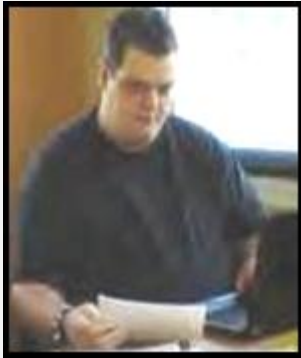


The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems

***We now have stories/poems in Spanish!**



Lucky Brown Meets the Vet

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

“Thank you doctor... yes we’ll be there in an hour. Bye bye.” Jill hung up the phone and glanced at Lucky. “Almost time, boy.” Smiling, she turned to head into the kitchen to finish her cup of coffee before it was time to leave.

Lucky Brown remained sitting next to the table where his boy’s mother stood with the phone a few seconds before. His tail wagged on its own, but he didn’t see any reason to stop it. In the year he spent with his new family, he hadn’t seen any reason to suspect something bad was about to happen. He knew his boy’s mother was talking to someone they called “the vet”. It was something he heard them talking about the last few days for his yearlies... whatever they were.

Feeling it was none of his concern, he turned and made his way into the living room and jumped onto his favorite chair. Things like names and titles weren’t important to Lucky, so long as he had his boy and plenty of toys to keep him occupied.

Closing his eyes, he could see the field and smell the grass but there was something else. He perked his ears at the unusual scent and looked from right to left in an effort to find it. He could hear the beating of its heart, of that he was certain. Lucky lowered his nose to the ground and sniffed. Yes, he was close to it now. A couple more sniffs and he knew where the rabbit was hiding.

With his heart beating at a frantic pace, Lucky struggled to keep calm until the right moment to attack. Sure the rabbit didn’t know he was about to meet the greatest of all hunters, Lucky’s tail began wagging of its own accord. After a moment’s pause, Lucky crouched low and aimed his nose towards where the scent and sound came from. The tall thicket of grass wasn’t a proper place to hide and the more he watched, the more Lucky was sure he could see his prey.

Chew toys were fun, but nothing gave him as much joy as playing with another animal. When he couldn’t wait any longer, Lucky leaped towards the small patch of long grass. When he landed, the rabbit skittered away just out of his reach. Turning, Lucky leaped once more.

The rabbit broke into a full out run which Lucky was more than happy to follow. Back and forth he chased after the rabbit on their zigzag path. The playful yips escaped from his whenever he got close enough to almost touch the

rabbit’s soft fur. Finally, as he was about to cut off the rabbit and win the game he heard his name.

Opening his eyes, Lucky looked around for the rabbit until he remembered he was in his boy’s house. Sad to see the dream leave, he yawned and stretched before resting his head back onto the arm of the chair.

“Lucky! Come here boy!”

His ears perked and he lifted his head at hearing his boy’s mother’s voice. Without wasting a second, he jumped off of the chair and trotted into the kitchen. When he saw his leash in her hand his tail wagged so hard it began swinging in a circle.

Jill leaned over and smiled at him. “Want to go for a ride boy? Want to go to the vet?”

There was that word vet again, but Lucky didn’t care. He knew the word ride and did his prance with a guttural snort in response. When she reached for him, he sat like he’d been taught and waited until she latched the leash to his collar. The time between then and when she opened the door was a horrible wait for him as he began to vibrate from his excitement.

“Come on.”

YES! His excitement exploded as his tail became little more than a blur. He followed her out to the car and jumped into the back seat as was his custom and checked both windows to make sure he could see out of them. There was nothing like going for a ride and smelling all of the different things in the world around him. Lucky was so engrossed in enjoying the changing smells he didn’t notice the building they pulled up to.

At first it looked like any other, but the smells of the countless animals overrode his senses. When his boy’s mother opened the car

door for him he practically dragged her to the building's entrance. The walkway and parking lot was covered with so many interesting smells and they grew stronger as they neared the door.

When his boy's mother opened the door, Lucky stuck his head in to smell the welcome mat but he refused to move another step. The smell of urine on the mat and the barking cries of other dogs told him not to go inside.

"Lucky... move... go!"

Having his boy's mother pushing him from behind left him little option but to enter. He trusted her, not as much as his boy, but he still trusted her. She wouldn't let anything bad happen to him.

Once inside, the chemical saturated cool air assaulted and burned his nose but Lucky remained calm while his boy's mother filled out something in a hard tablet. The woman behind the counter looked kind and Lucky was sure she meant well, but she smelled like the air in the building. With a groan he sat next to his boy's mother and waited patiently until she finished and led him to a bench.

Lucky took his place next to her on the floor and continued to smell around them. While he couldn't count, he knew there were many animals that had been brought in before him. Trying to figure out how many and who they were occupied his time until the woman behind the counter walked over to them and said something about needing a weight.

Curious, Lucky followed his human's lead and stepped on a large metallic tray on the floor. He didn't like the feeling of it as the metal shifted whenever he stepped. It took several attempts to keep him

still until they managed to get his weight. Whatever that was.

"Sixty-eight pounds. You're a growing boy, aren't you?"

Lucky wagged his tail at the tone of the woman's voice and let her rub his ear. *What did sixty-eight pounds mean?* The question was one of many he had, but it was quickly forgotten when he was led down a hallway and into another room. Once inside, the nice lady closed a door leaving him and his human alone.

As before, the room was filled with the scents of numerous animals and a strange chemical smell that burned his nose. Shaking his head he sat next to his human and waited for as long as she told him to. It wasn't easy as he was used to roaming around the house. After a few minutes Lucky began to fall asleep and he thought he could see a rabbit when the door opened and the doctor stepped in. In an instant Lucky was awake and alert.

"Hi there, fella. You're looking fit and healthy. Aren't you?"

Despite the burning smell coming from the man Lucky couldn't stop himself from wagging. The doctor also smelled like so many different animals Lucky's sense were on overload as the man rubbed his ears. Not wanting him to stop, Lucky leaned his head to the side and rested its weight against the man's hand.

Smiling, the doctor gave him a pat on the head and started to look through a stack of papers. They looked like the homework his boy was forced to do on a daily basis but the man seemed happy with it. Lucky thought it odd, but to each their own. He knew the man would never understand the delectable taste of shoe leather or toilet water.

Humans could be so strange at times.

While his human and the doctor talked, Lucky casually looked around at the small room they were in. Nothing interesting stood out to him about it except the smell. Why would anyone wish to stay in such a boring place? With a snort, Lucky lowered himself to the floor and rested his chin on his paws. If he couldn't find something to keep himself entertained then he'd take a nap. There, problem solved.

"All we need is a blood test and a couple of shots and he'll be all set."

Hearing the words, Lucky raised his head and began wagging his tail. He could see by his boy's mother's smile they were about to leave. Soon he'd be back in their home and resting in his chair. Then she handed the leash over to the doctor. What was she doing? Wasn't he going home? The doctor gave the leash a gentle tug and Lucky followed behind him but not before giving his boy's mother a sad look. He didn't want to go, but if that's what she thought would be best...

"It'll be okay boy. You'll be back in a few."

He'd be back? Hearing the words perked him up and Lucky followed the doctor as proudly as he could. The fear of being left there faded even as he strode past the cages of dogs. He looked at them with pity as they barked and carried on. Didn't they have someone that loved them like he did? Looking away he concentrated on doing what he was told. He'd make his humans proud if it was the last thing he did.

Further along the hallway he was taken into a separate room when another man helped the

doctor to put him on a table. Not liking the feeling of being lifted and helpless he let out a quiet growl. As soon as the sound escaped, Lucky looked down in shame. He knew better than to growl and he tried to show the doctor he was sorry.

“It’s alright boy.” Lucky wagged the tip of his tail, unsure if the man meant it or not. He didn’t notice the other man until he slipped a strange thing over his snout. When he tried to back away, the doctor grabbed him gently and held him until the other finished fastening the clasp.

Shaken and hurt, Lucky looked at the doctor with the saddest eyes he could. He knew he was bad to growl, but his humans never did anything like this to him. The other man kept a hold of him and talked to him but Lucky didn’t care, his focus was on the doctor and the sharp looking things he was getting ready.

“Relax Lucky, this will only hurt for a second.” The doctor pushed one of the things into Lucky’s front leg causing him to whimper and try to pull away but the other man held him firm. Not understanding what he did to deserve such a thing, Lucky tried to focus on seeing his boy. His human said he’d be back... but that was before he growled.

When the doctor pulled the thing out of his leg and held a piece of fabric over the hurt the pain started to go away. Still, Lucky didn’t trust the man and watched him with the three things he attached to the thing before pulling it out. Lucky was so focused on watching the doctor he didn’t notice the small pinpricks in the scruff of his neck. After a minute the doctor and the other man lifted him up and set him back on the floor.

Never so happy to *not* be on any furniture, Lucky’s happiness doubled when the strange thing over his muzzle was taken off. He started to wag his tail in gratitude and the doctor smiled at him.

“See? It wasn’t so bad was it?”

Something about the man’s tone sounded fake and Lucky’s tail slowed. Even when the doctor offered him a beef treat Lucky didn’t trust him enough to take it until the fourth time it was offered. He decided he punished the doctor enough for torturing him.

When the doctor took his leash and beckoned him to follow, Lucky couldn’t wait to follow. He knew he was being taken away from that room and that was just the thing he needed. After a quick walk through the hallway, happiness and joy exploded in Lucky when a door was opened and he saw his boy’s mother.

She smiled at him and talked to the doctor for a minute. None of that concerned Lucky, he wanted out of there and headed straight for the door. Pulling the leash as taut as he could, he enjoyed the feeling of his human being pulled off balance and ignored her when she said his name. Let her say what she wanted, so long as he was taken away from there he’d be happy.

Staring at the door handle he found it infuriating at it being a round knob. He’d seen the latch ones before and figured out if he could pull them down the door would open, but this one was like the ones at home. Trying to will it open he continued to focus on it, imagining he could see it turn. When it did it startled him, but not enough to keep him from moving. The curse from his boy’s mother wasn’t enough to stop him and she

followed him past the lady with the cat in a box and straight to the car.

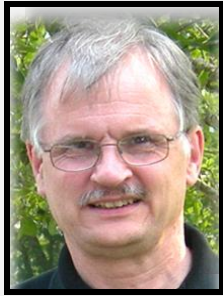
Jill stood next to him looking through her keys. “I guess this means you don’t like it here?”

Lucky glanced at her, snorted, then turned his attention back to the car door trying to will it open.

Shaking her head, Jill pressed the unlock button on her key ring and opened the door. With a snort of approval, Lucky jumped into the backseat as soon as the door was open.

When they were pulling away, Lucky’s eyes fixed on the light brown building as the word Vet burned itself into his memory with the building. They’d never get him back there. Nope. Not going to happen. The decree was forgotten as soon as they pulled into their driveway and he saw his boy. Everything was right in Lucky Brown’s world once more.





The Repast

By Rick Weber

Jason stopped and reflected. What became an annual event started out three years earlier on his parents' thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. It wasn't supposed to be that way. Camille and Jason invited his parents to their place outside of the City. What was to be an intimate group of four doubled when Mom's sister, Aunt Gert, invited herself along with Uncle Bob, cousins Lana, and Mike on the train ride to get out of town. Aunt Gert always invited herself along. The chime of a grandfather's clock in the living room brought Jason back to the present and the realization that he still had a meal to plan.

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

With the entrees decided, Jason had only side dishes and dessert to work out. "Not a problem," he declared. Grabbing a pencil and a

sheet of paper, he compiled the list for his trip to the market.

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

Cooking became a diversion for him after graduation when he got an entry level position on Wall Street. He quickly found out that his talent in the stock market equaled that in the kitchen. He married Camille, and they were able to buy an apartment in the City and later a house out on the Island where he now finished his grocery list. With one last look around the kitchen, Jason felt it was complete and off to the store he went.

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

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

"Tony, I'm having a get together at my house tonight and will be serving both Beef Wellington and Arroz con Pollo. When you get a

chance, can you pack me up a couple of pounds of beef tenderloin and a couple of three pound broiler-fryers. I have some other things to get and I'll pick them up on my way out."

"Sure thing, Mr. Pardo."

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

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

Jason started by doing what he felt was the hardest task of all, making dessert. He preheated the oven, and as it warmed up, he sprayed several baking pans with vegetable oil and dusted the insides with flour. In a mixing bowl he poured boiling water over the German Chocolate, stirred it, then set it aside before grabbing another mixing bowl for the flour, baking soda, cocoa, and salt. A large mixing bowl came out for him to blend it all together along with other ingredients before filling the baking

pans and getting them into the oven. As the cakes baked, Jason mixed his own brand of coconut-pecan filling to connect the layers of what would become two separate cakes. He then put together his own dinner roll dough which he would pop in the oven when it came closer to dinnertime.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason sat quietly at his desk looking at the menu from the evening before. Reaching for an open folder, he placed it with the

previous years' menus. After closing the folder and dropping it into the bottom right hand drawer, he locked the desk with a key he had in his vest pocket.



The Coyote

By Jamie White

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

Sunlight shone in through the window, lighting up Suzanna Hawk's face as she slowly woke up. She stretched her arms out, a yawn escaping her lips. It had been a long night with a lot of travel. She was part of a traveling circus making its way through the west. As she looked outside the window of her small train car, she noticed the other members of her troupe busily preparing for the night's show. They had finally arrived in Abilene, Kansas, the next stop on their tour. She loved traveling with the show. Although her act never changed, she still never knew exactly what her day was going to be like from one day to the next. There were always new places to explore and people to meet. Even the best planned acts would have last minute changes that made it fun for her to sit in the audience and watch, no matter how many times she'd seen the performers. She'd been with the show for almost six years now. She had left her home on the Sioux reservation when she was

only sixteen years old to join the show and she'd never looked back. She loved everything about it; the travel, the applause, the people.

Suzanna dressed and headed outside to help with the daily chores. There were tents to set up, animals to tend and rehearsals. Her act in particular needed to be carefully planned out. She was known as the Woman Who Can't Be Killed. The visiting crowd was told she had a spirit guide that protected her from being harmed, even when she was shot several times. Firing the gun was the job of her husband, Alan Strongbow. He was very meticulous about his job. He always checked the blanks closely before putting them in his breast pocket the day of the performance. The gun was always loaded with the blanks after another check just before he went on stage to make sure no real bullets could get in by mistake.

"Morning," Suzanna said, walking up to her husband and kissing him on the cheek.

"Morning. I was afraid you were gonna sleep the day away. There's much work to get done before the show tonight."

"I know. I'm sorry about that.... I don't know what got into me. I was so tired after the show last night I could hardly keep my eyes open. What should I do first?"

"Elisabeth could use some help getting the horses fed and groomed. Why don't you start with that? She's the first act anyway."

Suzanna nodded and walked off to help the horseback rider prepare the animals. For hours, the troupe tended the animals and made last minute preparations to make sure all the tents were ready for the locals before squeezing in a little

rehearsal time. Finally, it was time for the show. Suzanna watched the acts from the stands as she always did before joining her husband backstage. As she stepped up to the curtain, sneaking a peak at the audience, she felt the usual rush of adrenaline that hit her right before a performance. It was one thing to sit in the audience and take in the show. It was another thing entirely to look at them from the stage. It made the crowd seem much larger than it really was.

"And now.... The moment you've been waiting for. Please give a warm welcome to Miss Suzanna Hawk, the woman who can't be killed!" The audience exploded into applause with her husband's grand introduction.

She stepped out onto the stage, bowing briefly before taking her place on the stage. The lights dimmed and the audience fell into a deafening silence. Her husband stood several feet away from her, readying his weapon, taking aim at her chest. The gun was fired, all six rounds seemed to strike their target. Despite her swaying she never fell. With their act successfully over she and her husband bowed to the cheering crowd.

As with any other night they took a few moments to talk to some of the townspeople before cleaning up. They knew they were going to be there for another day, so there was no packing to do, at least. They finished their chores quickly and before she knew it she and her husband were heading for their train car to get some sleep. Well... she was about to get some sleep anyway. Her husband was too worked up to sleep that night.

Night after night, they did their act and the townsfolk showered his wife with praise and admiration,

barely giving credit to the gunman. He felt he should be getting as much adulation, if not more, than her. More pay, as well. Sure, he just fired a blank at her but all she did was pretend to fall back a little. As far as he was concerned they had equal jobs and he was tired of her getting more spoils. He even came up with the mysterious story for their act...all she had done was tell him about some legends among her people. Like many Indian tribes, her people believed in spirit guides and totems. He didn't. As far as he was concerned, those stories were just make believe, silly superstitions that meant nothing. He laid awake for hours, filled with the resentment that had been building for weeks now. The few times he had brought it up to her (that night included) she had brushed his concerns off. After all, the money all went to the same place. She couldn't understand why he was so worried about it. She didn't understand that as the man, he was supposed to be the one with the status and the power. He didn't know what to do about it, but he was tired of always having to play second fiddle. He also was a bit bored of the whole magical spirits nonsense. He knew better than to believe that stuff and was tired of listening to Suzanna and some of the others speak as though they were real. At least it brought the money in. It never ceased to amaze him what people were willing to spend money on.

The next morning, Suzanna was up and dressed early, ready to help with the daily chores. The early night had done wonders for her and she was full of energy that day. Alan was already out there, cleaning his pistol.

"Mornin'," she said, wrapping her arms around him in a hug.

"Mornin'," he replied in a cold tone, pulling back to continue his task.

"Are you alright?," she asked. He seemed a bit off this morning. She wondered if he was still stewing over their argument the night before. It was a familiar one and one she was tired of. She just didn't know how to fix it. It wasn't her fault if people wanted to talk to her more and give her a bigger piece of the profits.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said. "Just got a lot to get done. Why don't you head on over to the stable and get those horses ready again? They took to you real good yesterday."

Suzanna nodded and walked over to the stables, still not sure that the trouble wasn't over. She figured if she gave him some time to stew on his own, it would all blow over eventually.

Later that night, Alan stood behind the curtain, doing his usual pre-show routine. This time, however, He had an odd sense of dread about him. He wasn't sure where it came from. Maybe he was still feeling a bit worked up from their argument the night before. Whatever the reason, he never wanted to walk onto that stage less than he did that night. Ever the showman, though, he put on the big smile and let the fake enthusiasm enter his voice.

"Evenin' folks!," he greeted the crowd. "It's time again for the act you've been hearin' about. Please give a warm welcome to Miss Suzanna Hawk..."

Suzanna walked out onto the stage and took her normal place. Alan turned to her, pistol in hand. Just as they did every night, the audience became deadly silent, their anticipation and nervousness filling the air. Alan pointed the gun

at Suzanna, preparing to fire, anticipating her fake stumble. As he pulled the trigger, his eyes widened in surprise. Instead of Suzanna's face, he saw a coyote staring back at him. Its eyes flashed and he saw a snarl form as Suzanna fell back. The imagine lasted only an instant and he shook it off. Must've been his imagination. He blinked, wondering what on earth could've cause him to see that..

As always, Suzanna straightened up, turning to the crowd with a wide smile on her face. To Alan's surprise, she was holding a wooden bullet in her hand. The audience went wild, jumping to their feet and cheering loudly. Suzanna looked down at the wooden plug and back over at Alan, confusion crossing her features. How did she manage to catch it in her hand? Quickly composing herself, she turned to the audience to take her bow, a wide smile crossing her features that never quite reached her eyes. She had had the strangest feeling come over her. Like she'd been outside of her body looking in for a moment. Several feet away, Alan had a similar look on his face... although he seemed a little more spooked than she did. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the transparent figure of a coyote disappear behind the curtain.

They never spoke of that night and Alan comments about phony spirits and magical mumbo jumbo came to an end. It was sort of an unspoken agreement between them, He wasn't entirely sure what had happened that night under the big top, but he figured it was best not to take his chances.



Drifters vs. Librarian By DiVitto Kelly

Mid November, Thursday evening, fifteen minutes to nine. Andrea Murphy was wrapping up her first full week as librarian at the Birch Mills Public Library located in the historically mundane town of Linwood, Ohio. A horrendous thunderstorm rolled in, cutting off all power. No worries. She and her fellow colleague in circulation would on their way home in no time.

The emergency lights flickered on, almost useless in the antique bubble gum hued brick building, three stories tall and impenetrable. It was once a bank, constructed during the latter part of the Victorian era, circa 1893. Outside, deep green ivy crept up along white painted gutters stationed on each corner of the square building, surrounded by semi manicured hedges, pines, and maples. Fallen trees and heavy limbs scattered across the main road. The cobblestone parking lot was a mess, flooded and now blocked off.

Three strangers entered just as the circulation manager prepares to lock up. "I'm sorry folks, we're closing up shop," said Daniel Hubbard, circulation supervisor. He'd been with the county library system going on twenty-seven years.

"I just need to use the phone fella," said the slender man, late twenties, grungy with medium cropped orange-blond hair. The other man, five foot-seven tops, was a near younger replica of his brother, only slightly skinnier. Both looked like a decent hot meal had eluded them for some time. The woman, disheveled with long hair past her shoulders, offered up a half smile. Their faces looked harsh, a result of a year-long binge on meth. All three looked and smelled like wet dogs.

"I'm not sure they're working 'cause of the storm, but it's over there at the information desk," pointed Hubbard. He turned his back, ready to shut down the computers when the elevator opened. Just then, the man pistol-whipped Hubbard, knocking him out cold. Exiting the elevator, Andrea witnessed the brutal act. She screamed. The man turned and pointed his revolver at the woman and instinctively fired. The bullet ricocheted off the tile wall, just below the elevator button plate. Andrea darted back inside, frantically pressing the close button; she must have hit it a dozen times. The elevator moved in slow motion. "Come on, come on!" Andrea screamed.

Andrea got off at the top floor -- the third floor. "Why are they doing this!" she cried, running for her office. She closed the door, locking it.

The three vagabonds were running on empty: no money, no home, and no future. Their killing spree began in Missouri, shooting an elderly couple dead for cash in some non-descript rural town. They dipped south into Tennessee holding up liquor stores in Jackson

and Knoxville, then shot a gas station attendant too, stealing his cherished 1985 liquorish black Mercury Marquis. The younger brother joked no one should ever die over a freaking Marquis, but the man stubbornly refused to give up his car keys.

The trio headed east to Bullitt, Kentucky, robbing a bait store then a diner in the early A.M. They jammed a bunch of doggie bag Styrofoam containers with food and a case of Coke before taking off, eventually lodging in Alexandria, a town near the border of Kentucky and the Buckeye State, Ohio.

"Good to see we're finally making the news," said Dennis, more or less the ring leader. CNN was following the story, trying to piece things together, but offering up only vague descriptions of the perpetrators. Allan, whose real name was Albert -- he hated Albert, polished off a Frisbee sized whole apple pie and washed it down with a Coke. He belched then sat on the bed, legs crossed, still wearing his black work boots.

"Get your stinking shoes off the bed, don't you know nothin about manners?" blurted out Al's girlfriend Carol, a beauty school dropout and part time prostitute. They met at the local KFC while Al worked the drive-thru; one of a long string of jobs that never quite panned out.

He purposely flipped his heavy boots onto the floor, nearly waking up his older brother who snored like a chainsaw. Near dawn, the sound of screaming police car sirens racing by outside the dumpy motel made Dennis nearly leap out of his worn jeans.

He rubbed the sleep out of his bloodshot eyes. "Time to move, Bonnie and Clyde." He popped opened a Coke floating in the

watered down ice bucket. Al slung his tattooed limb over his girlfriend's narrow shoulder; she'd twisted and turned all night like a snake. It was the one thing Al couldn't stand about Carol. That and her snapping gum habit. All three spilled out the motel room and got in the suped up Lincoln. Next destination: a historically quaint town just north of Cincinnati.

 Andrea tried the phone again – still dead. And her cellphone? “Shit, I don't believe this, where's my freaking cell!” Then she remembered – it was charging . . . at home, sitting on the kitchen counter. She opened the door an inch. Through the open atrium she could hear the three talking. She kept running it through her brain – who would want to break into a library? A passionate reader maybe?

The librarian closed the door and scurried around her office. She spotted a flyer pinned on her wall. The Birch Mills Library proudly presents Civil War artifacts and a rare signed copy of *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. That can't be it, Andrea thought. Those three didn't look like the reading type. And she was near certain that the three could give a rat's ass what happened at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. In fact, she was fairly certain they were rather pissed off at the outcome.

Andrea opened the door and crept out of the office. It always smelled musty inside the longstanding brick building no matter how many windows were open on a crisp fall day or how many cans of air freshener were sprayed. Maybe a good crop-dusting of Febreze would do the trick.

Dennis ambled around the circulation desk and took a gander at the cash register. He pushed a handful of buttons but nothing happened. He pounded his bony fist on the key pad. “Damn it, we need the key.”

“You're not gonna find any cash in a damn library,” said Al, exasperated. “Why not grab us some computers? We can pawn a few laptops instead.”

“What about blondie upstairs?” asked Carol, drawing out a fishing knife she'd stolen from the bait shop. “Want me to take her out?”

“That would be so romantic,” answered her boyfriend. “Hey, the couple that kills together stays together.”

“More like natural bored killers,” smirked Dennis. “Look, the phones are dead, but she might have a cell. Why don't both of you go handle it?” The couple grasped hands and strode to the elevator like newlyweds.

A pool of blood lay next to Hubbard's throbbing head. The circulation manager forged every ounce of energy to open his eyes as he lay on the wheat bread hued carpeting that perpetually smelled of mildew. The odor of dank flood water just never goes completely away. He focused, watching as two people got onto the elevator. It took a moment, but the incident – the people needing the phone. “Oh no - - Andrea.”

The two miscreants got off on the second floor, greeted by rows of dark wood bookcases that housed the adult non-fiction collection, along with a smaller token book shelf half-filled with literature in French and Spanish. The reference desk was a dated, hand me down model. There was a lone desktop

computer and a small collection of ready reference materials.

“Check all the offices,” said Al. “I'm sure we'll be able to snag some laptops up here.”

The two split up in opposite directions. Carol followed a narrow hallway to a dead end office. She jiggled the door handle then pointed the knife inside the lock. “Easy peasy,” she uttered as the door popped open. There were two light wood desks stationed back to back along with a pair of older model desk top computers. By the look of the monitors even Carol could tell they were outdated.

Al was in no mood to spend any substantial time at the library – any library for that matter. It felt like Kryptonite to the high school dropout. But at least it was warm and dry; they had nothing to worry about. He poked around the bookshelves, randomly snatching books, reading the title then tossing them aside. He walked over towards the atrium, getting a whole view of the building.

Al called down to his brother. “Any luck with the cash register?” He then heard a blistering string of curse words. His older brother was a maestro at cursing, slinging lines of expletives with heavy metal gusto. “I guess not.”

Dennis marched over to the circulation manager, nudging him in the back with his pointed brown boot. Hubbard didn't move. Playing possum seemed like a safe bet – he hoped it might even save his life. “Get up prick,” said Dennis. “Come on fat ass, where are the keys?” Hubbard prayed, keeping his eyes closed, hard.

“The walrus is out for the count Den, try his pockets,” Al said, snickering. His twangy voice echoed throughout the atrium.

Dennis dug his dirty hands into Hubbard's windbreaker pockets. Bingo.

Dennis raced back to the cash register placing the key in the appropriate spot. The drawer popped open. "All right, here we go." Dennis's enthusiasm suddenly dropped like a stone. He grabbed the cash, quickly counting it -- a paltry sum of twenty-two dollars plus another six dollars and fifty cents in quarters. Used book sales never brought in much cash.

"What the hell are we going to do with all this change?"

"Hey, we can use it for tolls," joked Al, a wise-ass screw-up deluxe.

Dennis crammed the minuscule wad of cash and change in his front pocket, dropping a few quarters along the way. He was irked. "We need to make some cash quick; did you find any computers up there?"

"Not yet," Al replied. "Let me see what my woman got." Dennis acknowledged then headed behind the circulation desk to inspect the line of cubicles.

Andrea had to do something. She wasn't the type who was going wait around to be executed. Finally, the light bulb went off: drop something heavy on Al's head, just like in a cartoon. She was a big Bugs Bunny fan after all. She tiptoed to the law section and struggled to pick up a half-dozen Martindale Hubble Law Directories. The books weighed a ton; probably cost a small forest of trees their lives. You'd spot them, all lined up on bookshelves in those slimy late night slip and fall lawyer commercials; the type that bask in the primordial ooze alongside used car salesmen and beltway politicians.

Andrea planted herself right above the scumbag. She extended

her arms over the edge then whistled like a bird. He looked up only to be greeted by the cascading volumes. All five books pummeled the scrawny man right in the kisser, breaking his nose as his head ricocheted off the metal railing. He was knocked out cold. Andrea didn't see Carol but knew the skank was on the same floor. She was next.

Andrea was fairly intelligent, getting good grades at Xavier University in nearby Cincinnati. After graduation, her first job was as a copywriter working for a midsize advertising company. But after five years of coming up with clever taglines for meaningless products, Andrea quit.

Seeking something with a bit more importance, she joined the Army -- her two older brothers and father served. Her mom was terrified something would happen to her only daughter. Andrea spent a single tour of duty in Iraq -- mostly out of harms' way, before returning home due to a shoulder injury. She moped for the next six months not sure what to do. A good friend of Andrea's who worked at the town library suggested a change of professional scenery might do the trick. Being a librarian seemed like a cool gig -- and rather safe, excluding occasional paper cuts. Andrea returned to school in the fall, taking most of her classes online. After less than two years, she earned a Master's and began working at the Birch Mills Public Library. It felt right. She was near family and friends, and started writing about her experiences in the Middle East. Whatever happened this evening, Andrea was not going down without a fight.

Carol called out for her boyfriend. The scraggly woman managed to find two laptops and a

couple of desk printers. She placed them in a metal rimmed cart and pushed it towards the elevator. Andrea navigated the stairs down to the second floor. She peered out the doorway and spotted Carol. One thing she didn't want to happen was for the beauty school reject to broadcast that Al was TKO'd. Andrea's squeaky LL Bean duck books squished and squashed with every step she took. She contemplated taking them off but it was too late. Carol turned around as she waited for the elevator.

"So there you are missy, you gonna try and stop us?" boasted Carol, flashing a crooked tooth grin. Her face was pot mark city with a few freckles thrown in for good measure -- it'd make a perfect connect-the-dots drawing. At one time she may have been a looker, but those days were long gone.

"I'd like to think so," answered Andrea, as she rolled up her sleeves and walked towards Carol.

Carol pulled out the slender bladed fishing knife and stepped closer to Andrea. "A whittle ole librarian gonna hurt me?"

Andrea moved in, glaring at the woman. Carol lunged forward with the knife. Andrea blocked the feeble maneuver with her arm then let loose with a lethal roundhouse kick that flattened Carol in a heartbeat. The rubber soles on her duck boots even made a convenient squeaky sound as her left foot met Carol's unflattering face. "Two down, one to go," Andrea uttered. Her heart rate eased a bit.

"Better work on your math, honey," said Al, his face bloody and his eyes teary. He whacked Andrea square in the right shoulder with a wooden chair. The librarian fell to the ground in deep agony. Her shoulders, specifically the right one,

had been separated twice before: once in combat, the other playing volleyball at college. This made it a painful trifecta.

Al was about to stomp Andrea in the back when she knocked him off his feet with a sweeping kick. Al fell flat on his face, blood pouring out of his busted snout again. Andrea jumped on top of the man and pummeled him with lefts and rights. “Like I said, two down, one to go.”

Andrea ran upstairs to her office and retrieved a roll of duct tape, trampling back down to where Al and Carol lay comatose. She bound their hands and feet, slapped a piece over their mouths then dragged them into the small conference room.

The librarian heard Dennis call his brother’s name. She exited the room, locking it before heading up to the third floor. Andrea peered over the edge and spotted Dennis. He was standing over her co-worker with the gun pointed at his body.

“Hey Al, Carol, where the hell are you guys? You better not be doin it in a library; that’d be just plain wrong.” Dennis sensed something was askew. He knew there was someone else in the library. He’d hoped his brother and skanky girlfriend could have taken care of the situation, but his brother could be as dumb as a bowling ball.

Dennis grabbed Hubbard by the collar. “All right my friend, wakey-wakey.” He slapped Hubbard across the face, pulling him to his feet. “Playing possum fat-boy?” He grabbed him by the upper arm and walked him over to the middle of the lobby.

Hey librarian, you hear me?” bellowed Dennis. “Show your face or I’m killing your friend right here, right now.” Andrea remained still. She’d dealt with plenty worse in

Iraq, but had a gut feeling this guy was deadly serious.

“Tell your friend up there you’re a dead man if she don’t give herself up.” Dennis pressed the handgun against Hubbard’s temple, leaving a ringed impression.

“Andrea?” Hubbard called out. The blood was still moist on the side of his balding head. He called out again. “Andrea? I think this guy really means it.” Dennis fired a shot at the ceiling. Hubbard almost fainted.

Andrea’s heart dropped. She peeked just above the railing -- thank God her friend was alive. Andrea finally answered. “Alright, alright.”

“Even a college girl like you understands the international language of violence,” said Dennis. “Come down so we can have ourselves a little chat right here in the -- what’s the name of this place?” He choked Hubbard’s shirt collar harder wanting to get a response.

“It’s uh . . . Birch Mills Library,” uttered Hubbard, feeling woozy. His last conflict of any kind was way back in fifth grade, arguing with a schoolmate about which duck would win in a fight, Daffy or Donald. His money was on Daffy -- that fowl was completely insane.

The elevator door sluggishly opened. Andrea stepped out and stared at the dirt bag. Dennis raised his gun and whacked Hubbard on the head, knocking him out again. Her friend slumped to the floor like a duffle bag full of laundry. “Now it’s just you and me.”

“A little unfair don’t you think?” asked Andrea. “I mean you have a gun against me -- a helpless female.”

“You ain’t so helpless -- looks like you took care of my posse

pretty good and quick. I’d say we’re about even.”

“What do you want?” asked Andrea, thinking if only this scumbag didn’t have a gun, she’d beat the crap out of him.

“Actually, we just wanted a place to crash, you know, rest up a bit before we visit grandma.” Dennis broke out into a wise-ass grin.

Andrea sighed. “Why don’t you get your friends and please leave.” She concentrated on the gun. The chambers appeared free and clear of ammo. She took a step closer.

“Whadda say you tell me where the nice, expensive electronics are and we’ll be on our merry way, unless of course you have a hidden stash of money somewhere here.”

“It’s a library; there’s no money here except what’s in the register,” said Andrea. “And you already got that.” She wasn’t about to divulge the four brand new staff iPads safely locked up in her office. “Of course there’s the --.”

“The what?” asked Dennis with an anxious twang.

“The safe,” said Andrea, saying the word with a bit of apprehension.

“A safe, here?” Dennis perked up with thoughts of stealing some serious dough like a big-time outlaw.

“Well, this used to be a bank a long time ago,” Andrea answered. There are stories that there’s money still there. We’ve been instructed to never ever open it.”

“Well, you’re being instructed to open it --NOW.”

“But . . .”

“Where is it -- now missy!” He pointed the gun straight at her. Empty chamber. Now she was certain this loser was shooting blanks.

“It’s in the back, right behind the circulation desk next to my

supervisor’s office, but I need the keys.”

Dennis grabbed them from the cash register and threw them at Andrea’s feet. “Here, now open it.”

Andrea picked up the keys and walked over to the safe, clearing out a pair of chairs and a small table with a vase of fake flowers on it. She inserted the appropriate key into the slot. On school field trips Andrea would show off the two-ton heavy metal fortress. She even stuffed a few of the original moneybags with shredded newspaper, making it appear like they were filled with wads of money. The kids always got a kick out of that one.

Like a strip tease act, the librarian slowly opened the square door, teasing the drooling criminal. She played up the weight of the door, moving it slower and slower. “Sorry, it’s really, really heavy.”

“Come on, come on princess.” Andrea didn’t like that. She’d occasionally brawl with her older brothers and friends, playing football. Princess? Not hardly.

Dennis’s eyes grew bigger. He was desperate to hit the mother load. The vault was dark as he peered in. He flicked open his lighter. The small flame fell upon the worn bags inside. Dennis felt like he was in a western, robbing the ole town bank. The only thing missing would be a celebratory trip to the saloon and sucking down some rotgut.

Andrea opened it a little more. Dennis stuck his face inside. Andrea whipped around, kicking the man in the back, thrusting him right into the safe. She quickly closed the door with ease, locking it before Dennis knew what hit him. Dennis cursed up a storm, but followed on

his natural instinct to open the moneybags.

“What the fu--?” He reached in and pulled out nothing but crinkle-shredded old newspaper. His eyes turned to fury. “You conniving bitch, I’ll kill you!” He lunged over to the safe door and tried to open it. “Open it up now!”

“Now don’t make me shush you,” said Andrea, toying with the locked up loser.

Dennis ranted and raved, pulling and tugging at the handle. Andrea stood there smiling like Jerry the mouse after bamboozling Tom the cat, yet again. Then the bad library puns started.

“Mr. Dennis, it looks like you’re quite overdue -- for prison.” Andrea smiled. Dennis fumed.

“Oh, you’re interested in books about prisons? That would be in the three hundreds, I believe. Make that 365.973 to be precise. I’m sorry? How long can you check them out? I’d say three to five . . . years. Anything else I can help you with?”

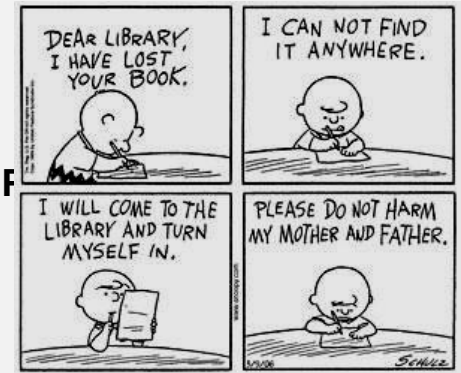
Dennis reached the boiling point. He bellowed out a string of high octane expletives. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bullet. He inserted it in the chamber and aimed at the lock.

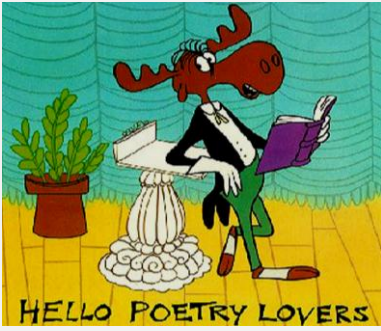
“You’re dead meat, librarian!” The gun fired. The bullet ricocheted off the solid fixture and surround walls, before finally striking Dennis in the temple. He dropped to the floor, dead.

Andrea pressed her ear to the vault door. Not a sound. She went back to help her co-worker up and headed outside in the brisk night air. The rain had stopped but the roads were still a mess. They hailed down a tow truck who radioed the police. The kind gentleman helped clear the debris from the parking lot before taking Mr. Hubbard to the

nearby hospital where he was pronounced okay, minus the throbbing headache. Andrea stayed behind and waited for the police, who showed up eighteen minutes later. They tallied up all three criminals: one dead; two now on their way to prison.

After the police had left, Andrea stood alone in the lobby. She took in a deep breath, reflecting on her harrowing ordeal. Her eyes circled the old building and she thought about her Army friends overseas. Returning to combat was out of the question, but at least she had the excitement of being a librarian.





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: Nov. 10, and Dec. 8.

From picture books to novels, stop by and discuss your ideas. Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal to Michael DiVitto Kelly at mkelly@broward.org.

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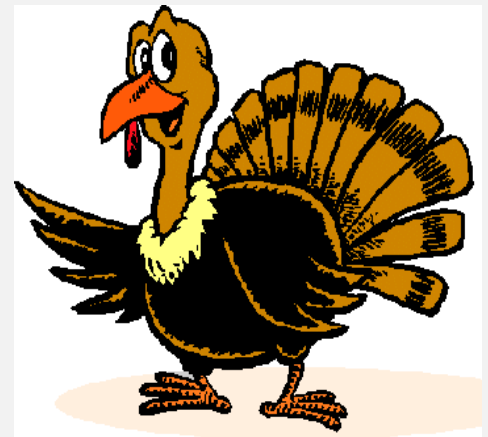
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FEEDBACK CORNER

We want to hear from you! Let us know what you think of our stories. Feel free to email Michael Kelly, head of the writer's group at mkelly@broward.org or call (954) 201-8870.



A Thanksgiving Poem.

The tear another's tears bring forth,
The sigh which answers sigh,
The pulse that beats at other's woes,
E'en though our own be nigh,

A balm to bathe the wounded heart
Where sorrow's hand hath lain,
The link divine from soul to soul
That makes us one in pain,

Sweet sympathy, benignant ray,
Light of the soul doth shine;
In it is human nature givin
A touch of the divine.

Unknown

Thanksgiving

The year has turned its circle,
The seasons come and go.
The harvest all is gathered in
And chilly north winds blow.

Orchards have shared their treasures,
The fields, their yellow grain,
So open wide the doorway ---
Thanksgiving comes again!

Old Rhyme.

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