put more wood on the fire.

At first he thought the eyes were tricks caused from looking over the fire but when they remained unmoving he was certain they were being watched. Worse still, he had the feeling the beast was crouching to look him in the eyes. The thought sent chills up his spine but he remained where he was with his knife in his hand. Never before had he felt so ill-equipped to deal with a situation. All he could do was sit there as the hours ticked away hoping the beast didn't attack.

Shortly before daybreak John was relieved when the creature rose to its feet and strode into the fading night.

While he was grateful it was gone, John couldn't bring himself to move at first. Not until Rachel and Chad opened the tent and stepped out into the early morning air.

"Dad? Why didn't you wake one of us? You must be freezing." Rachel knelt next to him and put her arm around him.

For the first time since he saw those eyes hours earlier John looked away and smiled when he saw his daughter's face. "It's alright sweetheart, you guys slept well I hope?" He pushed the ordeal of the night from his thoughts, the sun was up and they were safe.

Chad nodded while stretching, "Yeah but I'm starving."

John pushed himself to his feet, the feeling of his tight joints and stretching muscles brought a grunt from him. "Tell you what. Let's get this packed up and ready to go. I'll buy breakfast at Rhonda's. They have the best sausage and eggs I've ever eaten."

With the promise of a hot breakfast of eggs and sausage both Chad and Rachel took to packing their things with far more gusto than they showed coming up there. While they worked John had a bite of beef jerky and the last of his coffee. Once they were packed and ready Chad and Rachel began back along the path while John paused. He waited long enough so he could investigate the area where he saw the creature the night before.

Out of a need to understand it and ensure he wasn't imagining things he bent over a section of trampled down snow. It was about where he imagined the beast to be sitting the last night. Around the area he saw several footprints much larger than he ever saw before. He scanned the surrounding woods with his eyes but he didn't see anything, not that he expected to. Not wanting to let his daughter and her boyfriend get too far ahead of him he turned and hurried to catch up.

His fear diminished as they walked and he felt the peacefulness of the woods engulf him once more. Anyone else would've had that shattered by the creature but he understood how nature worked. It came to him to watch and not to harm them. So long as he continued to respect the creature, and have a

loaded gun, he had little to fear. In a strange sort of way he was sorry when they reached the Ranger's Station and their parked car.

The more he thought about it the better it sounded for him to wait until they got home to tell Rachel and Chad about what he saw. They'd either think he was making it up or be terrified. Either one worked for him, he'd show those kids something yet.



### Excerpt from *The Life and Times of No One In Particular*. Chapter Four: To the Victor Goes the Spoils

By Jamie White

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I spent the next couple of hours talking to the different people Melody had tried to steal from me. Most of them were just people who wanted to become famous through their art. I'm not saying that's bad or anything; I really like when someone has an ambition and they're honest about it. And hey, as long as the people reading their stories or listening to the music are enjoying it what's the harm?

I think the worst part is when someone puts up a big front about being an "Artiste" who doesn't care about the commercial bull while obsessively checking the sales charts. It's hypocritical to me and you're lying to your audience, which usually comes across in the work. Anyway, while talking to them I couldn't help but continue to be drawn to Akakios. I liked that he had very noble intentions behind

his desire for inspiration. When it started getting late, I asked if the two of us could be excused so I could speak with him. Everyone bowed and left, calling out their thanks. I heard several of them talking about the gifts they were planning to bring with them the next day.

"What do you want, O Muse?" He looked nervous, like he thought he'd done something wrong.

"I wish to give you a warning, dear child. Be aware, for sweet dreams shall come to you this night. Be sure to record them quickly, lest they be lost to you along with the work they will inspire. Now go and rest some. You have had a long day."

He smiled, excited about what I'd told him. I could tell he was already anxious for the evening and the work ahead. I love enthusiasm! It makes the job so much easier, plus you can really feel it when you read or listen to the work. He bowed, thanking me and hurried for the door. Score one for me.

"You think you won, but you're not even close!" I had just popped back to our world and Melody didn't waste any time finding me. "Despite your little lies, I managed to find myself a nice big group of devoted followers that are going to help me kick your oversized butt!" She had a smug smile on her face, but I could tell she was still fuming over her humiliation before.

"We'll see about that." I smiled right back, confidence written all over my face. "I've only just begun, Mel. Don't worry, I'll try and make your defeat as humiliating as possible."

"Don't be so sure of yourself." She walked off to do Zeus knows what. I didn't bother trying to follow and spy on her. I knew Melody well and I could tell she was nervous about her prospects. That's when she starts with the big talk. I guess it makes her feel better or something. Who knows? Either way, I didn't care. I was off to a great start and already knew where I was going to go for my next bunch of followers.

I appeared at a temple the next day where many people would gather to pray to the different Gods and ask for help with problems. I was hoping to be able to help some with inspired

solutions that would have them bowing at my feet faster than Melody can say "I'm a loser".

I once again appeared before the crowd gathered and announced my presence. They nearly deafened me as they all began shouting their questions in unison. I held up one hand, "Please, be still. I shall hear you all, but one at a time." The silence was almost as deafening as they hurried to obey and avoid angering me.

The first one I pointed to was a farmer who was having problems with a neighbor. He was having a hard time getting crops harvested and to the market to trade before his neighbor took all the good deals. I showed him how to make his work more efficient and he was thrilled at the idea, wondering why he hadn't thought of that before. He thanked me profusely and offered up some of his own crops as a token of appreciation. I nodded, smiling at him. "Go, now and get to work. I will be here waiting to help should you need it again." He nodded vigorously, hurrying home. I knew he was going to be back.

"Now," I scanned the crowd, my eyes settling on a young girl who had been kneeling before one of the statues when I arrived. I motioned for her to come closer. "Please, speak your mind and receive my guidance."

She hurried forward, kneeling before me with what appeared to be a hand woven blanket. It was quite good, I was impressed. "O Muse, my problem relates to the oracles. I so badly want to be a priestess at Delphi, but no one there will listen to me."

I sighed inwardly. Some of these mortal priestesses are so picky because they'd rather not risk being outdone by someone who is far more talented than themselves. I could tell they didn't want to risk her coming and taking one of their spots should she prove gifted, and she was definitely gifted. "No worries, dear girl, I will put a word in with the Gods themselves. You will get what you wish."

She smiled at me, looking ready to dance for joy. "Many thanks! You are too kind." She set her gift down on the

ground in front of me and turned to race home and share her good news.

I sat for several hours, listening to them all and either promising intervention on their behalf or inspiring them with knowledge needed to help themselves out of whatever mess they were dealing with. By the time the session was over, I had many overjoyed new followers and a huge pile of gifts to throw in a certain person's face when I saw her next.

When I did see Melody next, I discovered she wasn't doing too bad herself. She couldn't wait to show me the gifts she amassed the past few days. I was glad to see, however, her pile was still noticeably smaller than mine. I wasn't worried; I had another stop or two to make that day.

I guess you're probably wondering about Akakios. As promised, I had gone back to see the original group I gathered. When he saw me, he couldn't wait to tell me all about the epic poem he'd written the morning after my visit. He had never written anything that large and he was beyond overjoyed at it. He'd been sharing it with anyone who would listen and they all enjoyed it. I knew they would, the kid was fast on his way to becoming one of the most popular story tellers in town. In time he'd become known on a larger scale, but nothing near the level of Homer and the others as his works ended up lost to time. People here still talk about his poems, though, and it drives Melody crazy.

Where was I? Oh yeah, I was building a following. After paying a visit to them and the other groups I'd gathered, I decided to go and visit a spot where many of the philosophers of the town spent their days debating the different theories. Each one would try to convince the others they were right. I offered to help settle their debates and was rewarded with pottery and other gifts. I was really beginning to love this bet! Several of their pieces are still in existence today, stored in a museum in Italy.

We couldn't resist comparing notes each day to see who was ahead. I am happy to say I was the one kicking \*her\* big butt (which as Calliope was quite

huge. I don't know where she got off insulting me on that before anyway). By a week into our competition, my pile of gifts was almost twice the size of hers. Turns out word had spread about her story of a woman winning the Dionysius Festival and seriously ruined any credibility she might have had before she even got to talk to them. There were still plenty, though, who had benefited from her ideas and decided they didn't care. I didn't either, so long as my pile stayed higher than hers!

Finally, the day had come to declare a winner. Melody's pile had started to grow a bit and was pretty close to mine, making me nervous, although I will deny it if she ever happens to see this! Because neither one of us trusted the other, we asked a muse named Mathias to count the gifts. After what seemed like ages, Mathias said he was ready to declare the winner.

"Clarissa has gathered the most followers and gifts."

Melody looked like she wanted to throw a huge fit right then, but she didn't want to humiliate herself any more than I had already done for her. I smiled; Melody shot me a look that said she was going to get me back eventually. Oh well... it was worth it!

"Because she failed to gather more followers and gifts, it is up to you to decide what Melody will have to do as punishment,"

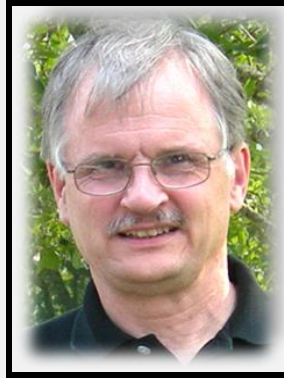
Mathias reminded us. "What have you decided on?"

I smiled as Melody watched me, a mixture of embarrassment, anger and worry in her eyes, although she was clearly trying as hard as possible to hide it. She didn't know what I had come up with. We do that from time to time with our bets. We think it adds a little bit of excitement and extra motivation. After the whole thing is said and done, we usually regret it, but neither one of us will say so and insist on doing things differently in the future. We don't want to look like cowards.

"Well, I thought long and hard about that," I began, wanting to drag out the moment as long as possible. Truth be told, I hadn't really thought too much about it because I was too focused on making sure I was going to be the

winner. "I have decided that she will have to spend the next century serving me, no matter what I ask."

Melody nodded, trying to keep up a dignified appearance. "Fine, I can pay my debt. Just know that next time, I will be the winner." Not if I have anything to say about it!



**Man Cave  
By Rick Weber**

Ding dong. "Fred, can you get that?" Wilma shouted from the bathroom as she finished putting on her mascara as the doorbell chimed again. "That man is own little world," muttered Wilma as she ran to the front door. Through the glass she could see Betty and Barney, who were earlier than expected.

"Good morning, Wilma. Where's the King of the House?" Barney bellowed with a wide grin as she opened the door. Standing behind him Betty could only offer a weak smile to her host.

"Down in the Man Cave. Where else would he be on a Sunday morning?" as she stepped aside allowing them into the house. Barney entered ahead of Betty who was still standing outside.

Betty shook her head. "Wilma, I'm sorry. I told Barney that we would be too early, but he insisted saying Fred wanted him over for the Pre-Game Show. Anyway, if you're ready, maybe we could get over to the mall before it gets too crowded."

"I'm fine, Betty. I'll just grab my purse. Do you want me to drive?"

"Yes, please," Betty groaned. "We came over in Barney's truck."

Wilma looked past Betty to see Barney's Ford F450 Crew Cab pickup with the local National Football League (NFL) team's bright colors as its custom paint job parked in the driveway.

Wilma needed no further explanation, but she wondered how Betty ever endured riding in that thing. Besides the wild color scheme, the noise from its diesel engine alone would raise the dead and send them running for redemption.

"Do you have everything set for tomorrow night?" Wilma asked closing the front door behind them.

Betty's face brightened up. "Yes, we have reservations at that new French bistro downtown. I had to book them three months ago, and only got them after I told the maitre d' it was our anniversary. All I need is your opinion about a dress I picked out at the mall."

As they pulled out in Wilma's Honda Accord, Betty sighed, "I want tomorrow night to be perfect. I just hope Barney made sure he won't be working any overtime. I told him no OT. I put a lot of time planning this."

"I know you did." Wilma patted her hand in a consoling tone. "I feel responsible, in a way, for how our husbands are acting. If I hadn't said okay to Fred's dream of finishing off the basement, maybe we wouldn't be in the predicament we are now."

"Wilma, Fred has always been a big NFL, even way before you got married. Sundays in the fall were set aside for him to watch football. He could have a vice that's worse."

"You're right," Wilma groaned. "When we were first married, Fred would just watch the local team, but over time, he began to watch more and more games, mostly with Barney, once in a while with a few other friends."

"As time went by our family room became disaster area with food wrappers and drink cans all over the place. I harped on the messy house issue with Fred. Finally, I agreed to let Fred build a game room in the

basement when he said he needed his own space in the house.”

“Wilma, the end result was great! The room is away from the main part of the house, soundproofed with its own bathroom, and Fred has the responsibility for clean up.”

“The arrangement worked out well in the beginning, but over time, Fred added on to his creation by putting in a wet bar. His sixty- inch LED High Definition TV, hooked up to a satellite dish with the NFL Sunday Max Ticket package broadcasting every game is what almost sent me over the edge. He can watch up to eight games at one time. That’s when Fred began calling his basement retreat, the Man Cave.”

“I feel just as guilty, Wilma. Barney is a regular in Fred’s Man Cave. We spend almost the entire football season without our better halves. I remember a couple of years ago when you were buying your curio cabinet, and the furniture salesman asked if we were divorced or widowed. You told him, “Only separated by the NFL.”

Pulling onto the mall’s parking lot, Wilma and Betty, focused on getting Betty the dress she had in mind for the big event.

Back at the Man Cave, Fred and Barney had everything set the day’s festivities. Fred had set up snack trays and on the coffee table by an overstuffed leather home theater seating ensemble located in front of the big TV. Barney was upstairs waiting for the first Domino’s pizza and chicken wing order of the day to arrive hoping not to miss the kick off.

As Barney made his way back down with their food, Fred yelled, “Barney, hurry up! The network is throwing the broadcast over to the announcers for the local games. Our Sunday services have begun.”

“It’s a shame nobody else could make it here today. They’re going to miss a good game,” as Barney passed Fred the pizza box.

Their team received the opening kickoff for a good return. This was a good omen. The Italian Sausage and Pepper trio pizza along with the wings and hot sauce were also becoming

history being downed with the Coors beer Fred had on tap.

It was not all about food and drink. Midway through the first quarter, Fred picked up his iPad. “I’m gonna check on the other games to see how everything is going today.”

“It’s never too early to see how post-season opportunities are shaping up even though the season’s only halfway done. I’m glad you boosted the Wi-Fi connectivity down here. It makes getting on-line so much easier here in the basement,” Barney gave in support.

Fred looking at his Tablet device offered, “I always like to confirm player injury and the statistics being given over the air by the network. You’d be surprised how often they’re wrong.”

These were tough long days for the two friends, but necessary if they were to stay true to their team. Each pass completion by their quarterback, each yard gained, and each sack by their defense was a reason to celebrate. But when the other team achieved each of these same things, the mood turned ominous in the Man Cave.

“Did you see that call?” Barney asked turning his head toward Fred.

“Their guy was out of bounds, and our coach didn’t even pull out his Red Card. What’s he waiting for?” Two fans screamed foul to the television set as if the referees and coaches could hear them. This day would turn out to be a great day for them. In the end their team won, but their struggle was not over. They had other games to watch that afternoon and evening, other teams to monitor, and plans to make for the post season.

Opening a fresh order of wings between games, Barney remarked, “Will we ever get to go to the Super Bowl, Fred?”

“We can only hope. A true NFL fan should go at least once in his life to see the biggest game in the universe. It’s an obligation.”

As for the ladies, their afternoon at the mall was fruitful. The mood in Wilma’s car was lighter than on the drive out.

“Wilma, thanks for all your help. The dress I got is beautiful and so are the

shoes you picked out. I didn’t see them when we walked into the store.”

“That’s all right. I’m happy that I was able to get some new linen for the guest bedroom.”

“I know. It’s been a long day. Can you drop me off at home? I have to make sure I’m all set for tomorrow.”

When Wilma arrived back at her own house, she could cries of profanity coming from the Man Cave because the basement door was ajar. “Do I have to wait until February to get my home life back?” Wilma asked herself counting the days until the Super Bowl.

Monday afternoon Wilma received a text message from Fred saying he would be late and not to hold dinner for him. Without any thought, Wilma acknowledged the message and went back to working on a project she was doing at the office. The tasking had a tight timeline, and she was glad she would not have to hurry home to fix dinner for Fred. She finished working late herself and got home to hear the phone ringing. It was Betty who was crying profusely.

“Barney called and told me he had to work overtime,” she sobbed bitterly.

“When I reminded him about our anniversary dinner, he told me he didn’t have a choice. The OT was mandatory, but I knew something was not right. The background noise sounded like he was in a bar and not at work.”

Wilma listened patiently then gave her friend an assessment. “Betty, Fred texted me this afternoon saying he would be late, too. Something’s not right. Let me look into this and I’ll call you tomorrow.” The two women hung up and waited for their spouses.

Later that evening, Fred finally made it home to find Wilma sitting at the kitchen table having a cup of herbal tea. “You work late, too?” Fred asked knowing that she should have been asleep already.

“Yeah,” she said in a groggy tone giving Fred a quick head toe inspection. “I was able to get that special assignment done ahead of schedule. Now, I don’t have to worry about it. What about you? How was work?”

“It was work,” Fred replied curtly without giving any details. Then

changing the subject, he let out a yawn. “I’m beat. I’m going to hit the hay. Good night.”

“I’m going to finish my tea and I will be up in a bit,” Wilma said to give her time to collect her thoughts. She saw barbecue sauce stains on the front of Fred’s shirt and knew that he had to have been out somewhere dining on his favorite football snacks.

Tuesday morning prior to leaving for work, Wilma called Betty to see how she was doing. Betty was still somewhat upset, but in better spirits than she was the night before. In a sullen tone, Betty informed Wilma, “I couldn’t stay up. I went to bed before Barney came home. He said he would make it up to me before he headed out this morning. I got up before him and saw a takeout box of wings in the refrigerator. I just couldn’t deal with him and let the whole anniversary thing go for the time being.”

“I know what you mean,” Wilma commiserated. She then added in a cool but tough voice, “Fred came home with sauce splattered on his shirt and probably thought I wouldn’t notice. Who was he kidding? Betty, our boys were out watching Monday Night Football in a sports bar. This can’t go on. First, it was Sundays. Now, it’s on Mondays, and even Thursdays, too. I need help, but don’t know where to find it.”

“I need help, too,” Betty replied in a more sullen tone and added, “but, we have to start looking somewhere.”

Noticing that she was running a bit behind schedule for work, Wilma cut Betty short. “Betty, I have to get moving. I’ll do some looking around for help. If you could do the same, maybe we can come up with a solution.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see what I can come up with and let you know,” Betty said in a brighter spirit.

While inching along the freeway in bumper to bumper traffic, Wilma mulled over her conversation with Betty. At the same time she was listening to a drive time radio talk show. By a stroke of fate, the day’s guest was a psychologist, Dr. Frazier, whose specialty was relationship counseling. Dr. Frazier was on the show to discuss a new area in his practice, sports

addiction and its effects on couples. This got Wilma’s attention. The host asked Dr. Frazier, “How does someone know if they are a sports addict?”

Dr. Frazier gave a quick and concise answer to the listeners. “When a couple comes in with this as the issue, I give the affected partner this little quiz: Do you think about sports when you’re supposed to be doing other things, like spending time with your family?”

“That would be ‘yes’ on Fred’s answer sheet,” Wilma said aloud to herself.

“Do you rush home to catch games or listen obsessively on the radio while you’re out?”

“That’s another yes.”

“Do you feel irritated when family or friends interrupt a game to get you involved with another activity?”

“A big emphatic YES for that one.”

“Do you spend time at work surfing sports sites to stay on top of what’s going on?”

“Only Fred can answer that one,” she answered honking her horn at the inert driver in front of her.

“Do you call in sick to work in order to watch games, especially playoffs?”

“I’ve seen him do that,” she exhaled finally glad to be getting off the expressway.

“Usually, after the last question, the patient sees the point and we work out a course of treatment.” Dr. Frazier summed up.

As she was parking her car, she heard Dr. Frazier tell the audience that his practice was seeing more sports fan addict cases and gave his web address to the listening audience.

Wilma called Betty and told her about what she heard on the radio. Betty took the initiative to check out Dr. Frazier’s website and learned from other sources that he was a reputable practitioner. Later that day, Betty called Wilma back and both agreed that they should have an initial consultation with the good doctor.

Betty was lucky enough to get an appointment the next afternoon with Dr. Frazier. After listening to Betty and

Wilma during their visit, Dr. Frazier told them that Fred and Barney may be showing signs of being sports fan addicts, but he had to speak to them first. Dr. Frazier gave them an evening appointment for Thursday.

Betty and Wilma knew that Barney and Fred would not go to Dr. Frazier’s office on their own so a plan was devised to get them there. That evening, Betty confronted Barney about their anniversary. “Mister, you owe me a night out,” she chided him.

“I guess, I guess you’re right,” Barney stammered. “What do you have in mind?”

“How about, we go out tomorrow night after work with Fred and Wilma. Wilma knows of a new place across town we can try out.”

Barney began to sweat. Obviously, he felt uncomfortable. His usual routine was to come home and watch Thursday Night Football, but this time, he could not get out of the dinner commitment, especially after what he pulled on Monday.

Fred, like Barney, also had the same Thursday night television ritual. When Wilma laid out the dinner plans to Fred, he, likewise, was fresh out of excuses, and he knew it. Well, at least he and Barney would be together he thought.

Right after work the next day, Wilma drove Fred over to pick up Betty and Barney at their house. Barney was so busy on his smart phone checking out the line for the night’s game that he did not notice that Betty was still in her work clothes when they got into Wilma’s car.

En route, all Fred and Barney could talk about was the upcoming NFL games on Sunday. “Tonight’s game isn’t much of a match up,” Barney said.

“You’re right. Those two teams got the worst records in the league. We won’t be missing anything,” Fred commented.

All the while Betty and Wilma could only just roll their eyes. The men are so engrossed that they did not notice that Wilma pulled into the parking lot of a professional building.

Their attention was finally turned away from the point spread when they got out of the car, and Fred commented, “We’re not at a restaurant.”

“We have to make a stop first,” Wilma replied.

Neither Fred, nor Barney, questioned the reason for the stop. They continued talking football all the way up to Dr. Frazier’s office oblivious to their surroundings.

In the reception area Dr. Frazier looked at the two men who were too engaged in discussing possible draft picks to notice him. Betty and Wilma just shook their heads as the doctor broke in.

“Fred, Barney, I’m Dr. Frazier,” he said in a loud voice with an outstretched hand.

Fred and Barney stopped cold. “Where are we?” Barney asked.

“You’re in my office,” Dr. Frazier answered as he guided the two couples through another door. “Let’s go inside my inner sanctum where we can sit down and chat.”

As everyone took a seat in some overstuffed chairs set up in a semi-circle, Fred spoke up. “Who are you and why are we here?”

“Two very good questions,” Dr. Frazier replied. “As I told you, I’m Dr. Frazier and my specialty is relationship counseling. Gentleman, your wives told me that both of you may be spending too much time following football.”

Fred rose up in his chair and became defensive. “Look, Doc. I don’t know what you were told. We’re fans, like a lot of other folks following the local team, but we have it under control. We never bet on games...”

“That’s right,” Barney interrupted. “We’re not like those Fantasy Football nuts with their made up teams and junk.”

Seeing where the conversation was going, Dr. Frazier diffused the situation. “We are here to talk. Betty and Wilma have their concerns, and from what I saw in my reception area, I understand where they’re coming from. You were so caught up talking football that neither one of you knew where you were. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Fred and Barney agreed and took the same quiz which Dr. Frazier gave out on Tuesday’s radio program. They answered yes to all of the questions

which astounded neither Wilma nor Betty. Fred and Barney could only look at each other and quietly admit that they may have problems with the way they followed the NFL.

“Admitting you have a problem is the first step on the road to recovery,” Dr. Frazier told them. “Right now, I am proposing separate counseling sessions for both of you followed with some sessions with your wives. The first thing you have to do is to wean yourselves off of the Sunday NFL package so you spend time attending to other responsibilities and family obligations. This is not going to be easy, but if you persevere, you will be a lot happier in the long run.”

The next Sunday instead of holing up in the Man Cave, all four of them attended a jazz concert. Just before they entered the venue, the two women turned toward their spouses with Wilma asking Fred with an outstretched hand, “Your phone?”

Before Fred could answer, Betty interjected, “Yours too, Barney.”

Barney and Fred both felt the same way they did the first day they each quit smoking. As part of their treatment, they turned over their smart phones to their wives to avoid the temptation to check the scores. It was difficult for them, but after the concert they all went to a local seafood restaurant for dinner. The mood was light. The bar inside the restaurant had one of the NFL games on a flat screen TV. Fred gazed over at Barney and said, “Let’s look at the menu.”

Over time, Fred would water down the football décor in the Man Cave, and they would celebrate other occasions there from birthdays to baby showers in this one time sports shrine. For Barney, the annual NFL draft was no longer a holy day of obligation.

Wilma and Betty knew that their husbands had finally overcome their NFL addiction when they brought home a great travel deal, skiing over the Super Bowl weekend. Attending the Super Bowl at least once during their lifetimes was no longer a priority for Fred and Barney.



### The Waterbed By DiVitto Kelly

Matthew Garvey’s older brother Thomas, age seventeen, and already too cool for his own good, made it quite clear. “Do NOT go into my room for any reason while I’m gone, do you understand me?” Matthew, age eleven, made a big gulping sound and nodded in approval.

“I know how much you like jumping on my waterbed so if anything happens, or if anything is out of place, I will hunt you down and pummel you,” Thomas said, making a balled-up fist motion.

Matthew was a good kid, but he could be a wise ass at times. Last year, he accidentally popped a pencil-point hole in his brother’s prized lake-sized king bed, located in the remodeled basement of their two-story home.

“Bad aim,” claimed Matthew, while playing darts with his friends. Truth was, the dartboard was in the game room, located in the other room of the basement.

Thomas, a shade over six-foot two and star high school wide receiver, would be college shopping with his parents over the weekend so Matthew’s grandmother, Susana, would be in charge.

“I’ve put an evil curse on my room so if you even attempt to sit on my bed, you’re toast, I guarantee it!” boasted Thomas, a strange seriousness imbedded in his dark brown eyes.

“Alright, alright, jeeze, I get, I get it!” cried Matthew, who was still small for his age and wondering when his growth spurt would occur. “I not touch bed!” he added in caveman speak.

“No fighting guys,” yelled their father, grabbing the last of their matching brown and green LL Bean luggage from the hallway.

Matthew stood just outside the front door, watching everyone assemble into the car. As they pulled out of the driveway, Matthew blew his brother a kiss, which infuriated him. Thomas rolled down the back window of their pearl blue Volvo SUV and pounded his fist into his open hand. It started to rain; the weekend forecast predicted gloomy weather with a strong chance of severe thunderstorms.

Matthew invited his best friend Kip over for dinner and a sleep over, with his parent's permission. Grandma Susana made homemade chicken fajitas that both children devoured in record time. Afterwards, Matthew and Kip grabbed a bowl of ice cream then played pool in the game room in the basement. After cleaning up, the two watched a pair of shark-themed movies, Stanley – about a hammerhead shark that longs to be a vegetarian, and Open Water, a film about a couple left alone in the ocean by accident while on a diving trip.

"You know what made that film so scary?" asked Matthew to his friend "was that it's based on a true story."

"And in the Great Barrier Reef!" replied Kip, whose dad was a commercial fisherman where they lived in Sarasota, Florida. "With all those great whites swimming around, what the heck would you do?"

"Don't even want to think about it," chimed Matthew, making a gulping sound.

It was nearing midnight. Matthew's grandma called down in the basement, "Bedtime kids."

"Alright grandma," barked Matthew. "Can we sleep down here? Kip brought over his sleeping bag."

"Fine, just don't stay up too late," she replied.

"Cool," said Matthew. "Forget the sleeping bags; let's sleep on my brother's huge waterbed! It will be like were sleeping on a boat!"

"Didn't your brother say he will officially kill you if he finds you slept on his bed?" asked Kip, "And I'll be an accessory to the crime!"

"That's against the law," said Matthew, motioning off his older brother's threats. "He's said stuff like

that ever since I put a couple of barbeque ribs in his piranha's fish tank when was eight years old."

"Why would you do that?" asked Kip, puzzled.

"Well, you know how they say a piranha can debone an animal carcass in like, twenty seconds? I wanted to see it for myself."

"And did it?"

"Uh . . . no."

Where's your brother's fish now?"

"My guess it's probably floating around somewhere in the Sarasota sewer system."

"I'd kill you for that," said Kip.

"Hey, I was a kid," replied Matthew, shrugging his shoulders. "My brother's not getting back for two days so it's cool, but let's study how he has the bed made up, every angle, you know?"

"I have an idea," boasted Kip, who had lost one of his front teeth last year trying to field a hard-hit ground ball in the face. He went to the dentist and had an implant tooth made, but it took a week so in the meantime, he looked like some middle class street kid, Polo shirt and all. Kip took out his Smartphone and snapped away.

"Now we can compare!"

"That's why we're friends Kip, 'because you're smart like me," joked Matthew, as he turned on a camping lantern. Kip shook his head and rolled his eyes.

After two dozen rounds of poker, playing for small change, the two boys started yawning. "Crap, it's almost two in the morning!" said Kip.

Matthew gathered up the cards and his winnings and placed them inside his baseball cap on his brother's night table. Kip picked up the lantern by the handle, turning the knob all the way until it clicked off.

The rain thrashed against the above ground basement windows. His brother's room, originally the guest bedroom, had its own full bathroom and was much bigger than his old room on the second floor. Flailing branches danced in the wind, creating creepy shadows. The storm was a holdover from a tropical storm that had meandered out into the Gulf of Mexico. Matthew's parents were traveling

northward, towards Tallahassee to visit Florida State and then to Gainesville to check out the University of Florida. Thomas was a big-time gator fan and preferred the Swamp to the Seminoles, which was his dad's alma mater. Still, Thomas promised his dad he'd 'kick the tires' and play it by ear.

Kip, who was not used to staying up late, had fallen asleep quickly; his parents were always strict when it came to bedtime hours. Matthew on the other hand, was nocturnal. He'd developed a bad routine staying up late even on school nights. His parents told their youngest son he could stay up late as long as he was either reading or drawing. It was a policy Matthew savored; often reading the Harry Potter series till midnight. One of Matthew's teachers actually wanted to conference with his parents about the dark circles under his eyes; wondering if everything was okay. Matthew was a good student, but it usually took a pair of Strawberry Frosted Pop Tarts and coffee diluted with a splash of milk to jumpstart him in the morning.

Matthew finally dozed off as it neared half past two, the heavy thunder and lightning bombarding the Garvey residence in between the feint caws of seagulls.

The waterbed began to ripple, gently ebbing and flowing as Kip rolled over on his side. Drops of water tapped Matthew across the face. He brushed it off, still sound asleep. More drops hit the side of his face, some managed to drip down, finding his inner ear. Again, Matthew brushed his face then slowly opened his eyes, like stuck blinds. There, about twenty feet to his left, was a great white shark, poking its conical snout from the calm water, its eye, black as coal. The massive gray and white body gleamed in the moonlit night.

Matthew sat up hastily. The shark submerged like a submarine, the familiar triangular dorsal fin dropping below the water. Matthew's eyes practically popped out of his head. A dream of course, he thought before dozing off again. The moving waves made the large, rectangular bed rise and fall. Matthew dropped his hand over

the edge of the bed. “Huh?” He felt something rough, then pointy. The boy opened his eyes again. This time, the shark thrashed its crescent tail against the bedframe and vanished.

Matthew screamed as loud as he’d ever screamed, until it hurt. His friend Kip sprang up, “What the?” discovering the bed soaked. “Oh no, I didn’t pee on your brother’s bed?”

“We’re at sea Kip!” Matthew bellowed. He saw the dorsal fin heading towards Kip’s side of the bed. “Get your hand out of the water, now!”

The shark bashed against the bedframe, knocking Kip into Matthew, who almost spilled into the briny water. The full moon above, the color of a grapefruit, hovered above the two boys, afloat on the king-size mattress, alone.

“What happened?” asked Kip, “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” answered Matthew, his long, straight hair sopping wet.

“I knew we shoulda watched Three Stooges episodes instead!” cried Kip, frantically looking out into the black water. “We’re dead!”

“No, we’re not,” said Matthew. “I mean, this can’t be real.” The boy could make out the shape of a large buoy, possible light blue in color, about fifty yards away.

“There’s the . . .” Kip trembled, pointing out in the direction of the fin. The shark torpedoed towards the front end of the bed frame. The nose lifted above water, the pointed, serrated white teeth, made perfectly for cutting through prey, framed its cavernous mouth. Matthew scrambled around on the wet surface of the bed, waves toppling over the mattress now.

“Help me with this!” barked Matthew. Both boys grabbed the top of the headboard, prying off a long piece of wood. “My brother is gonna kill us for this!”

“Us?” gulped Kip.

The two raised the six-foot long plank of wood and pointed it as the massive fish, nearly fifteen feet in length, approached.

“Hold on!” yelled Matthew. The shark jumped up on the bed, jaws furiously wide open. The back end of the bedframe lifted out of the water, both

boys holding on to the headboard for dear life. They managed to plunge the wood plank into the shark’s maw, like a supersized tongue depressor. The fish gagged and backed off, recoiling back into the dark water.

“That was close,” gasped Matthew, wiping the saltwater from his eyes. Kip stood up, scanning the vast ocean.

“We’re all alone out here!”

“I know, but we’ve got to stay calm,” replied Matthew. “We need to think, and quickly!”

“How about using part of these headboard shelves; we could paddle to the buoy?” suggested Kip.

“That’s why I’m friends with you Kip, because you’re smart like me!” For the first time the two kids actually smiled. They positioned themselves on each side of the bed and paddled, luckily the ocean current was still. As they approached the bobbing object, Matthew’s friend noticed something.

“Hey, I’ve seen this before,” said Kip, recognizing the orange stripes running across the towering cone-shaped buoy. I’ve seen this while fishing with my dad. I think we’re in the Gulf of Mexico!”

“So we’re close to home then?” asked Matthew, hoping it was true.

“Yeah, I’d say we’re about two miles from shore.” Kip was optimistic then came the realization. “Uh, two miles . . .”

“At least we know where we are, and that’s a start,” said Matthew. The flat, broken pieces of wood made it difficult to paddle, but at least it was something. “We’ll get there!”

Kip, paddling on the left side of the bed, lifted his head and saw the familiar triangular shape cutting through the water, approaching. “It’s coming back!” Both kids dropped their makeshift paddles and picked up the large plank. The shark zeroed in on the bed, mouth open. The two boys raised the piece of wood like a blunt harpoon.

“Now!” screamed Matthew. With all their might, the boys rammed the oncoming shark straight in the snout, but this time, the two-inch thick plank snapped like balsa wood. The great fish submerged, thrashing its powerful tail then swam away. The rush of water propelled the bed 360 degrees, the tail

scraping underneath the wood frame. Both kids screamed as they jostled towards the center of the bed for safety.

“Grab the paddles!” yelled Kip, looking desperately around for them. But during their epic battle, the two pieces of particleboard had floated away.

“Now we’re really up a certain creek without our paddles,” said Matthew, half joking, but feeling near hopeless. The two felt a sudden jolt from underneath. The shark pressed its nose against the thick, polyvinyl mattress, lifting it out of the water. Matthew tumbled over the headboard, landing in the warm surf. The shark snapped its bear-trap like jaws wildly, breaking through the wood and metal frame surrounding the rubbery mass. Kip slid over and reached out his hand. Matthew grabbed it and crawled up, banging his left knee on the solid oak frame.

Both boys tumbled over to the center of the mattress as the shark elevated the frame again. This time the shark retreated, as if punched solidly in the nose. The fish quickly swam away, but for how long, they thought.

A few moments later, the dorsal fin broke water, the shark circling the drifting bed. “We’re almost there!” pointed Kip, as they neared the buoy, now only a few yards away. Both noticed a rusted ladder and safe perch up top.

The shark tightened its circle, prolonging the agony for the two children. “It’s toying with, isn’t it?” said Kip, his lips quivering.

Matthew gazed at his leg in horror. “Oh God, no wonder it won’t leave, I’m bleeding; I must of cut myself when I fell off the bed!” Kip turned, gasping at his friend’s wound. Both looked up, eyeing the familiar dorsal fin in the reflecting moonlight . . . then it charged.

“It’s coming again!” screamed Matthew, but with no paddles, both boys lunged for each side of the bed and began rowing with their hands.

“This is taking too long!” yelled Kip, already running out of energy.

The shark loomed closer and closer, the snout of the beast rising; it was only twenty feet away.

“Come on; come on!” screamed Matthew, “We’re almost there!” But they weren’t. The great white shark flicked its powerful tail and pectoral fins and leaped onto the bed, rows upon rows of white daggers eager to snap up its victims. The weight of the beast caused both kids to bounce off, landing hard onto the . . . floor?

“Aahhhh,” Thomas screamed, “What are you two fish sticks doing on my bed!” Both Matthew and Kip fumbled for words, still half asleep as they picked themselves off the burnt orange shag carpeting.

“What the . . . ? I thought you were supposed to be in Tallahassee?” yawned his younger brother, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“He made me do it; he made me do it,” trembled Kip, as he pointed to Matthew.

“I’m sure he did,” replied Thomas, who had planned to simply jump in bed and sleep like a rock. “You’ll live, my brother – that’s a different story.”

“What happened?” asked Matthew, hoping to leave the scene unscathed.

“The stinking car broke down – overheated when we were stuck in traffic. So we took a cab back, man was dad pissed. And now I am!”

“Please don’t kill me,” his brother begged.

“I’m actually too tired to kill you right now,” said Thomas yawning. Matthew gave a sigh of relief. “But we’ll make an appointment sometime tomorrow late afternoon after I wake up.” Matthew gulped.

“I believe my schedule is all full tomorrow,” replied Matthew, “you know, baseball practice then cutting the grass, washing mom’s car, tidy up my room, feed the cat, hit the books. I’ll have to take a rain check.”

“Leave now!” said Thomas, yawning for the third time, revealing a row of fairly straight white teeth.

Matthew and Kip picked up their belongings and zombied into the game room, rolling out their sleeping bags on the carpeted floor and crashed on the spot.

“What just happened in there?” asked Kip, eyes closed and secretly hugging his stuffed animal seal.

“I think maybe we shouldn’t watch any more shark movies or sleep on my brother’s waterbed,” replied Matthew, as he nestled inside his navy blue cocoon.

“Sleeping at sea can be hazardous to your health.”

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