

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



Learning Me By Jamie White

(Excerpt from Chapter One)

The chatter of the audience carried backstage, where Courtney waited for her cue. No matter how many times she performed, the sound never failed to inspire a panic attack. Her mind blanked and a numb sensation traveled up her body as she approached the stage. The sounds coming from the auditorium dimmed as though her ears were filled with water. Courtney swallowed hard and grabbed onto the nearest object her trembling hands could reach in an effort to gain a sense of stability in the chaos.

Her cue sounded from the stage and, like magic, her mind and body calmed. Courtney didn't know how

she never missed a cue, but she hadn't. She stepped onto the stage and panic gave way to confidence. Once again, she surrendered to her character. Every word she spoke resonated deep within. Before she knew it, she was soaking up the cheers from the audience with the rest of the cast. Courtney took her bow, and then retreated to the wings where their drama coach and crew waited.

"Bravo, everyone," Miss Hernandez said. "That was better than rehearsal! Courtney, your parents are waiting outside. They seemed like they were in a hurry, so you should go get changed. I'd like to talk to you tomorrow, though, so stop by my room after school, okay?"

"Sure, Miss Hernandez." Courtney waved goodbye to her cast mates while forcing a smile. The way her parents rushed out of these things, Courtney was surprised they'd never tried to grab her right off the stage in the middle of curtain call. She turned and retreated to the dressing room while trying to block out the excited chatter of the others.

Courtney washed the makeup off her face and changed back into the jeans and t-shirt she'd worn for the ride to school. She hung her costume with care, gently fingering the soft material before leaving the room. She wished she were partying with the rest of the cast rather than facing another night of boredom and indifference. She stopped wondering about their lack of pride in her performances a long time ago. Truth be told, she wondered why they even bothered going. It wasn't as though they were going to discuss the play on the ride back. The last time they'd shown

any enthusiasm for her acting was in Kindergarten.

She trudged down the hallway, sighing deeply before stepping through the double doors and into the parking lot. She scanned the area, spotting them on a bench several feet away. Her parents looked to be deep in conversation until she came closer. Instantly, they stopped talking and stood to greet her.

"Sorry about that. Removing that gunk takes forever." She thanked whatever deity was responsible for her acting skills. *She* even believed that apology for a moment. She'd been doing everything she could to extend her post-show cleanup for years, but had yet to get it over a half-hour.

"It's fine, Sweetie. We'd better get moving, though. Don't you still have homework?" Her father raised an eyebrow.

Courtney learned long ago that look was dangerous and she generally did what she could to avoid it being directed her way. She nodded and forced a smile. "Just a little. I'll be done with it in no time."

"Good." Her mother adjusted the strap of her purse as she turned toward the car.

Courtney focused her attention on the crickets in the distance while they walked, hoping that would be the extent of their conversation. The same thing happened every time she did a play, and she didn't understand it. Shouldn't they be proud of how well she did?

The whole ride home, Courtney stared out the window and replayed the performance in her mind. How she remembered any of it, she had no idea. She went into autopilot

every time she stepped onstage. The words flowed out of her as though she had no control of herself. It was a terrifying, yet exhilarating feeling that she chased without a second thought. Maybe one day she'd get them to understand just how important acting was to her. She wasn't going to place any bets on it, though.

Courtney dug through her backpack and pulled out a small container of tuna salad she'd made for lunch that morning. She picked up the fork that came with her container and took a bite, savoring the salty and sweet mix.

"Hey, Babe."

Courtney's pulse accelerated. Sam Roberts stood before her, looking every bit as hot as he had the first day she met him Sophomore year. She fought the urge to laugh as she thought about how flustered she'd been. Something about those deep brown eyes and dark hair had shut off any higher brain function. She maybe got one coherent word out, but somehow he still asked her to a dance. Courtney chalked it up to luck on her part. She couldn't think of any other explanation after the horrible first impression she'd made. "Hi, yourself."

She patted the space beside her. Sam plopped down next to her with a tray of food in his hand, most of which Courtney couldn't identify. She wasn't sure she wanted to. Her nose wrinkled at the stench. "How can you eat that stuff?"

Sam shrugged and scooped up a heaping spoonful. "It's good. So, how'd it go last night? Sorry I couldn't be there."

"It's cool. The play went great! Well, ya know, if you don't count the ride home." She laughed, trying to keep her tone as light as possible. She had no intention of getting him riled up the night of a game.

"What happened?" He narrowed his eyes as he took another bite of his food.

"Eh, same old thing. Ya know, a long, quiet ride filled with nothing but boredom and dreams of being elsewhere. It was a long day."

"They rushed you out again, huh?"

Courtney nodded. "So, what's the plan for tonight?"

"There's a party after the game if you want to go. Dan's throwing it, assuming we win, anyway."

Courtney laughed. "Figures he'd say that. So, I guess I'll be ready about six?"

"Sounds good."

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch period. Courtney stood, gathering up her things. "I better get going. Oh, before I forget, you're on your own this afternoon. I've got to meet Miss Hernandez after class."

"Really? Did she say why?" He followed suit, retrieving her bag from its spot on the bench.

"No, but she did say I did a great job right before that, so who knows? Maybe there's another production coming up she wants to talk about."

"Good luck!" He handed her the bag and then held his hands up defensively. "Sorry.... Break a leg!"

Courtney laughed. "Thanks." She turned and made her way back into the building, her nerves on edge. The end of the day couldn't

come fast enough. Whatever she wanted, Courtney couldn't help feeling as though it would be much more than she could imagine.

Courtney arrived before Miss Hernandez did. She plopped down in one of the seats, trying her best to keep the nerves at bay. To distract herself, Courtney started working on the paper she had due in English next week. There was nothing better than concentrating on a task to steady her nerves. She became so engrossed in her work that a sound to her right made her jump. The sight of her teacher brought a sense of relief.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I had to step out a minute."

"It's okay. So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about, Miss Hernandez?"

Miss Hernandez took the seat beside Courtney, her face serious. "Well, as I said last night, you were great. You really do have a gift, and I'd like to see you use it to its full potential."

"I don't get it..."

"Have you heard of Steven Miller?"

Courtney's heart raced as the name registered in her mind. "Are you talking about that producer who does a bunch of indie films?"

"That would be the one."

Courtney shifted in her seat and put her notebook away. "What about him?"

Miss Hernandez smiled, opening her brief case. She dug through the contents and pulled out a yellow sheet, which she gave to Courtney. "He's casting a new

project next month and there are plenty of roles available. I thought you might be interested in checking it out.”

Courtney blinked. This had to be a joke or something. “I’m sorry; did I just hear what I thought I heard? You want *me* to audition for this?”

“Why not? Courtney, you’re a very talented young lady, and I don’t see why you couldn’t get at least a small part in this. You’ve been talking about applying to a drama program and this would look great on your resume. Not to mention the pay could go a long way toward tuition.”

“Wow, I don’t know. I mean, I appreciate you thinking of me, but—”

“You don’t have to make a decision right now. Just promise you’ll think about it. It never hurts to keep your options open.”

Maybe she has a point.

Courtney just wasn’t sure how to bring the subject up at home without starting World War Three. She had to suppress a laugh as she imagined the looks on their faces. “Maybe.”

Miss Hernandez grinned. “Wonderful.” She glanced at her watch and stood. “I should be going now. Why don’t you think about it, and we’ll talk about this some more later?”

“Great.” Courtney navigated through the halls with her mind reeling at the possibilities Miss Hernandez’s offer brought. She pictured herself standing on a set, preparing for the director to call “action.” Could she really win a part?



Soul Catcher Serial Part Three: The Finale

By CP Bialois/Ed White

Chapter 5

Patricia wasted little time in opening the liquor cabinet and popping a bottle of wine open. The last thing she wanted to be right then was sober. She filled a water glass with the white grape flavored wine and made her way into the living room where she plopped into her soft recliner. She rested her head and fluttered her lips as she blew out a breath. Her gaze remained locked on a point on the ceiling as she thought over the last twenty-four hours of her life.

Above all other thoughts, the image of the homeless man kept coming to her. Aside from a familiar feeling about him, she didn’t understand why he was so prominent in her thoughts. Taking a mouthful of her wine, she enjoyed the breathless burn it brought to her. If nothing else, it helped her feel alive. “Not that that’s important right now...” She let her voice trail off and closed her eyes.

“Now, I wouldn’t say that, lady.”

Patricia bolted out of her chair, spilling her wine across her lap and sweater. She didn’t notice the spill as she spun around, trying to locate the speaker. “Who’s there? I’m

warning you... I’m a police officer...”

After a few seconds at not hearing a response to her, she set the glass aside and went to her desk. Though it was only a handful of feet away, she never stopped looking around. The last thing she wanted was to have some stranger get the jump on her any more than he already had.

When she reached her desk, she pulled open a side drawer and grabbed her revolver. It’s wasn’t her usual sidearm as that was at the station, but she knew it better than any other weapon. It was a gift from Uncle Jimmy...

“I’m armed and will shoot if you don’t come out with your hands up... NOW!” Her voice echoed in the small downstairs of her house, but no one responded. Taking the revolver with her, she moved through the living room an inch at a time. In all her years as a police officer, she never had to use her weapon and her hand shook from the possible need of it.

After a couple of minutes, she moved into the hallway that lead to the bathroom and kitchen. The steps leading to the second floor would have told her if someone tried to go up them, so she decided if anyone was in the house, they had to be in the kitchen or bathroom on the first floor. The thought didn’t give her as much comfort as she thought it would. While having limited space to search made it easier, the fact the intruder could’ve gone out a window and be waiting to ambush her from outside made it far more dangerous than what she was used to dealing with.

*Why is this happening to me?
All I wanted was a quiet career and
life.*

She quieted the question and focused on making sure her house was safe. That was the important thing.

For better or worse, she felt as in control as she could expect when the room spun. The sudden spinning and tilting of the floor caught her off guard and she fell against the wall with a pained yell. *Of all the stupid...* Patricia clamped her eyes closed for a couple of seconds to force things to settle down.

When she opened her eyes, the spinning had slowed but her ankle throbbed from her misstep. The earlier mouthful of wine was the first time she drank on over a year, and she regretted it. She had never been able to handle her drink and now she was forced to do that and deal with a possible intruder.

Her breathing hitched as only shot, quick breaths came to her and her heart pounded in her chest. "Damn it!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

She forced herself to take long, drawn out breathes and was surprised to find breathing was as easy as ever. Taking strength from that knowledge, she continued to breathe as thoughts of an intruder left her mind for the moment. Only when her heart and breathing returned to normal did she focus on searching her house.

Her search lasted little more than another minute as the windows and back door were locked and no one was in the house with her. Lowering her revolver from a ready position, she noticed her wet clothes for the first time. "Oh for the

love of... I'm such an idiot!" Turning, she made her way into the bathroom to wash off the remnants of her wine and change clothes.

As she was closing the door, she thought she saw a shadow move, but when she looked nothing was there. "I'm losing it big time." Shaking her head, she closed the door, pushed the curtain aside, and turned on the shower. The sound of the water helped to soother her some as she undressed and tossed her clothes into the hamper.

The spinning sensation the wine caused was long gone, but she couldn't stop thinking how it was similar to her scramble vision. Had she not known better, she would've sworn she wasn't drunk.

Letting out a sigh, she stepped into the shower as her mind went back to her mother berating her for claiming to see the dead.

"You're a disgrace! Are you trying to embarrass me?"

The words still stung. Even the four years following her mother's death hadn't brought any closure for Patricia. It was always about appearances and doing what she was told. Never about what she wanted or could've been helpful for Patricia.

As the warm water cascaded over her shoulders, Patricia found herself hoping her mother had a good seat next to the bar-b-cue.

The homeless man stood outside her bathroom door watching where the shadow had been a second before. Knowing he nearly cost the person he was supposed to protect to join the other stolen souls didn't sit well with him, but few

things were expected to on the road to redemption.

He rubbed his chin in thought as he stared at the location Gideon had entered, then left the house. No matter how many times he tried to understand how and why he would save Patricia's soul, he couldn't find the answer he needed. The Hidden Scriptures spoke of a balance needing to be maintained between God, Satan, and Gideon, so that meant defeating the third wasn't possible. All he could do was try to redirect Gideon to others until he learned how to protect Patricia.

If everything revolves around her, where does that leave me? The answer to his question was right in front of him. He could feel it. He just wished he could see it.

When he heard the shower stop, the homeless man turned toward the bathroom door and waited. This was the only way he could think of to prevent Gideon from outmaneuvering him. He didn't have long. The Soul Catcher was never one to take failure lightly.

Patricia let out a sigh as she stepped out of the shower. Though her tension had melted away under the hot water, she didn't feel comfortable enough not to look about as she toweled off. She never stopped feeling as though someone watched her every movement since she took her first sip of wine. As much as she hoped it was only her imagination, she knew it wasn't. The voice that had spoken to her sounded too real for her to forget.

Of all the times for me to see and hear things. Why now?

The question wasn't a new one for her, as she asked it every time

she saw, or thought she saw, a shadow move. Since it'd been years since she last experienced an episode of her scramble vision, she couldn't stop feeling as though something was picking on her. It felt like junior high all over again.

Patricia let out a shaky breath as memories of her adolescence came to her. She had made the mistake of trusting her friends about seeing Uncle Jimmy after he killed himself. The fact that she did so after years of her mother claiming such a thing couldn't happen and was scandalous, spoke more to her desperation to have the others like her. She was tired of walking around as though she mattered, while knowing all the while she was just another pizza-faced teen struggling to find her way.

A shiver raced up her back at the memory, displacing the comfort the shower had provided. There was a reason she tried to forget those days along with a majority of her family life. *Get a grip, woman! That happened twenty-five years ago!*

She blew her breathe out and tossed the towel off to the side, grabbing her clothes in a single motion. No matter how hard she tried, those memories refused to leave her since that man fell to his death in front of her. That didn't mean that she was giving up. She just needed to better equip herself to handle them.

"That would be a nice trick," she muttered under her breath as she adjusted her bra and grabbed a t-shirt. Once she finished, she stepped out of her bathroom and froze, her eyes wide. Her scream died in her throat.

The homeless man stood less than five feet away from her. He still wore the dirty yellow rain slicker, but his face was different. The beard and age was gone. "Hello, Patti-girl. I see you've been good."

The scream that had died found new life.

Chapter 6

The figure known as Gideon stepped from an alcove and slowly glided across the floor toward the walls of slots where he kept his boxes of souls. His movements left no sound as his robe moved as if nothing more than smoke. Once at the wall, his white hands pulled the wooden box from its place within his robe and placed it in the appropriate slot.

Though his hands appeared emaciated, they moved with a fluid strength as he set the box in one of the slots carved into the dark stone wall. For centuries, he had raced against his father and brother to acquire the most souls. He had accomplished that much, despite being out numbered thousands of followers to one.

It wasn't about power, but prestige. At some point he knew his father would allow him to return if he brought enough souls. It was for that reason he didn't differentiate between good and bad, light and dark auras. Siding with Lucifer had cost him, but soon he would reclaim his rightful position. When the horsemen rode, he would follow in their wake and collect all the souls he could carry before offering those he had acquired.

There was one he desired above all others, as her kind were considered delicacies. Her time was

near and he refused to be sidetracked further. He would add her soul to his collection before the sunset in the mortal world. That, he swore to himself.

Oh great. That didn't go so well. The homeless man stepped closer to Patricia with his arms extended. "Patti-girl, if you keep screaming, they'll take you away where I can't help you."

Patricia's next scream jammed in her throat. The fear at having someone in her home *after* she searched nearly caused her to become overwhelmed, but that face and voice...

She forced herself to swallow the choked off scream. "It can't be... who are you?"

He smiled the same sheepish grin he used to before his suicide. What remained of his disguise fell away. "It's me, Patti-girl. Uncle Jimmy."

Patricia stared at him for a few seconds. The time took any hope he had of being welcomed away. Lowering his arms, he nodded. "I don't blame you for being mad. It's just—"

"You sonofabitch! You left me! Do you have any idea what you put me through?"

Of course I do. He didn't say that, choosing to let her unload her anger and resentment at him.

Patricia's emotions crashed over him, but that one struck him like a physical blow. "I'm sorry, Patti-girl. I really am. I didn't know you could see spirits, and I sure as hell didn't want you to see me die."

"Then why did you?" Though it was a question, it sounded more

like an accusation. Despite the tears flowing down her face, Patricia's eyes remained focused and locked on Jimmy.

He wanted to tell her the reason. He really did, but how could one tell their niece that they were threatened with accusations of child molesting just because the child preferred them over her own mother? He was in enough trouble for appearing as himself to Patricia. Telling her about something that wasn't her concern or place to know about would result in him being taken away.

"Patti-girl, I'd tell you if I could..."

"But you won't?"

He shook his head. "I can't." The words came out as little more than a whisper.

A silence settled on them for a few seconds as neither one knew what to say or do. Patricia broke the silence.

"So... why are you here?"

Jimmy paused for a moment before letting out a defeated breath. "I can't say. You just have to trust me."

Jimmy knew he asked a lot from his niece, but he didn't know what else he could say.

Patricia eyed him with the same suspicious eye he had grown accustomed to seeing from her mother when he was a child. Pat of him wished he knew for sure where his sister had gone when she passed. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't hear what Patricia asked him. "What was that, Patti-girl?"

Patricia rolled her eyes. "Why are you here?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Does it have to do with last night? It does, doesn't it?"

Jimmy couldn't help but smile at her question. Even though he didn't have the ability to do so, he thought he could see her putting things in order. "I can't tell you much, but let me ask you things. Have you seen a shadow in the corner of your eye lately?"

Patricia opened her mouth to answer, only to close it in thought.

Jimmy recognized her look and leaned closer. "You can see the dead, but not angels. Am I right?"

She paused for a few seconds before shaking her head. "I don't know. I never thought about it before." She swayed on her feet as she finished speaking.

Jimmy recognized her reaction as what she did whenever he appeared or left her presence. "Patti-girl, what is it?"

Patricia wanted to answer, but it was enough of a struggle for her to keep from falling over as her scramble vision returned.

She thought back to what Uncle Jimmy said about seeing dead people and not angels as he separated into four images and the world spun. There was something different about it this time, but she couldn't figure out what it was. For the briefest of seconds, she thought she saw a black shape behind her uncle, but by the time she manages to open her mouth, it and Uncle Jimmy were gone.

Was that a scream? She tried to think, but the sound ended as quickly as it sounded.

The scramble vision faded just as quickly, but the nausea

remained. She swallowed a couple of times to quell her stomach. Thinking something was amiss, she took a step forward. She stepped on what felt like sand and looked down.

"What the...?" *Salt? Why is there salt on the floor?*

The white powder ran in a curved line to both sides of her in a—

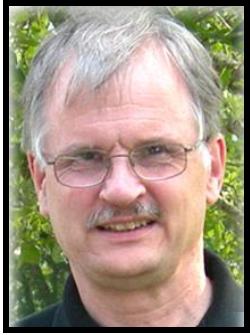
A circle? How did a circle of salt appear?

As she turned to follow the white line, her stomach chose to empty itself. The force of her retch doubled her over and with the scramble vision dizziness still affecting her, she took a step to keep from falling. She stepped on a shoe she hadn't seen, causing a shooting pain to rocket up her leg. With a strangled cry, she fell and hit her head on the base of the wall.

Everything was quiet as Patricia remained still, her gaze locked on the wall on the other side of the bathroom door. As if summoned, a dark shadow appeared over her and touched her forehead.

A strange sensation filled her like she was being stretched thin and pulled through a funnel. A second later, she found herself looking down at her body laying half out of the salt circle before being placed in a wooden box next to a purple wooden looking stick. Somehow, she knew the purple stick was her Uncle Jimmy and that he failed to help her yet again.

The last sound she heard was the creaking of the box's hinges before darkness enveloped her.



Black Friday By Rick Weber

It was very early on a cold and damp Friday, Black Friday -the day after Thanksgiving and Art North was trying to jump start his old Honda Civic with his wife, Marie's, almost as old Dodge Mini-van. He connected the cables to the Honda's battery and jumped into car praying that it would start. Luck was on his side and the Civic kicked over on the first try. Art was thankful for that because he had to be at work by 4:30 AM. Art was a salesman at a nearby big box store. He got the cables off both vehicles and closed up Marie's van after putting the jumper cables in the trunk of his Honda. With that done, he headed to the store.

This was Art's fourth Black Friday at the store where he worked in the electronics department. He did not always work in retail sales. Art had been a human resources (HR) manager at a local factory and lost his job more than three years earlier when the company closed the plant as a downsizing measure at the start of the recession. Art landed his new job first as a temporary worker for the holiday season but he became a regular full time employee when he had the best sales record of anyone in his

department that Christmas. Art felt lucky just to have a job. The area where he lived with his family in the Northeast had been particularly hard hit by the economic downturn. No other HR positions had become available locally and relocation was not feasible. Marie worked as an elementary school teacher and had been with the local school board for over twenty years. Both Art and Marie had strong ties to their community having grown up there even attending a local college where they met. They married shortly after graduation.

Art focused on the slippery wet roadway in front of him as he drove to the store. As Art pulled into the mall parking lot, he saw that a long line of customers had staged themselves at the store's main outside entrance. Art parked near the employees' entrance and went inside to clock in. He put his overcoat and lunch in his locker and headed out to the sales floor after checking his appearance in a mirror on his way out. His thinning gray hair was combed neatly and his store name tag was pinned evenly on his sport jacket lapel. He was ready for the opening volley of the Christmas rush. He knew that the next four weeks were crunch time not just for the store but also for him. Marie and Art were depending on his commissions from the Holiday season to help them break even with their finances for the year.

In his assigned department, Art could see his boss, Walt De Witt, waiting for him. His coworkers had yet to arrive there. Walt was anxious himself. Just like Art, he needed a good bonus check to survive. Walt greeted Art cordially by asking him, "Are you ready?" "Of

course," Art quickly replied and then Walt went over the Black Friday promotions with him. Walt was glad to have Art working for him because Art was both dependable and a good salesman. In fact, Art was still the best salesman in their department. Two of Art's four co-workers are not so enthusiastic about their jobs. Why Walt put them on the schedule to open on Black Friday Art did not know. Five minutes before the doors opened, the two stragglers, Joe and Tony, showed up on the floor. With no time for Walt to chastise them, the doors opened and an onslaught of humanity was headed their way. Three customers came right to Art, who was at the cashier's counter. All three had been in a week earlier and Art gave them information on some promotional items which would be on sale. Each of them had grabbed several different items from the displays. They knew what they wanted and Art was glad that they remembered him. It was shaping up to be a good day for him. Sales were brisk for everyone on the floor, even for Joe and Tony. Art elected to work an extended shift on Black Friday when Walt asked him since he could use the money and he knew that Walt could not rely on Joe and Tony to close the sales as fast as him.

Art was glad to be busy. It kept his mind off of things at home. His relationship with Marie was solid. His younger son, Sean, was the light of their lives; an honor student in his freshman year of high school looking forward to becoming an engineer after college. The problem was with their older son, David. He was a junior with another year and a half until graduation. While Sean was a giving child, David was always demanding.

When times were good, David always got what he wanted; a new computer and a cell phone, just to name a few. Even though he was sixteen years old and could hold down an after school job, David chose not to work. On the other hand Sean, at fourteen, hustled to make his own spending money; cutting lawns in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter. Sean even put some money aside for college. Sean knew that his parents were strapped but David kept begging them for everything even though he fully was aware of their situation. David stayed out late many nights past his curfew. Art and Marie had spoken to him and even disciplined him on more than one occasion without success. Sometimes when he came home late, Art and Marie had waited up for him and found David to be inebriated or high on something when he walked in the door. They confronted him each time and each time he denied using any alcohol or drugs. Lately, Art and Marie noticed some things missing from their home such as an antique ring, an heirloom from Marie's grandmother. Like many parents, their suspicions about David's substance abuse problems were becoming confirmed and now they were discussing what to do about it.

Marie got out of bed about an hour after Art had left. It was her usual time to get up anyway. She generally used it to make lunches, grade papers, and get ready for work. Since schools were closed for the long Thanksgiving weekend, she would be doing other things on a personal level. Marie, Art, Sean, and even David spent Thanksgiving at the home of Marie's parents. Art had no close family members in the area. His parents were deceased

for some time and his siblings were scattered across the country. David stayed for dinner but left right after when a friend called him. This led to another late night for her and Art with Art needing to get up early to be at the store. David got home about 1:00 AM but was too intoxicated to have a coherent conversation with by them. He staggered up to his room and fell asleep on top of the bedcovers where he still sleeping was when Marie got up later that morning and checked on him. Sean was also sleeping but had plans to start work later in the morning at a Christmas tree stand to make money for Christmas presents. Sean had stayed up with his parents for a time while they waited for David. Art and Marie told Sean to go to bed before it got to be too late knowing of his plans to work.

Marie sat at the kitchen table with her laptop in front of her. She was searching the internet for counseling services to help them with David. With the missing jewelry from the house, she and Art knew that rehabilitation may be David's next stop but they needed to go through some other steps first. The school district furnished her with some leads and now it was up to her and Art to find a solution even if David was resistant. Visiting the various websites made Marie cry. She asked herself, as she had done a number of times before, how could two boys raised by the same parents under the same roof be so different; Sean so kind and giving with David so selfish and demanding.

After an hour, Marie could not bear the process any longer and turned off her computer. She got

dressed and came back to the kitchen to make breakfast. With the coffee pot brewing, she heard Sean behind her saying, "Good morning, Mom." She turned to him and smiled saying, "Good morning, sleepy head. What can I get you for breakfast?" Sean was beginning to show signs of growing up and with his changing voice he told Marie, "A couple of fried eggs and toast would be great." Marie fried a couple of eggs for herself along with the two she was making for Sean while he made toast for both of them. They ate together as Sean discussed his plans for today. He asked Marie, "Can you drop me off at the tree stand by nine? I don't want to be late. Mr. Smith wants me to help him set up a display." "No problem," she replied as she was cleaning the skillet. She got Sean to the stand run by their neighbor, Bob Smith -a nursery owner, promptly at nine. As she kissed Sean on the cheek, she wished him luck on his new venture before returning home to find that David was still in bed.

With the house somewhat to herself, she called a counseling service, which happened to be open, and made an appointment for early the following week for her and Art to meet to talk about David. Her initial conversation not only confirmed that David had a substance abuse problem but that from what Marie outlined about David's recent behavior, the problem was getting worse. After she hung up with the service, Marie just sat at the kitchen table and sobbed. The thing which ran over and over again in her mind was at sixteen David was throwing his life away with her and Art almost helplessly being forced to watch. After she got her emotions in check, Marie cleaned up the kitchen and

put away some serving pieces she had taken to her parents' house for Thanksgiving.

It was after 11:00 AM when David finally woke up. He came down to the kitchen to find Marie going over the monthly bills at the table. "Good morning," he said with a groggy slur to his voice. Marie turned to him and snapped, "Where were you last night? We were worried about you." "I was just out with the guys hanging out," came his vague reply. Marie just shook her head knowing that this would be the best answer she would get from him. She also knew that her and Art would need to confront David together after they saw the counselor. "What are you doing today?" Marie asked him.

"I am going out to the mall with a few people to do some window shopping," was his once again vague response. "Well, I am going over to your grandparents to help out with Grandma for a bit while Grandpa does some errands," Marie said. Marie's mother had Alzheimer's disease and Marie went over as much as she could to give her father a respite. With that, Marie put on her coat and told David, "There's leftover turkey in the refrigerator if you want something to eat." David could only mutter okay as she walked out the door to her van. As she got into the van, Marie only hoped that nothing else would be missing from the house when she returned.

Although he was having a long day, Art was making a lot of sales. It was now noon and he called Marie on his lunch break to see how things were going. She was still on her way to her parents' place and gave Art the rundown about appointment with the family

counselor along with her conversation with David after he got out of bed. Art and Marie commiserated and made some plans for confronting David about his issues after their meeting with the counselor. "I never thought that we would have to go through something like this," Art told her in a shaking voice. "I know," Marie responded quietly as she pulled in front the house. "I used to wonder how parents could let their kids get hooked on drugs before this happened to us," Marie felt the tears well up again in her eyes. "We'll see what the counselor says next week and then we may have to drop the hammer on David," Art resolutely said to her. Before Art could go on, Marie cut him short after seeing her father waving to her from the front door. "Art, I have to go. Daddy is waiting for me." "I know," Art replied. "I have to get back to work myself. I should be home about six. We'll talk some more then." On a lighter note to change the mood, Marie told Art, "I hope you know that we're having leftovers for dinner." "I wouldn't expect anything else," Art said with a laugh, "I love you." "And I love you, too," Marie responded as she hung up.

At about 5:30 PM, Marie's father got home from his rounds and Marie told him about spending the afternoon going through family photographs with her mother. They both sadly noted that Marie's mother was succumbing more and more to her disease. Marie hugged her father and left. She got home to find David gone, which she expected. As she began to get things out of the refrigerator for dinner she heard a knock at the door. At the same time, Art finished up at the store for the day and was

headed home. As he pulled into their block, he saw a police car parked in their driveway. His first thought was what David has done now. He hurried inside and saw Marie seated on the living room sofa crying profusely. Two officers were with her. One, a female, was sitting beside her with her male partner standing nearby. "What happened?" Art asked in a stressed tone. "There's been an accident," the male officer started to say. Before the officer could finish, Art butted in, "What happened to David?" Then he heard Marie cry out, "It's not David! It's Sean! He's dead!" With that Art's knees buckled and the male officer guided him to a nearby winged back chair. "Mr. North," the male officer continued in a calm quiet tone, "Sean was struck at the Christmas Tree stand by an elderly woman who had a stroke while driving her car down Main Street. He was hit along with a man who was there to buy a tree. They both died on impact. We are sorry for your loss." The officers stayed for awhile giving Art and Marie the information they would need for the undertaker to claim Sean's body. Both Art and Marie then went over to Marie's parents to break the news to them. David was nowhere to be found and his cell phone was turned off. They left him no message. Marie's father was devastated crying uncontrollably while her mother looked at them in a state of confusion. The rest of the weekend was spent making arrangements for Sean's funeral and David did not make it home until Sunday night when Art and Marie gave him the news. David cried but they did not believe his tears.

Sean was buried the following Tuesday in a plot near Art's parents'

graves. The funeral service and burial were crowded with relatives, friends, and Sean's classmates. All deeply mourned Sean's passing. David stayed close to home for Sean's wake and burial but stepped out for some unexplained short periods of time returning home each time under the influence of something. After the funeral, David again disappeared but Art and Marie had too much going on to chase after him. At their home, Art and Marie graciously received the other mourners. Their neighbors, many had known Sean his whole life, brought over large servings of food for those who were there. This was viewed as quite generous by Art and Marie since some of them were also having tough economic times. Walt De Witt came to extend his condolences and told Art when he was away from the other visitors to take as much time off from work as he needed. Art thanked Walt and told him that he would be back to work the following day but would need to take some time off later in the week to attend to some other matters. Walt's reply to Art was, "Just let me know and we will work with you at the store."

Two days after Sean's burial, Art and Marie got in to see the family counselor, Dr. Charles St. Clair a psychologist specializing in substance abuse. Dr. St. Clair got right to the point. "David needs in-patient treatment. His unexplained absences and under the influence behavior when he comes home both indicate that something serious is going on with him. We won't be able to know the extent of his problems until we have the opportunity to talk with him. I know that this is hard on both of you

especially with the loss of his brother, Sean. David is sixteen and you as his parents can have him hospitalized without his consent. We can help you with this by having an intervention. This will be difficult for you and, we will work with you at each step. You are not alone." With that both Art and Marie sobbed together dreading the thought of losing two sons. Dr. St. Clair gave them information for the center and a contact number for them to call when David finally showed up at home.

The following day as he was sleeping off another stint of partying, three large men came into David's room, woke him up, and spirited him out of the house to a waiting van passed his parents who were crying in the living room. "Where are you taking me?" screamed David at the top of his lungs. "To some place safe," said one of the men. Initial assessments at the rehabilitation center revealed that David had a serious drug problem and that he would be an in-patient for an unspecified time. Art and Marie faced this with silent resignation and hoped for the best. The good thing was that David was still a minor and could not sign himself out of the treatment program. He had to face his problems.

During the rest of the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Art and Marie grieved for the loss of Sean and prayed for David. Art worked long hours at the store while Marie spent time with her parents when she was not in school teaching. It was a long painful interlude for them. A week after the funeral, Marie went into Sean's room for the first time and the shoe box where Sean kept his

extra money and valuables was empty. Marie sat down on Sean's bed and cried. David had robbed his dead brother. Art also broke down himself later when he got home from work and Marie told him. Still, they had to continue in the Holiday spirit. With Marie in charge of the school's Christmas pageant and Art putting on his best face at the store for the customers, they both felt that this was the most difficult Christmas they ever would have. Grieving for Sean and waiting for more information about David made thoughts of celebrating the Season the last things on their minds.

Dr. St. Clair told Art and Marie at a family counseling session that David was proving to be a hard case most notably in group therapy; denying he had a problem and blaming Art and Marie for his situation. Although he could not go into specifics with them because of doctor-patient confidentiality, Dr. St. Clair told them not to give up on David yet. Their health insurance from the school board allowed for a certain amount of in-patient care so for the time being they would not be hit with huge bills from the hospital. At this point according to treatment protocol, they could not have contact with David. For the time being, Marie and Art were not anxious themselves to see David.

As the Christmas Day drew closer, Marie and Art, when he could, spent their free time with Marie's parents. Her mother's memory was fading but she still asked, "Where are David and Sean?" Marie and Art went all out and decorated her parents' house not just for her mother and father but, for themselves, as well. Lights, a train garden, and a large tree with

the many ornaments her parents had collected over the years graced the living room. A festive wreath was on the front door and lighted candles were in every window of the house. Even with her declining condition, Marie's mother helped address Christmas cards and strange as it may seem, Marie's father and Marie got some sense of purpose by explaining to her who some of the people were whom she had forgotten as she addressed the envelopes. Art was glad that Walt De Witt listened to him outside of work while he vented his frustrations with David and his loss of Sean. As it turned out, Walt was that one true friend to Art, a friend most people never have and Walt continued to help Art through this most difficult time.

On Christmas morning, Art had his first day off since Sean's funeral and he went with Marie early to her parents' place. Their own home was dark and unadorned. They had no one there with whom to share the holiday. The place evoked pain. They would never get over the loss of Sean. As for David, they still had not had any direct contact with him but Dr. St. Clair had told them that David was making some progress. This was a sign of hope but Marie and Art knew that for David there was a long way to go.

They entered Marie's parents' house to find her mother having a good day and her father upbeat. They exchanged gifts, ate a hearty breakfast, and made calls to family members living outside of the area. It was the first time that both Marie and Art had smiled and laughed in almost a month.

Indeed, this Christmas was the most difficult one Art and Marie would ever have. The best thing to

come of it was a stronger bond between them and greater love for each other as they looked to the New Year. This was the best gift they could have given each other.



Fang Fest (Part Two) **By DiVitto Kelly**

A lone individual, tall, late thirties and physically imposing, approached the counter. Everyone else had apparently gone into the auditorium to watch the latest film. His voice was deep and measured.

"I would like . . . a large popcorn without the artificial butter please, a Vernors, very chilled of course, and . . ." He paused.

Kirkland turned around, keeping his cool as he prepared the popcorn. He glanced back breaking a half smile.

"One chunky teenager." The man's voice oozed of sinful arrogance.

Kirkland turned and charged towards the man. Before he could utter a word, the man thrust out his right arm, sending Kirkland to the floor.

The vampire spoke up again. "Oh, I see you're out of those, Mr. Kirkland."

"Where's my son, you prick!"

I believe he's watching the movie with my niece. Don't worry, she's harmless. Besides, she's already had her full after dining on one of your flabby locals."

Kirkland balled up his meaty fist and lunged again at the vampire. "You better not hurt him you mother--"

The man grabbed Kirkland's hand and slammed it down hard on the Formica counter. "Mother?" the vampire replied, peering into the eyes of Kirkland, his hand now throbbing in pain. "Oh, I can almost assure you he will end up like his mother. She was quite tasty, by the way. Type AB-positive I believe; very rare you know."

The deacon shifted next to his friend, holding him back. Tears welled up in Kirkland's beet-red fuming glare. "Not here, okay?" A handful of toothy henchmen appeared behind the vampire.

"That's right, Deacon Walters," said the vampire, glancing at his watch. "I say let's all enjoy a predawn breakfast. You bring the Count Chocula and I'll supply the bloody Marys or Trevors in this case."

Kirkland boiled over as the vampire entourage entered the auditorium. "I'll burn this fucking place to the ground and kill you sons of bitches so help me God."

"No, we can't do that, Kirk," said Deacon Walters, restraining his friend. "Your boy's in there along with a whole bunch of unsuspecting people. You and I probably know at least a third of them in there. We've got to kill 'em, but minimize collateral damage."

“I’ve got some stakes in my trunk,” said Kirkland.

“Unless you’ve got yourself a hundred, that isn’t going to work.”

“But we’ve got to do something,” cried Kirkland. “They’ve got my son, and all those other people!”

Two men exited the auditorium and stood by the door now guarding the entrance.

Kirkland stormed over. “I need to see if my son is alright!” barked Kirkland.

“That wasn’t very polite,” said one of the men, a bit rounded around the midsection. He had a red stain around his lips and teeth.

“Oh shit, they’re feasting on the audience!” Kirkland moved closer. “Let me in, damn you!”

Another vampire, dressed in a classic light blue striped seersucker suit, grabbed Kirkland by the shirt collar, lifting him off the floor. He proceeded to toss him into a large gray plastic garbage can. “I think it’s time we take these two annoying people out.”

Deacon Walters limped over and helped Kirkland off the floor. He whispered something in his ear. The two backed away slowly then bolted for the basement. Surprised, the two vampires got a slow start chasing them.

Both men ducked inside the supply room and locked the door. “So what’s your plan?” Kirkland asked, breathing heavily. Wham! The two jolted back as the vampires pounded against the door. “You do have a plan, right?”

“Let’s get ready to rumble,” sneered the deacon. From under his full-length black coat, Walters pulled out a sawed off shotgun. The

two vampires busted through the door and were about to utter something annoyingly stupid when Walters blew a hole through each of them. He unsheathed a well-tuned machete and sliced their heads off neat and clean, finishing the job off like a seasoned pro.

“Holy Christ!” yelled Kirkland. He stammered for a moment then made a B-line over to the industrial sink and heaved.

The deacon patted him on the back. “Don’t worry; it gets easier.”

Kirk rinsed off his face then spat out a mouthful of water. He stood up. His friend handed him a clean rag. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” Kirkland finished drying off his pale face, the color slowly returning.

“A man of the cloth, and a man of action, I like to say.”

“So what now?” asked Kirkland as he watched his friend clean off the blade and slide it back in the sheath.

“First of all, let’s drag this garbage into the back of the supply room and cover things up,” said the deacon. “You know how I like to be tidy.”

“Oh yeah,” replied Kirkland, who recalled as an alter server in high school being sent home packing on a few occasions for showing up in sloppy attire or dirty shoes. He finally got it together after his dad opened up a can of whoop-ass.

“First and foremost, I need to get to my truck. I’ve got a healthy supply of weaponry I’ve been just itching to try out.”

“Like what?” asked Kirkland.

“Got a hand-made crossbow courtesy of one Mr. Kirkland with

loads of arrow-sized wooden spikes.”

“So that’s why you asked me to make that for you, you sly devil,” replied Kirkland. “I remember now. You told me you were going to use it for that vermin problem around the church. Come to think of it, that was rather peculiar.”

“It’s still vermin that I want to eradicate,” said Deacon Walters, “So either way, thanks my friend for the fine craftsmanship.”

“So how do we get to your truck; we’ll be seen for sure,” said Kirkland.

“I have an idea,” he replied as he glanced over at the headless henchmen.

“Oh no,” stuttered Kirkland, shifting his eyes over to the stretched out tarp. “I am not going take the clothes off a dead vampire, no way Jose. That is just too disgusting.”

The deacon strode over to the blue vinyl tarps and picked it up. “Don’t think that will be a problem.” Unveiled were two sets of suits, minus their inhabitants, nothing more than a streak of ash. “See? These SOBs make it easy for us.”

The two men changed quickly. Kirkland resembled a full-sized Carl Kolchak, the lightweight garment snug on his husky frame. The deacon, looking svelte, could pass as James Bond’s dad.

“Okay, now let’s keep our heads and walk outside like we own the place, got it?” ordered Deacon Walters.

“Tell that to the guys you just whacked,” smirked Kirkland, who reminded his friend he did actually own the place. They zipped across

the lobby and were ready to bolt outside when a voice called out.

“Where are you two guys going?” The vampire was snacking on popcorn, spilling some on the floor. He tossed a kernel high in the air ready to devour it but it ricocheted off one of his protruding canines. “This artificial butter isn’t too bad.”

“Oh, our popcorn doesn’t contain anything artificial,” replied Kirkland. The deacon gave his friend a jab in the ribs. “I mean we’re just two average vampires going out for a smoke.”

“You know all these smoking laws are a great big pain in the keister,” added Deacon Walters. “You never had to deal with this stuff in the nineteenth century!”

The man burst out laughing, spewing popcorn everywhere then coughed. “That’s a good one . . . what’s a keister?”

The two men stepped outside and scuttled over to the deacon’s white pick-up. He chirped the remote and the two got in. “Nice adlib my friend,” said Kirkland.

Walters unzipped the duffle bag in the back seat revealing three dozen-plus wood stakes, each the width of a quarter and of standard arrow length. “We can take out a bunch of these cretins for sure,” said the deacon, “But since you’ve invited what appears to be every damn vampire on the east coast, we’ll need a plan B.”

“What the hell can we do, call the cops? The army?” Kirkland apologized again, not realizing what mayhem he may have brought to his beloved hometown.

The proverbial light bulb was beginning to shine above the

deacon followed by a budding grin. “How’s your water supply here?” inquired the deacon.

“The what? Water supply? What kind of a question is that? Kirkland was irked and running out of patience. “Look Art, I’ve got to save my son; it’s all I have left.”

Deacon Walters placed his hand on Kirk’s left shoulder. “We’ll save him, but I need to know about the water. Trust me, it’s important.”

“We have the private storage tanks like most of the businesses in this area. You remember after the main line broke, our water got contaminated with seawater so we’ve been doing it this way for almost two months now.”

“That’s good news.”

“What do you mean, good news,” barked Kirk. It’s been a colossal pain in the ass and expensive too! Why is the . . .” Deacon Walters cut him off.

A young man decked out in a white suit, vintage early 1960’s with a powder blue dress shirt underneath, approached the passenger side of the ruck. “Hand me the crossbow and a stake,” said the deacon. Kirkland obliged. He quickly placed his windbreaker over the weapon, concealing it. “Stay cool.”

Kirkland rolled down the window. “What can I do you for?”

“Looks like you two are missing the movie.”

“Oh I wouldn’t say we’re missing it,” replied Deacon Walters, “We’re living it.” He fired on the man, killing him instantly. Blood splattered all over the white garb, now resembling a Jackson Pollack painting. Another vampire

approaching the driver’s side door exhibited his pointy choppers and began pounding on the window.

“Another stake please, Kirk.” The deacon lined up the stake then thrust the door open, knocking the man to the ground. The vampire’s eyes burned red as he landed on the hard, wet pavement.

“You don’t mess with a man’s truck, blood sucker.” Thunk! This time, the stake pierced right between the man’s eyes. The vampire squirmed and cried out, contorting in agony. Kirkland handed his friend another stake.

“Observe: Load, lock, aim, and fire -- repeat technique with pleasure.”

Deacon Walters aimed the stake directly at the creature’s heart. Thunk! In minutes, the vampire evaporated, leaving nothing more than flattened threads. “What a shame.”

“What’s that?” asked Kirkland.

“He had such a nice suit.” The deacon grinned. “You know the best thing about using stakes is the killing process. It’s quick, but not too quick. These bastards deserve a little suffering.”

Kirkland was taken aback at his friend’s joyous yet venomous tone. He paused before peeking at his watch. “Damn, we’ve got one last film on tap.” The theater owner reached into his pocket and pulled out his cheat sheet. “Nosferatu is only about eighty minutes long so whatever you’re planning, we’ve got to make it quick.”

“First of all, hand me about three more stakes,” said the deacon. He counted off the vampires storming in their direction. “I hope you don’t mind, but I

tweaked your craftsmanship a little bit. The deacon lined up the crossbow and launched three stakes at once, shooting them out like porcupine quills. In seconds, the trio of vampires bit (and turned) to dust.

“Let’s load up and get back into the theater,” advised the deacon, who suddenly heard the familiar shriek in the night sky. A vampire bat the size of a crow strafed the two men. It circled around then plunged directly at Kirkland, who shielded his face when his friend unsheathed the machete and guillotined the flying vermin in half. Blood rained down all over Kirkland, totally grossing him out.

The deacon handed his friend a handkerchief. “Is there another way in?”

“There’s a back entrance,” said Kirkland, wiping himself off. “My God this is insane.”

The two made a wide circle, hiding in and out behind trees, shrubs, and a rotted picket fence. There was a small light above the back door entrance. Two men were standing guard, smoking cigarettes and making small talk.

“What do we do now?” asked Kirkland.

“We walk up to them, shoot the breeze, shoot them, and enter,” he replied.

“You make it sound so easy,” said Kirkland. “I wish I had your confidence.”

The deacon placed his hand on Kirkland’s shoulder. “Look, I know how worried you are about Trevor, but we’ll save him, trust me.”

“How the hell could you possibly know, Art? For all we know he could

be dead already and there’s nothing I can do. I’ve already lost my wife to these monsters; I can’t lose . . .”

Deacon Walter’s demeanor turned to stone. He grabbed a deep breath and proceeded to spill his guts to his friend.

“As you may or may not know, a deacon can marry.” Kirkland knew that already. He’d heard bits and pieces about his friend’s past. No real concrete details, more rumors than anything. The deacon hesitated, glancing up at the full moon, alone in the overcast night sky.

“I was married, just like you. Marlene was her name, beautiful woman -- loving, good sense of humor, and rocket science smart. We met at Dartmouth.”

Kirkland knelt down on one knee. “What happened?”

“We took a fall weekend road trip to this particular little seaside town. She and I had done some shopping, did hayrides, bought cider, the whole nine yards. We stayed at a quaint bed and breakfast not too far from the old burned down church. That first night, Marlene couldn’t sleep. She made herself a tea and went out on the front porch and sat down on the hanging rocking chair. I remember it suddenly got chilly in that Victorian house. I think the heat broke or something. Anyway, I woke up, shivering. When I couldn’t find her, I got nervous. Then I looked out the back window. I saw her . . . standing outside all alone in her white nightgown. I rushed downstairs and out into the back yard. I called her name but she didn’t answer. It was dead quiet. I approached her and . . . touched her shoulder. She turned. Her eyes

were burning red. She tried to drive those canines into my neck. I pushed her to the ground and ran towards an old shed. I locked the door but she busted it wide open. I picked up the first thing I could find, and, um . . .”

The deacon brandished the machete, the wooden handle scuffed and permanently stained with blood. “She attacked me.” Art stammered. “I didn’t know what to do. It all seemed like some horrid nightmare. I raised it up and . . .”

“Kirkland stood there, stunned.

“I killed her.” He started sobbing.

“No you didn’t,” said Kirkland, placing his hand on Deacon Walter’s shoulder. “Those bastard vampires killed her. You had no choice. If you did nothing you’d be one of them too. Probably a little slower than most with your football injury.”

Both men managed a half smile. “Art, you and I are going to eradicate our town tonight of those fanged fuckers. We WILL get justice, you hear me?”

Deacon Walters perked up. “Deep breath first, my friend. We can’t lose our heads, deal?” Kirk agreed, but was still seething. Here they were, two men – both decent and hard-working, their lives both rocked to the core by vampires. And now, everything was going to come down to the next eighty-plus minutes.

“Stay sharp,” replied the deacon. He stopped. “Just one thing, Kirk. I’d really appreciate it if you would curtail the cursing – the salty language is beneath you.”

Kirkland apologized, promising to keep his language in the PG

range. “Alright Art, let’s go kick some vampire . . . can I say ass?”

“Ass is perfectly acceptable, but the f-bombs . . . no mas.”

The two men approached the vampires, holding court under a metal awning. One of the vampires sporting a devil red three-piece suit handed out a colorful observation to Kirkland’s bloody appearance. “Messy eater, aren’t we?”

“I hit a gusher on some fat guy. Got a permanent taste of Arby’s now on my freaking tongue.”

“Man do I hate it when that happens,” boasted the other, recollecting about a past ‘dinner casualty’ who’s blood tasted like Sweet Baby Ray’s barbeque sauce. “Never dine on someone who’s just left a rib joint.”

The other man flicked his cigarette onto the grass and was about to divulge a comical blood-sucking encounter with a sumo wrestler in Osaka when the deacon delivered a pair of deli perfected slices just below both vampire’s Adam’s apples. The two men dropped to the ground with a thud.

Kirkland gagged as a fountain of blood poured from their necks. He covered his mouth then reached for the set of keys, sidestepping the crimson puddle to unlock the door. “Uh, after you.”

“Actually, you first,” replied the deacon. “Let me clean up this mess first and then I’ll join you in a sec.”

Kirkland strode inside. The seldom-used entrance smelled musty. Twenty feet down the hall he could make out a dim yellow light above a door that led to the back stage. With his friend preoccupied, Kirkland ambled forward.

He looked at his watch. “Damn.” Kirkland estimated they had about an hour to save his son and kill the vampires before sunrise, who no doubt were punctual when it came to sunrises. Tardy and you were toast. You’d have to be a really, really dumb vampire to get that wrong.

Kirkland heard the back door squeak open. Deacon Walters tucked something into his pocket then called out. “Kirk, are you there?”

Over here,” replied Kirkland. “Everything cleaned up?”

The deacon was half paying attention, more preoccupied with the buildings’ logistics. “Sorry. Yep, everything is nice and tip top.”

“What took you so long?”

“You know how thorough I like to be,” he replied. “By the way, where does this lead to -- the auditorium?”

“Yeah,” replied Kirkland. “There are a couple of changing rooms, the stage, and then of course, the back of the movie screen.”

“How’s your insurance on this place? Is the building up to code?” he inquired.

“Good on both,” replied Kirk, puzzled. “I had to update the alarm and fire sprinkler system, along with some of the wiring . . . where are you going with this?” The light bulb suddenly gleamed on. Kirkland’s ah-ha moment. “Torch the place, barbeque the vampires, save son and people, ta da!”

“It’s an idea,” said the deacon. “Look, I know you love this place, but . . .”

“It’s an easy decision, Art,” replied Kirk. “We’ve got to save

everyone and kill those mother ffff fathers.”

“Well done, which is how the vampires will be in due time.”

“Sounds like a grand plan,” said a voice. Another voice seconded the motion, followed by a third.

The only thing Deacon Walters and Kirkland could make out in the dingy light was their gleaming white teeth. Art raised the crossbow but the stake slipped out of his perspiring hand. He bent down to pick it up when he was tackled by one of the vampires. Kirkland jumped on top, grabbed the man by the collar and tossed him aside.

Another vampire attacked, blindsiding Kirkland to the ground. The whisper-thin hipster, clad from head to toe in Hollister, swooped down on him and flashed his meager fangs. Kirkland pushed the lightweight off then retrieved from his jacket pocket a 9-millimeter Glock pistol. Seconds later, the theater owner plugged the inhuman with four bullets directly into the chest. The vampire fell to the floor, dead.

A burly vampire wearing oil-stained overalls stormed over towards Deacon Walters. He reached out with his bare hands and lifted the man up, slamming him against the dank brick wall.

The deacon grimaced in pain before calling out to his friend. “Little help, please.”

Kirkland rushed over and snatched a pair of wooden stakes from the duffle bag. The vampire was inches away from the deacon’s neck when Kirkland reached up and jammed them both deep into each side of the behemoth vampire’s neck. The tubby slug of a man fell

to the ground. His agonizing voice gurgled as his throat filled with blood. Kirkland finished off the vampire with a trifecta of point-blank shots to his heart. He fired again but realized he was out of ammo.

“So sad – you seem to be shooting blanks,” voiced a tall, seasoned vampire, solidly built with broad shoulders. He emerged from the darkness and sauntered over, three yards away. He glanced at his two dead cohorts. “That wasn’t very nice of you.”

“Well, I guess we’re all out of nice around here,” replied Deacon Walters. Kirkland seconded the motion.

“You know, I’m feeling a little parched, and I . . .”

“Holy crap,” observed the deacon, interrupting. “I know you.” He snapped his fingers, hoping to jog his memory. “Left tackle. Dartmouth. Mid 90’s. Am I right? You know as an active alumnus, I still try to attend every . . .”

“Cut the small talk and let me kill both of you,” the vampire replied, a hulking figure at six-foot five. “Actually it was right tackle, 1996, went undefeated that year. And you, theater owner, you look so intimidating with that little pop gun of yours.”

He stalked over towards Kirkland who reached underneath his coat and brought out the heavy artillery. “I’ll give you pop gun, a-hole.” He aimed and fired twice with the deacon’s shotgun, splattering the vampire’s chest area wide open. The behemoth vampire fell to his knees, gasping. Kirkland motioned for the machete from the deacon.

The vampire growled, fire in its eyes as he staggered to his feet. “You cheated.”

“As long as you cheat fairly,” mused Kirkland, recalling a quote from his favorite eight-grade English teacher, Mr. Scrimm.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” uttered the wounded vampire. Kirkland gave the wounded vampire a whack across the head with the stock of the gun.

Deacon handed the machete to his friend. “Time to get sacked,” growled the theater owner. Thwack! The vampire’s head toppled off neat a clean.

“Not bad,” observed the deacon. “Although sacked really pertains to a quarterback, not a . . .”

“We’re done here, Art, now what’s the plan?”

“We need to secure every entrance so we can keep these bastards contained; I’ve got something up my sleeve.”

Kirkland raised his brow. “Whatever’s up your sleeve, we better do it quick because time’s running out.”

 Inside the theater, Trevor was relaxing, watching the last movie with his new acquaintance. He was sleepy, but enjoyed a relaxing moment to chill after a whirlwind of theater work. He started dozing off. In and out of sleep, he started looking around. He had estimated that a hundred people were in attendance. It appeared most of the moviegoers were making out, like some sort of hickey-fest or something resembling it, or perhaps they were just resting. The young

woman linked her arm around Trevor’s.

Two aisles in front, Trevor recognized his high school friend, Chad Grimsley, a fellow football teammate wearing the familiar black and orange varsity jacket. He appeared asleep. Trevor at first pelted him with some candy corn he had tucked in his pocket. With no response, he leaned forward, stretching his arm to poke his friend’s shoulder. Still no response. He reached farther up in his seat, and poked harder. The teenager’s head slumped to one side revealing two distinctive trails of blood from a bite wound on his neck. One that had been on display in about every movie Trevor and his dad had shown tonight.

“Very funny,” chided Trevor, who got a sudden chill. “Chad, you okay?” That’s when it hit him. All those people weren’t sleeping; they were dead, courtesy of the living dead.

“You know I think I need to get a box of Goobers, be right back,” said Trevor as he sprang from his seat.

“I think you’ve enough of the sweets, my sweet,” replied the woman, as she gave the stout teen a stiff arm, throwing him back into his seat. “Let’s enjoy the rest of the movie, shall we?”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” squirmed Trevor.

The young woman turned her head. Her eyes turned the color of rubies, her incisors descending. “One of what, my cutie?”

Trevor was paralyzed in his seat. To his left was a hot-looking vampire. To his right, a hefty woman in her early sixties, a lay minister from the church, who he

thought was sleeping, but presumably dead too.

“First of all, why are there real-life vampires here at the movie theater?”

“What vampire would pass up a whole night’s worth of vampire films?” she laughed. “And your concession stand is like totally awesome! That, and the local folks are pretty tasty too.”

Trevor gulped. “How are you . . . real?”

“Oh, we are very much real. You, like most of the people in this town, were just blinded by reality.” She stroked Trevor’s neck with her protruding black-painted nails. “You see, we’ve been here for a very very long time.”

“My dad,” said Trevor, panicking. “Where are my dad and Deacon Walters?”

Someone from behind suddenly grasped the young man’s shoulders and picked him up. “Your daddy and his gimp friend I’m sure are dead by now. And you, young Kirkland, are going to be a featured guest for predawn breakfast.”

“You,” answered Trevor, gritting his teeth. He’d heard bits and pieces of the story from his dad when he was in a grieving drunken state. But no way could it be true. Could it?

“You . . . It was you who killed my mother!”

The top count increased his vice grip around Trevor’s neck. “Me and my associates have taken a liking to your little seaside town. They say the salty air is good for you. And your collection of plump humans – they’re such easy prey for us. One thing that did surprise me was the

local art scene; it’s really not half bad, although I’m not much into the hand-made crafts. I find this little corner of the world to be actually, dear I say, quaint? By no means is it Boston or New York City, but it does serve its purpose.”

 Meanwhile, Deacon Walters and Kirkland sealed off the back door and ventured around front with their bag full of kill toys. The theater owner made a pit stop at his car and reached in the trunk. He slung a backpack half full of ammo and a Louisville Slugger over his shoulder. “We’ve got ten minutes, Art.”

“Got an idea,” said Deacon Walters. “I’ll parallel park my truck to seal off the front entrance.” He got in and with the lights off, pulled up behind the towering columns and parked as close as possible in front of the glass double-doors.

The deacon lumbered out and joined Kirkland. The two men entered through a single glass door five yards to the left of the main entrance. Kirkland quickly locked it. As they approached the lobby, the deacon fired away with the crossbow, taking out a handful of vampires milling about near the concession stand.

“Nice and quiet; that’s what I like,” said the deacon, as the four vampires dropped to the carpeting, dead.

“I wish we could seal this one off better,” said Kirkland. Just like the back door, Deacon Walters draped the frame and door handles with garlic. He turned to Kirkland. “Where are controls for the sprinkler system?”

“In the supply room downstairs, why?”

The deacon hobbled as fast as he could to the short stairway and headed to the supply room when he was greeted by an irate, retirement-aged vampire. He came at the deacon with a raised cane and dulled choppers.

“Ain’t got time for this, pops.” The deacon fended off the weak assault then unleashed the oversized steak knife, lopping off the geezer’s balding melon. He turned on the light and scanned the walls. “Bingo.”

Deacon Walters pried open the gray metal panel and studied the various gauges. He was about to press a button when Kirkland interrupted him.

“What the hell are you doing, Art?”

“How do you test the system, I mean, to make sure we can all get a good soaking?”

Kirkland scanned the controls. “You turn this lever and press the red button. Hold on, what are you planning?”

“Trust me, Kirk.” The deacon then bent down on one knee, his joints making a symphony of snap, crackle and pop sounds. He made the sign of the cross then gradually stood up.

“What was that for?” asked Kirkland.

“Praying for rain, my friend.”

The two men strode back upstairs when they were greeted by . . .

“Oh look, the dynamic duo,” said the chief vampire, resembling a classic Universal movie monster in his flagship attire: black, white, and dead all over. He held up Kirkland’s son by the back of the teen’s jacket,

raising him off the floor like he was a bag of laundry.

“Dad,” uttered Trevor, barely able to get the words out.

The vampire opened his mouth wide, revealing a set of porcelain white fangs. He was about to drive them deep into the young man’s neck when the sprinkler system kicked on.

“Trying to dampen my spirits, I see,” boasted the vampire. He laughed, still eager to kill the senior high school student when he flinched. Something was irritating his eyes. The skin on his hands began corroding, reacting like a chemical lab experiment. Screams emanated from the auditorium.

“What the hell did you do?” bellowed the vampire.

“Yeah Art, what the hell did you do?” whispered Kirkland, “Poison the water supply?”

“Far from it,” replied Deacon Walters. “If I followed the instructions correctly, I’d say your water supply is now officially blessed.”

“You what?” shouted the Count.

“How in the hell did you manage that?” begged Kirkland. There were more screams coming from inside the theater.

“I had to think of a way to kill Count A-hole here and all his blood-sucking minions without harming our town folk. I just had to confirm with Siri – God bless you by the way.” He gave his iPhone a quick peck, “that a deacon could bless water. And lo and behold, I can.”

“You’re a dead man, all of you!” roared the vampire, his face now deteriorating.

The deacon continued. “What you have is a quick response sprinkler system that by my estimations, releases approximately eight to twenty-four gallons of water per minute. Taking in the polarity of the situation . . .”

“That is impossible!” screamed the vampire, clutching his face. Blood raced down his failing skin. He dropped Trevor to the floor, who darted over to his father.

“Sorry to reign on your parade, Count Fuckula,” snarled Kirkland, who quickly apologized to his friend.

The deacon turned to his friend. “No need too, Kirk; that was a good one.”

Vampires poured out of the theater, their skin melting away. Some dropped to the floor withering in pain. Kirkland delved into his backpack and loaded up his glock and let loose with a spray of bullets. “Like shooting fish in a barrel.” After killing vampire after vampire, both Kirkland and the deacon zeroed in on the Count.

“How did you do this?” the vampire staggered.

“I did a little research,” said Deacon Walters. “Not to bore you with the details . . . oh why the hell not. I’m not going anywhere too soon and you’ll be dead . . . for good.” He cleared his throat.

“This should be good,” chimed Trevor.

“As you may or may not know, deacons can bless any amount of water, but we can only do so when we are confident that the holy water can be set aside for sacramental use. For example, the water around a big lake is used for non-sacramental purposes like speed boating, washing cars, flushing

toilets – so making the whole lake into holy water is a recipe for sacrilege.

“You are boring me to death,” said the vampire, trying to stand back up.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” replied the deacon, who proceeded to launch a spike into each of the vampires’ legs. “We’re you going somewhere?” The vampire wailed in pain. “No, I didn’t think so.” The deacon paused. “Damn, now you lost my train of thought.”

Kirkland moved in and served up a roundhouse kick to the vampire’s melting face. “Don’t mess with my friend’s train of thought, got it?”

The two men were savoring payback. “I don’t know about you Count, but I’m finding this all very interesting.”

“Thank you, Kirk.” Deacon Walters cleared his throat and continued. “However, if a deacon wanted to have some holy lake water, he could set it aside in a container and bless it. A deacon could use a regular container such as a bucket or swimming pool, but he’d have to post a sign to prevent people from accidentally committing sacrilege.”

“So no skinny dipping, I guess,” joked Trevor.

The deacon handed the crossbow to Kirkland. “Finish this abomination off.”

“With pleasure.” He aimed at the fledging vampire, still defiant in his unholy emaciated rage.

“May I?” asked Trevor.

“Why not,” said Dad. He handed the weapon to his son. “All in the family.”

Trevor pulled back the bow and aimed point blank. “For Mom.” Before the vampire could utter a word, the teen fired, hitting the vampire just above the bridge of the nose. Deacon unsheathed his tool of the trade and did the rest.

For the next hour, Kirkland, his son, and the deacon gathered up what remained of the vampire bodies and had a bonfire in the back of the building. Neat and clean, deacon approved.

The remaining drenched humans cleared the theater to safety. Perhaps there was a way to save the dozens who didn’t make it out alive. Prisoners of the undead, but now free.

Deacon Waters was already on it. He took out his cellphone.

“Siri?”

The Club

By Pierre Bernensky

“I don’t want to go,” said Peter.

“Why won’t you just go to your prom?” Jenn replied. “You’ve been there for all four years and your parents already paid for it.”

“I didn’t tell my parents to pay for it. That’s their fault,” said Peter. “I envisioned myself going to prom with the people I grew up with as a kid, not with a bunch of people I knew for a couple of years. I never wanted to go to this school, so why should I go to prom? Instead, I’m going to the Miramar High School after-party at the club.

“Really?” replied Jenn, surprised. “You’re going waste your parents’ money?”

Yeah.” Peter looked at his watch. “I have to go, bye.”

The time had come. Eight o’clock. Peter got ready to head out. He opened the closet and ransacked through, trying to find the perfect outfit. He dressed in black and blue, a deep blue sky jean jacket with a long black sleeve shirt beneath it. The pants were long black skinny jeans and the shoes the same color as the outfit. He stood still, gazing into the mirror, looking for any wrongs.

Peter informed his parents that he was going to a party, feeling confident it was going to be a great night. He looked into the opaque skies and stood there, letting the stiff breeze slap him in the face. Mesmerized, Peter snapped out of it and got into his slate gray 1996 Acura. He peeled out of the driveway and headed for his friend’s house. He opened the door and he strolled in, ready to dismantle his best friend in video games. After engaging in small talk and video games until midnight, we went our separate ways.

Peter found himself at Burger King drive-thru near his house on Northeast 167th Street across from the McDonalds. He receive his food and parked the car in the parking lot, savoring a double whooper and fries. Moments passed and he realized time was flying by. It was nearing half past midnight before heading to Broward County. After driving for forty minutes, Peter felt nervous. Suddenly, he made a turn and found himself in a mist of darkness. The car lights were the only source

of light. He kept driving only to realize he was totally lost. He started to panic.

“I’m lost,” he uttered. Up ahead, he spotted something familiar. He saw lights, and just past it, the club.

Peter parked near a light post and got out of his car. He heard the incessant music thumping. It is one in the morning. He tried to call his friend, but his phone but couldn’t get a signal. As he walked towards the entrance, Peter spotted a beautiful girl. She was wearing a tight, black neck dress. She had long ebony hair, terra cotta cheeks, violet lipstick, but her eyes were beyond description. When he got within an arm’s length of the door, she spoke.

“Hey, can I be with you tonight?”

Peter quivered, but did his best to act cool. “Okay, no problem.”

The young man smiled; she the same with her dimpled cheeks. She took his hand and led the way into the club. We stood there, motionless. She smiled, but Peter felt something was strange. He didn’t recognized anyone that went to Miramar High School or his friends. A rush of doubtful thoughts hit him squarely in the head.

“I’m at the wrong place,” he said.

Peter felt uneasy, but the woman took his hand, a firm grip, and led him to the center of where everyone was dancing. She ignited a smile that had intrigued Peter in the first place. The two headed for the middle of the crowded dance floor. They danced for hours. Peter was exhausted, but the young woman was still high-energy.

Peter finally stopped. “I’m exhausted. Let’s take a break.” She

headed to the bar to get something to drink. Gatorade would be nice, he thought.

He stood in the midst of the club, still searching for his friends, or anyone he might recognize. He turned for the entrance and pulled out my phone. It was 2:59. Suddenly, at the strike of three AM, everything and everyone vanished. The dance floor, the ceiling, the people, and the bar -- are were gone.

Startled, Peter spun around in place wondering what the hell was happening. He found himself outside in a graveyard. The young man stood there, his heart exploding with pulsating heartbeats. Then he heard the girl's voice behind him. Peter turned. Her eyes were clear and haunting.

"I wish you were dead because we would have never stopped," she uttered. She abruptly turned around and walked deep into the graveyard until her figure faded into darkness.

Peter's heart sank in an ocean of terror. He turned back around, shivering. Suddenly, he spotted the familiar light post hovering over his parked car. He got inside. The girl's haunting words continued to resonate in his head as he sped off for home.



Portal Poetry Corner



Bram Stoker (Nov. 8)

Margaret Mitchell (Nov. 8)

Neil Gaiman (Nov. 10)

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (Nov. 11)

Robert L. Stevenson (Nov. 13)

Margaret Atwood (Nov. 18)

C.S. Lewis (Nov. 29)

Mark Twain (Nov. 30)

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

***Upcoming dates 2015:**

Nov 9, and Dec 14.

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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