

The Portal



The Hunted By Etheridge G. Lovett

On the Thursday evening of February 12, 1852, a proud hunter named Joe Calhoun, journeyed through the biting cold winter elements from Texas to South Dakota to hunt big game. Joe heard about the large herds of buffalo, roaming freely throughout the Black Hills of South Dakota. Joe also heard about the legendary White Buffalo that wittingly protects other buffalos from hunters venturing out into the Black Hills. This legend prompted Joe to visit South Dakota to see for himself, such an interesting creature. If the buffalo existed, Joe planned to bring down the great beast single-handedly.

Riding upon his favorite horse, Caroline; Joe trekked across the snow-laden plains to the small bustling hunting and gold miner's town near the Black Hills of South Dakota known as Deadwood.

After entering the town, Joe left his horse at the town's holding stable to be cared for overnight. Joe entered the Red Rooster Saloon to relax and unwind from his long journey. The moment Joe entered the saloon; you could hear the distinct jingling sound of the fine silver spurs he wore upon his tough, well-crafted cowboy boots. A sudden blast of frigid air, mingled with large snowflakes, followed Joe as he pushed his way through the swing doors of the saloon. Piano sounds, laughter, and loud conversations permeated the popular saloon.

Several people fixed their eyes upon the tall, handsome young hunter approaching the bar, wearing some of his hunting gear. Two ammunition belts, laden with shotgun rounds, were strapped across his chest. Two .44 Caliber Smith and Wesson single action revolvers were neatly placed inside holsters attached to his belt. He also wore a long coat made of tough buffalo hide, with another thin gray coat barely seen underneath it.

On the side of his belt, Joe wore a well-crafted Cheyenne Indian hunting knife. He wore his long blonde hair platted down his back. The only hair upon Joe's stern face was the long mustache he wore, curled up at each end. The mustache was so thick that you could barely see Joe's top lip. Joe's sea-blue eyes scanned the room of high-spirited visitors who were all gambling, drinking, and frolicking about with the sensually attractive saloon girls. Those who noticed Joe entering the saloon began to lean to one side, whispering to each other.

"Bartender, I'll have a bottle of Jim Beam whiskey," Joe requested, placing his wide-brim, black hat upon the counter.

"A bottle of Jim Beam whiskey coming right up," said the bartender, preparing the drink.

"Pardon me for asking, but where are you headed, Mister?" asked one plump gambler sitting at a table near Joe.

Taking a quick gulp of his whiskey, Joe answered, "I heard that there's a menace up in the Black Hills, killing off most of the hunters around

here. I thought I'd come here and offer my services to get rid of him. You see, I take the death of any hunter personal."

"Well, I hope you brought the U.S. Calvary with you. That menace you spoke of up in the Black Hills is like the devil in white buffalo hide. One witness said that the White Buffalo stands eight feet tall, weighing around one and a half tons. Some men believe it's a spirit," the plump man said with a slight chuckle.

"If the White Buffalo breathes, it bleeds. If it bleeds, it can roll over and die. It's just another beast of the field to be tamed, maimed or killed. Besides, I don't believe in spirits. That's hogwash... I only believe in my rifles," Joe said, taking another drink from his bottle of whiskey.

The plump man stood, walking over, shaking Joe's hand, saying, "Mister, you're my kind of man. My name's Nick Mosley. I'm the Mayor of Deadwood."

"I'm Joe Calhoun, a buffalo hunter from Dallas Texas."

"Joe, I want you to meet my gambling buddies," said Mayor Mosley, as he and Joe walked over to his table.

"Listen up everyone; I'd like you to meet my good friend, Joe Calhoun, visiting us all the way from Dallas Texas. He's a buffalo hunter. He traveled many miles to come here and rid the Black Hills of the White Buffalo," Mayor Mosley informed.

Everyone in the saloon went silent for a minute, gazing upon the young hunter after hearing the mayor's words. Some onlookers whispered to each other. Concerned about the young hunter, one old Cheyenne Indian tracker, with a head full of snow white, long hair, stood; approaching Joe.



The Indian grabbed Joe firmly by the shoulders, looking deep into his eyes, saying, "Listen to me, Mister, if you go up into the Black Hills to hunt buffalo, you will surely regret it. As long as you and other hunters continue to hunt the buffalo in the Black Hills, the White Buffalo will continue to attack.

Whatever you do, stay away from the Black Hills. Go back where you came from and you won't be harmed."

Assuming that the old Indian tracker simply wanted the elusive White Buffalo to live so that he, and his people, could maintain their fear over the small town, Joe became outraged. Joe pulled out one of his Smith and Wesson revolvers, turned the weapon over, striking the Indian across his mouth with the butt of the weapon, knocking the Indian to the ground. Everyone in the saloon was shocked at Joe's explosive reaction.

Several cowboys laughed at the dazed Indian sprawled out on the floor. Gathering himself, the old Indian sat up, wiping the blood from his split lip with his hand. He stared at the blood upon his fingers; then gazed up at Joe with a frown. The Indian pointed at Joe's face, saying, "Remember, I warned you not to go up into the Black Hills."

"Some of you boys get this fool Indian out of here before he gets himself killed!" Mayor Mosley shouted. Several local cowboys grabbed the Indian by his shoulders, dragging him outside in the freezing cold. They went back inside the saloon, laughing about the incident. Joe twirled his revolver around upon his finger a few times for show; then shoved it back down into his holster. He walked over to the bar to finish his whiskey.



"Well, if you need any extra supplies for your hunt just let me know before you leave. I promise you, hunting the White Buffalo won't be a Sunday picnic," Mayor Mosley said.

"Thanks, but no thanks, mayor. 'I'll be just fine. These are all the supplies I'll ever need," Joe said, patting his hand upon his Smith and Wesson revolvers. "These metal saviors haven't let me down yet."

Everyone laughed at Joe's arrogant response.

"Can you use a little extra attention tonight courageous cowboy?" asked one attractive saloon girl, approaching

Joe. Her eyes were sea blue, like those of the young hunter. Her blonde, curly hair shone like fine gold. Her body showed no flaws. Her sweet smelling perfume filled Joe's nostrils as she drew closer. Joe eyed the voluptuous woman from her head to her feet; then he answered, "Sure. I could use your kind of attention any night."

"Come up to room seven when you're ready, cowboy, and let me show you a good time," the woman offered. She smiled, walking up the winding stairwell. Joe consumed the final gulp of his whiskey, leaving the empty bottle on the table. He placed a one dollar bill beside the bottle then followed the woman up the stairs to her bedroom. The mayor smiled, watching the young hunter disappear in the shadows upstairs.

The Next Day: Despite the biting cold, the morning sun peeked through an opening in the white-laced curtains, striking the closed eyelids of the young hunter. Feeling the warm sunshine, Joe's eyes blinked several times. He awakened, sitting up in bed. Rubbing the back of his neck, he glanced over, noticing the saloon girl sprawled out, nude in bed beside him. Joe smiled.

He reached over, grabbing his pants from a nearby table, reaching into the pocket of his pants to get his wallet. Joe left three dollars on the table for the saloon girl's sexual services; then he went over to a large tin pail of ice cold water, wiping himself off. He pulled out his straight razor and shaved. He dried himself off and put on his shirt, ammunition belts, weapons, coat, and boots. Flipping his fancy hat upon his head, Joe glanced back at the young woman still asleep in bed. He tipped his hat, quietly exiting the room. Joe casually exited the saloon, walking towards the holding stables.

"Good morning, Mr. Calhoun. I guess you're ready for your horse, Caroline," one old stable hand said.

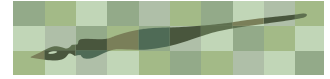
"You're absolutely correct. I have a long day of hunting ahead of me. I need to get a head start before the weather turns," Joe said.

"Caroline rested pretty well last night. She slept like a newborn filly. I

also changed her horse shoes to make the hunting journey easy on her. I took good care of your saddle gear as well," the stable hand said.

Joe checked over his horse; then he checked over his saddle gear to make sure that everything was there.

"You got a pretty nice set of weapons there fella," the stable hand said.



Joe half smiled, grabbing one of his rifles from his saddle bag, saying, "This here is a .50 Caliber Sharps Buffalo Rifle. Most hunters call it 'Old Reliable.' My other rifle is a .44 Caliber Winchester rifle with a 24 inch barrel. Then there's my two .44 Caliber Smith and Wesson, single action revolvers. To top it off, I have a genuine Cheyenne hunting knife that I stole off a dead Indian."

"I see you're ready to kill a lot of buffalo today," the stable hand said.

"Not a lot of buffalo, one buffalo in particular. I'm traveling up into the Black Hills to bring down the great White Buffalo, putting an end to a local legend. If I have enough sunshine and rounds left, I'll probably kill a few extra buffalos for sport," Joe bragged, glancing off at the Black Hills in the distance.

"I certainly wish you all the luck on God's green earth, Mister. When I was a young man, I went up into the Black Hills with a close friend of mine to hunt buffalo. We saw the legendary White Buffalo with our own natural eyes. The creature stands taller than a man and seemed twice the weight of an average buffalo. Me, and my friend barely escaped with our lives when the creature attacked us. My heart darn near jumped out my chest.

I have never been up there since. So far, no hunter has been able to stop the great White Buffalo. Indian legend says that the white buffalo's a spirit. A spirit's not something you can shoot and kill with a bullet," the old stable hand said with a concerned look upon his face.

Gazing into the eyes of the old man, then up at the ban of cirrus clouds

in the frozen blue sky above, Joe smiled, answering, “I really don’t believe in spirits, old man, but I’ll leave you with a bit of sound advice, stay out of the Indian camps listening to their empty legends and foolish tales.” Joe climbed upon his horse.

“I hear you talking, Mister, but I know better. My old eyes have seen much, and my old ears have heard much. Spending time on this Earth makes you very wise, if you live long enough to pay attention. I have a bad feeling about you going up into the Black Hills, Mister,” the stable hand said.

“I hear you, old man,” Joe said, handing the man two dollars.

“Thanks, Mister; I sure appreciate it,” the old man said.



Joe reached into his pocket, pulling out a small lump of snuff, placing it between his bottom teeth and his gums. He tipped his hat to the old man, spitting off to one side of his horse. With a slight kick of his fancy boots, Joe rode away from the stables down the main street of the small town.

“You take good care of yourself, Mr. Calhoun!” Mayor Mosley yelled, standing at the doorway of his office.

“I’ll be just fine, mayor!” Joe shouted back.

The mayor half smiled, muttering under his breath, “You damn arrogant fool.”

Joe’s horse galloped down the snow-covered road in the middle of the small town as he neared the town’s edge.

“Take care of yourself; Mr. Joe Calhoun!” shouted the saloon girl, waving from a second floor window.

“I’ll bring you back something real nice, honey!” Joe vowed.

“I’ll be waiting, Joe,” the woman shouted back, her girlfriends standing behind her, giggling.

Other town members watched the young hunter riding past the city line, heading towards the Black Hills in the distance. Gentle gusts of frigid air blew across the snowy open plains as the

lone hunter vanished from the view of the town’s people. For an hour, Joe rode until he came upon the area the Indians called the Sacred Hunting Grounds.

“Whoa — Caroline!” Joe shouted, pulling on the rings of his horse. Caroline slowed to a mere trot; then she stopped. Joe climbed down from his horse; closely examining several fresh buffalo hoof prints pressed deep into the snow. The prints led off into a rocky, forested enclave, partially covered in snow.

“Come on, Caroline,” Joe said, grabbing his horse by the rings, walking with her towards the narrow enclave. The frigid wind howled like weary ghosts, blowing through the Black Hills. Faintly drifting upon the cold breeze was the loud, deep and eerie roar of a lone buffalo, echoing throughout the Black Hills; then it stopped.

Joe grabbed his favorite shotgun, Old Reliable, loading several rounds. His keen eyes scanned everything that twitched or moved, but not one buffalo was in sight. Only dead silence remained. Joe shoved his rifle down inside his saddlebag, following the buffalo hoof tracks pressed upon the ground throughout the snow-covered, wooded area.

“I know you’re out here somewhere, I can feel it in my bones,” whispered Joe, frowning. As he walked further over a small hill, Joe noticed in the center of the woods, a large clearing. In the middle of the clearing there stood a small herd of bison. In the center of the herd of buffalo there stood the legendary White Buffalo.

“There you are. You’re as good as dead,” Joe whispered. He carefully removed his shotgun from his saddlebag. He tied his horse to a nearby tree, slowly lowering himself down into the cold, fresh-fallen snow aligning the crest of the hill.

“Take your last breath, legend of the Black Hills,” Joe whispered to the White Buffalo. He aimed his shotgun at the head of the large beast, firing his rifle. The buffalos surrounding the White Buffalo ran around in a panic. The White Buffalo remained still, staring in Joe’s direction. The creature

blew several breaths of hot air from its nostrils and mouth, angered by the mere presence of the young hunter.

“Damn it. How did I miss?” Joe questioned. He glanced down to quickly reload his shotgun. When he raised the weapon for another round of shots, the White Buffalo was gone, so were the other buffalos. Only the voice of the White Buffalo was heard, roaring aloud throughout the brisk winter breeze.

Standing to his feet, Joe brushed the snow from his hands, chest, and stomach, untying his horse from the tree. He hopped upon his horse, riding down the hill into the clearing. He sat there, trying to make sense of the vanishing buffalo.

“I got all day and night, damn you. You can hide in the woods until Hell freezes over, but I’ll find you, and bring you down!” Joe shouted, brandishing his shotgun high above his head. The sound of the buffalo’s roaring voice suddenly went silent.

Joe laughed aloud, his face pointing towards the cool sky above. As he continued to laugh, a thunderous pounding sound was heard all around him. When Joe looked off to his right, he saw the incredibly large, White Buffalo, charging towards him with great speed. Before Joe could aim his rifle at the creature, the White Buffalo struck Joe’s horse with a thunderous impact, knocking Joe Calhoun high into the air. Joe landed in the snow several yards away from his bleeding, dying horse, Caroline. The White Buffalo charged onward up the hill, vanishing beneath the tall trees in the distance.



“Hang on, Caroline!” Joe yelled. He crawled over to his horse, weeping beside her. The horse, kicked several times, trying to get up, but it couldn’t. The wounds the White Buffalo inflicted; slowly dragged Caroline into the shadowy realms of death. With her eyes stretched wide, Caroline panted several times. She drew her last breath, releasing her spirit into the freezing winds of the Black Hills.

“Damn you!” Joe shouted from the pit of his stomach. He hopped to his feet, pulling out his two revolvers. Joe began shooting in every direction, firing at everything that moved. Tears streamed down Joe’s stern face as he unleashed a hail of bullets across the horizon. Streams of blazing gunfire jumped from Joe’s powerful twin revolvers as he wept for his loving horse, Caroline. He fired his weapons until he only heard the clicking sound of the hammer of each gun, striking, but finding no more bullets to ignite. With his revolvers still in hand, Joe fell forward upon his knees before Caroline.



Joe wept bitterly over her death. As Joe wept, he heard the loud trampling sound of buffalo hooves coming from the narrow path of the snow-covered forest area. Joe stood, looking in the direction where the sound came from. He saw a large herd of buffalos charging towards him.

Filled with a burst of rage over the death of his horse, Joe pulled out Old Reliable, firing upon the buffalos, bringing them down, one by one. Even the young buffalos fell under the blast of Joe’s powerful rifle.

“You killed my horse, now I’ll kill buffalos by the hundreds!” Joe shouted. He reloaded his weapon and continued firing. Between shots, Joe heard a loud, distinct buffalo’s roar, filled with rage, ringing out behind him. When Joe spun his rifle about, that was all the time he needed to fire one blazing shot right into the forehead of the great White Buffalo approaching. Blood spurted from the buffalo’s large head, but the creature kept charging, striking Joe with a bone-crushing blow, knocking Joe Calhoun unconscious. When Joe regained consciousness, he was lying flat upon his back with pain streaking throughout his body. As Joe lifted his head, he looked directly into the large, cold black eyes of the White Buffalo, staring back at him. The huge creature was lying motionless across Joe’s legs in death.

“Damn you!” Joe shouted when he realized that the dead buffalo had fallen, pinning him to the ground with its incredible weight, crushing both of his legs. Trembling from the intense pain and cold weather, Joe reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a bottle of whiskey. He took several quick gulps of the whiskey; hoping that the strong drink would somehow dull the pain, but the excruciating pain continued. Joe feared that death was closing in on him.

Lying flat upon his back, Joe watched the pristine white snowflakes trickled down from the blue skies like angels descending from heaven. The dead silence seemed almost surreal to the young hunter. He looked off to one side and noticed Old Reliable lying in the snow, broken apart by the impact of the White Buffalo. Joe lost consciousness once more.

“Joe Calhoun, wake up!” a familiar voice beckoned.

When Joe opened his eyes he saw the old Indian he attacked inside the saloon standing over him. Beside the Indian he saw a black horse and a wooden carrying platform the Indian made from dried tree branches and leather strips. The carrying platform was neatly attached to the saddle on the Indian’s horse.

“Where’s the White Buffalo?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t see a White Buffalo. I only found you laying out here in the snow with your legs busted up something good,” the Indian said.

A confused look formed upon Joe’s half-frozen face.

“Drink this, it will help keep you alert until I get you back to town,” the Indian said, holding the back of Joe’s head, administering an old Indian medicine that he’d made from natural herbs. The bitter taste of the medicine caused Joe to frown.

“I warned you not to come out here, but you didn’t listen to me, young hunter from Texas. Now look at the terrible shape you’re in,” the Indian reminded, carefully dragging Joe’s broken body upon the platform. Joe gritted his teeth in pain. The Indian placed Joe snugly into the platform, covering him with several hand-woven,

wool blankets. The Indian climbed upon his horse, riding slowly out of the Black Hills, in route to the town of Deadwood. When they made it to town, people watched as the horse dragged the platform, with the brave hunter nestled inside, towards the town’s doctor’s office.

“Everyone, get back!” shouted the doctor, pushing his way through the crowd towards Joe. The doctor pulled back the blankets and saw Joe’s busted legs.

“My goodness, what happened to him?” the doctor asked the Indian.

“He tussled with the great White Buffalo and lost,” the Indian said.

“Un-strap him and bring him inside my office—quick!” the doctor shouted.

The old Indian carefully untied Joe from the carrying platform. Several men helped place Joe inside the doctor’s office.

Grabbing the doctor by his shirt, Joe asked, “Doc, will I ever walk again?”

“You’ll be lucky if you remain alive after getting busted up like this,” the doctor answered.

Joe rested as tears seeped from the side of his weary, reddened eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mister, I’ll do everything I can to save you, you damn fool,” the doctor said, working frantically on Joe.

“Thanks, doc,” Joe replied. He turned his head to one side, looking out of the window at the small crowd of people gathered outside the doctor’s office. Standing in the crowd of onlookers, Joe’s eyes fell upon the old Indian who saved him. The Indian drew closer to the window of the doctor’s office with his hands pressed against the glass. He peered through the window at Joe with a blank stare upon his face. At that very moment, the snowstorm began once more.

A strong gust of wind blew past the old Indian, causing his snow white hair to blow upward, twirling about in the winter breeze. Underneath the Indian’s long hair, Joe noticed the shotgun round hole in the center of the Indian’s forehead.

At that very moment, Joe Calhoun fully understood why the Indian tried to prevent him from hunting buffalo up in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Joe quickly learned that the Indian, and the White Buffalo, are one.



Homemade Surprises By Edward White/CP Bialois

The night sky was clear and crisp as a lone car sped along the winding roadway. Howard Diaz glanced at his watch, 2 AM, he still had time to reach the cabin before it was too late. He turned the last corner on the road to where he was told his wife and daughter were and a relaxed feeling swept through him at seeing his wife's car sitting in front of the cabin by itself. He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face; it looked like this day would end as good as it started. His mind began to drift back sixteen hours to when his horrible day began.

Early that morning, Howard reached over and switched off his alarm before stretching out with his eyes closed, wondering what his day had in store for him. His thoughts were interrupted by his wife when she entered the room and opened the curtains. "You'd better show some life mister or you'll be late."

Howard smiled and opened his eyes. "I can't seem to remember anything that would motivate me to get out of bed."

She returned his smile as her raven black hair fell over her right shoulder, a look he loved to get from her. "Easy cowboy, you'd better save your strength for your big day."

He reluctantly sat up and swung his legs out of bed. "I do hope you have

the celebration ready to go for when I get home."

Miriam stepped towards him and leaned down to give him a kiss. "Shannon will be at Susie's house for the night, so whenever you can pry yourself from your busy schedule I'll be waiting." With that she straightened and left the room, Howard's pulse rate nearly doubled at the exchange.

Howard sat in his office after lunch with a smug smile, his business transaction had gone through and he became the hero of the office. The company had turned the corner because of his deal and he was on top of the world were almost nothing could ruin it for him. It was then that his office phone rang, the person on the line told his secretary it was an emergency and she patched it through without a second thought. This one call would change his life forever. Still smiling, Howard answered the phone. "Howard Diaz."

The voice on the line sounded like a man's but with a little distortion, he was certain he knew the voice. "Listen to me Howard, you are in grave danger."

Howard's mood shifted to one of shock and fear. "Who is this?"

"Who I am is not important, the important thing is that I know who you are and about the reward on your head. Do everything I say and your wife and daughter will be fine."

"If you've done anything to harm them I'll..." His rage boiled over. How were they able to track him here of all places?

The voice on the line remained calm and commanding, "You'll do nothing besides what you're told to do. If you tell anyone about this or if you refuse to follow my directions your family's blood will be on your hands."

Howard took a deep breath, "What do you want me to do?"

The voice chuckled, "It's simple Howard, after work you'll go to the airport. There you will empty the contents of locker 18, the duffel bag they're currently stored in shall be satisfactory."

Howard's brow furrowed, how had this man known about that? "Now just a damn minute!"

"Being cavalier is not a luxury you can afford. Now, are you finished?" The voice paused a moment before continuing when Howard didn't say anything. "Good. As I was saying, once you've taken the duffel bag you will leave it sitting in the terminal by the pay phones."

Howard waited a minute before speaking in a soft tone. "If you harm either of them..."

"Honestly Mr. Diaz, if you do as I say you'll be with them by tomorrow."

"Wait! Wait, how do I know you have them?"

The voice chuckled, "I love your daughter's Carebear underwear, it'd be a shame to mess something so sweet."

Howard was trying to think clearly, somehow this familiar voice had either seen his daughter's brand new under garments or had accurately guessed, either way he wasn't a gambling man anymore. "Alright," his voice sounded defeated, "I'll do as you ask, just please don't hurt them."

"That, my dear Mr. Diaz, is entirely up to you."



Once the voice hung up Howard sat for a moment trying to think of something to do. If they found him all he could do was hide, but with his wife and daughter being held there wasn't much he could do. He picked up the phone and dialed his home number, after four rings the answering machine picked up but it wasn't his wife's voice.

"You're wasting time Howard, anymore delays and their blood will be on your hands." Howard slammed the phone down in frustration and collapsed into his chair.

The trip to the airport was a blur as he somehow managed to drive across town without any incidents and within minutes of him leaving the office. He wasted little time parking his car by the front of the terminal in the loading area and ran through the entrance. Once inside, he was forced to slow down at the security check points and ran a hand over his balding head in an attempt to regain his composure. He

was reacting purely out of fear and he realized as much, but it had been years since he last worked for the Agency. Why would anyone waste the time to find him now?

Much to his dismay, it took Howard nearly ten minutes to get through the check points and reach the locker. He felt too exposed until he made it within arm's reach of the lockers. A sudden flashback to the day he first used the locker to hide the payroll of a local gangster caused him to freeze where he stood. He could feel his chest begin tightening as an anxiety attack tried to force its way to the surface. Howard closed his eyes, swallowed hard, and took a deep breath. Within a minute his heart rate slowed to the point where he felt comfortable and reached out towards the locker. He had no problem remembering the combination as he spun through the four digit code and opened the light gray metallic door. He let out a deep breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and lifted the duffel bag out of the locker as a bead of sweat ran down the side of his face.

Without wasting any time, he turned and made for the exit of the airport. His eyes darted side to side trying to find the one that would take his "package" once he left it, but despite all of his training he couldn't locate a single one that may have been his contact. He stopped by the phones at the side of the terminal and sat down on the bench next to one of the many plants decorating the airport and set the bag down next to the phones. His assignment complete, Howard then sat back and attempted to relax for a moment.

Five minutes later, he slowly stood and stretched his back before absently making his way towards the exit of the airport. Part of being in the business was that you remained calm, but there was always a part of you that would be scared, worried, or paranoid. In fact, if it wasn't for this sixth sense no operative in the world would survive their first mission. With the constant feeling of being watched Howard nodded and smiled at the guard as the automatic door opened to allow him to pass. In response, the guard returned the smile

and nod as he wished Howard a good day, a wish Howard hoped would indeed come true.

An hour after leaving the drop off point, he was contacted by the same voice that had sent him on this hellish trip. The voice seemed pleased with Howard and told him where he could collect his wife and daughter, but he had to do so by 2:30 AM.

Now as he pulled up to the cabin in the middle of the woods and parked next to his wife's car, Howard felt a wave of relief sweep through him. He couldn't remember getting out of the car or even if he shut the engine off before finding himself inside the doorway. "Miriam! Shannon!"

"Howard!" The shout sent a great wave of joy through him as his wife ran into his arms from the next room. "Oh Howard! I was so scared!"

He held her tight as tears found their way down his cheeks. "Everything's going to be alright now, my love. Let's get Shannon and get out of here." He took her by the hand and tried to pull her towards the door but she didn't move. After a moment he looked at her. "Didn't you hear me? We have to get Shannon and get out of here."

His wife stared at him for a moment and a warning tingled in the back of his mind. "I told you this morning Howard, she's spending the night at Susie's house. It took you longer than I thought to get all your work done." Dumbstruck, Howard's mouth opened but no sound escaped. Even after he saw the flash of light in front of him and felt a great pain and burning in his chest no sound escaped. He watched as everything in the room seemed to grow dark and spin around him like a whirlpool.

He watched in shock as his wife picked up the duffel bag from behind a chair and slung it over her shoulder. "You made lots of enemies over the years, Howard." He then realized what happened to him that day. how his own wife had been an assassin sent after him and how she set everything up from the very start. He tried to say something but he could only gag on his own blood, he knew he'd be dead within a few minutes. Miriam bent down over him and gave him a parting kiss

then wiped the blood from her lips, "I want you to know that it's nothing personal, just business. You were a good husband and father." Without saying another word she left him in the middle of the floor in a pool of his own blood. The last thing he saw was the headlights of her car as she started to pull away. He then slipped into darkness after receiving the payment he had known would come his way at some point. To him the peace was worth more than the millions in bounty on his head or in the duffel bag. Miriam's treachery would call for her payment in time, would she be willing to make her payment when the time came?



**Princess
By Jamie White**

Princess sat up and stretched, gently digging her claws into the bed where she'd been sleeping only moments before. She yawned, looking around to see her human was nowhere to be found. The little boy must have just woken up; she could hear a noise from the bathroom. It sounded like running water. Curious, she hopped down to the floor and entered the bathroom, seeing her boy standing at the sink. He was on a stool, brushing his teeth. The child always made such a mess when he washed up in the morning; there was soap and water all over the sink. She couldn't understand how humans could be so messy!

Wanting his attention, the kitten walked over and began rubbing against his legs, purring loudly. This always worked!

"Hi, girl! How's it going?" The child finished what he was doing and leaned over, picking Princess up to snuggle. He loved how soft and fluffy her fur was. It was so soft, he was tempted to use her as a pillow sometimes, but his parents had vetoed that idea. They said it could hurt her and he didn't want to do that, so he listened. It was one of the few rules they set down he followed voluntarily! "Let's go see what's for breakfast, huh?" The little boy left the bedroom, still clutching the content kitten in his arms. He hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen, where he finally set her on the ground.

"Mama, what's for breakfast?" Princess, suddenly on her own four feet again, stretched once more, her ears perking up as she heard the familiar "B" word. That usually meant a bowl of food was going to be set in front of her. She hoped the other cat in the house didn't try and come in to get it first. Sure, she could take him, but she didn't really enjoy having to flex her muscle all the time. Being the boss of the house was a tough job and that's why her housemate hadn't been able to take it yet. It didn't stop him from trying, though.

"Pancakes, kiddo. Why don't you get the kitties they're food while I get your plate ready?"

It looked like the boy was about to say something; Princess could see his mouth starting to open. He must've realized whatever it was would get him in trouble, because it closed awfully fast and he nodded. "Ok, mama. Come on, Princess...."

Good, no sign of the other cat, Princess thought as she followed the child over to the bowl. Champ was Princess' brother, well... when Princess was feeling in a generous mood. Other times she liked to pretend he was just some uninvited guest; usually when he tried to challenge her authority. Just because he was bigger, he assumed he should be the leader. Not if she could help it! Champ was slightly older than her and bigger, but otherwise they

could be twins. They had the same markings and all.

The other main difference between the two was his appetite! He could easily finish off both of their breakfasts himself, plus try and eat some of the human's scraps. Princess never lowered herself to such begging. She was perfectly content with the kibble they got, along with the occasional canned stuff. Now, that was a treat! Far superior to the stuff those humans call food. She did, however, sort of enjoy their chocolate milk whenever they would offer her a little sip.

A familiar noise rang out as the child dumped the kibble into the bowl. Sure enough, seconds later, Champ came racing into the kitchen, practically sliding on the tiled floor as he tried to hit the brakes. Unfortunately for him, Princess was already at the bowl, chomping away happily at the little brown bits that made up their kibble. Champ attempted to nose his way into the bowl a few times, but his sister managed, despite her small stature, to cover the bowl with her face so he had no room. Once she was finished with her share, she stepped away from the bowl. Champ, seeing his cue to act, hurriedly took her place, and finished the rest of the bowl in under a minute. He then looked up at the people with a look on his face that clearly indicated it hadn't been enough. Princess mentally chided him for being so pathetic and turned to leave the room.

Her boy had finished his own breakfast by then and was heading into the living room, so she wanted to see what he was up to. She wasn't surprised to see the child walk over to the little closet by the door and pull out a jacket from one of the hangers, while picking his bag off the floor. Must be what the humans call a "school day". On those days, her boy would grab his things, say goodbye to her and then disappear for hours at a time. When he got home, he'd usually run straight for her toys and play with her for a little bit before the mother forced him to go to his room and start his homework while she made dinner.

A couple of days a week, the routine would change. She came to know those as "weekends". The boy would still disappear for a time, but he always snuggled with her in bed later and stayed up to play longer. She liked those days best.

Princess didn't like being woken up early by the irritating noise from the child's alarm clock. Where did people come up with things like that anyway? Where they all crazy? Why would anyone want to ruin a perfectly good lounging opportunity? Try to figure out a human...



As expected, minutes later the boy picked her up and petted her while saying his goodbyes. He called out to his parents and Champ before racing out the door. Princess jumped onto the living room windowsill and watched as the boy approached a group of children a few doors down and chatted. Soon, a big yellow thing pulled up beside them and the kids got on, disappearing from her view.

Now that her child was gone for the day, Princess decided to wander the house in search of something to do. She wasn't tired enough to try another nap yet and, even if she was hungry, food would not be coming again until the boy was home and about to sit down to dinner with his parents. Just as Princess was about to turn her attention to one of the many toy mice the people had brought them, she felt something bump her from behind.

It was Champ, in one of his playful moods. Or maybe, he was just trying to overpower her to assert the dominate position in the house. Whichever one it was, his victory was completely unacceptable! Even though he had caught her by surprise, Princess managed to stand her ground. She even got Champ to bounce back a little bit. As he stood straight again, Princess let out a small hiss to let him know he needed to back off. Apparently, Champ didn't get the brains in their family, because he had the nerve to hiss back at her; he even swiped on top of it all!

To teach him just how foolish a move that was, Princess hissed a little louder and pounced him, knocking him to the ground. As they rolled across the floor in a tangled mess of fur and claws, Princess swiped at her brother again. He let out a small cry and ran off as she caught him on the back of the neck. Satisfied her lesson had gotten through, Princess returned her attention to the toy she'd been eyeing before her brother's rude interruption.

A little while later, the kitten began to find the toy boring and decided it was time to take a nap. She looked around the living room, trying to find the perfect spot to rest. A brief mental debate led to her choosing to jump back on the window sill and nap there. The sunlight was shining through just right, creating the perfect warm and toasty place to sleep. She curled up in a little ball, her head resting on one of her paws.

Just as she was about to doze off, she felt something sharp on her side. Princess raised her head, looking down to see her brother with one paw propped on the wall beneath her and the other one in the air. She let out a loud hiss and he turned to run away. Princess wasn't going to let him get away that easy, though. She jumped down, racing after him.



She briefly lost him in one of the hallways, but caught a glimpse of his tail retreating into the parent's room. *“I’ll get him now,* she thought, picking up her pace and following him under the bed. Her brother made a huge mistake and, judging by the look on his face, he knew it!

This was the worst spot he could've tried to hide in. The opening of the other side of their bed was blocked off by boxes and other objects. There was one way out of this mess he'd made and Princess was blocking it. She pounced and they once again became a mass of flying claws and fur, occasionally bumping the bottom of the bed.

Their struggle ended when the mother came in and demanded to know

what was going on in there. Both cats stopped cold, startled at the sudden interruption. Both came out from under the bed. While Champ was hanging his head in shame and meekly trying to slink by, Princess stood with her head held high! She had been kicking his butt pretty bad and was always proud of herself after standing up to her brother's annoying attempts to take over around there.

"I swear, the way you two carry on! Scoot now, get out of here," the mother scolded them. Champ picked up his pace, but Princess deliberately slowed down a little. She wasn't going to be pushed around; especially not now! Not when she'd just scored such a massive victory. The human would just have to live with it.

Now that the lesson was out of the way, Princess was able to go back to her spot and get the nap in she'd attempted earlier. If she was right, she'd have just enough time to do so before her boy came home to play. The kitten fell asleep on the window sill, sweet dreams of playtime and fights dancing through her head.

A sharp noise from outside stirred the kitten from her sleep. She sat up, seeing that the doors of her boy's bus had just slammed shut. He was running towards the house, waving at the other children and calling out promises to play over the weekend. Princess sat up, stretching again and briefly leaning herself before the child came racing through the door.

"Mama, I'm home," he yelled, tossing his stuff on the ground and looking around the room. "Oh, hey girl!" He walked over to Princess, patting her on the head. "Did you have a nice day? Are you ready for playtime?"

Princess purred and rubbed against his side, signifying her agreement with his plan.

"Just a minute, young man," the mother admonished as she entered the living room. "Is that what we do with our things when we come home?"

"Oops, sorry mama." The boy bent over and picked his coat and bag up, hanging the coat on a hanger and putting his bag on a hook on the door.

"That's better. Now you can go play with Princess." She turned around and headed back into the kitchen to work on dinner.

"Come on, girl!" The little boy motioned to Princess to follow him into his playroom. She jumped down onto the floor and trotted after him, eagerly anticipating the fun that was waiting for her. They spent the next hour or so playing. He'd throw cat nip toys for her to chase and run a string along the floor for her to pounce on. That was her favorite, even if she managed to miss it from time to time. She'd just attack it all the more fiercely the next round.



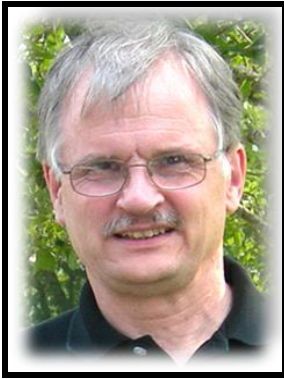
Finally, it was time for the child to start his homework and then head downstairs for dinner. She followed him as he put the toys away, trudging up to his room to complete a task he clearly didn't like. She hopped up on the desk to lie beside him as he worked. She didn't understand what this "homework" thing was exactly, but she had a feeling the pictures the boy was doodling in his book weren't it. She didn't mind, so long as he reached over to pet her every so often.

Champ had clearly learned something (for the time being) from their little scuffle earlier. When her boy put the bowl down for her dinner, the cat didn't race over to try and nose his way in. Instead, he crept into the room, sitting a safe distance away while Princess finished her share. Only then did he dare to move any closer and try to take some for himself. She knew it wouldn't last though; it never did. Sometimes being the boss was exhausting!

More homework time and a bath followed. Princess was forced to sit outside the bathroom, mewing at the door while the child finished up and got ready for bed. She never was allowed to go in there during bath time, she wasn't sure why exactly. She sometimes wondered why she bothered to try; she heard the water in there and saw how the boy would come out with wet hair. It made the kitten's

hair stand on end to think about it! The few baths she'd gotten had been torture!

As another day came to an end, Princess hopped up onto the bed, lying down beside the little boy and watching as his parents came in to tell him goodnight. Princess drifted off to sleep with her boy gently petting her to sleep.



Quasers By Rick Weber

I was awakened by the whinny of a horse. “A horse,” I thought. “I must be mistaken.” The room was dark and cold with only the faint rays of the early dawn light coming through a window. I slowly climbed out of the bed with my head a bit groggy. I moved over to the window and looked out. I was surprised to see a horse in a corral below. Gripped with anxiety, I asked myself, “Where am I?”

Before I could gather another thought, I heard a door open behind me. I turned and saw a tall thin middle aged man with thick brown hair in a long gray dressing gown standing there with a lit oil lamp in his left hand.

“I see, I see you’re awake,” the man stammered with an English accent. “You gave us quite a start last evening. You fell off your horse on the road out front. Don’t worry about your steed. He’s all right but I guess you know that already from looking out the window.”

“Where am I?” I asked.

“You’re in Canoct the capital for the principality of Voidea,” the man replied. “And,” he continued, “I am Professor Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. I teach

mathematics at the university but I am currently on sabbatical here. So, what is your name and whence do you hail?”

“I am Jon Forster and I come from New York,” I responded puzzled at Professor Dodgson’s choice of words.

“You said that I was thrown off of my horse?” I asked.

“Yes, you were,” the professor replied. “It also appears that you struck your head during the fall, which may account for some memory loss. To put your mind at ease, I’ll tell you what I know. A passerby found you lying on the road outside the front gate after dark yesterday. Your horse was close by. The stranger sent his son up to my door to fetch me. I went out and helped bring you up to my house. We put you on the bed hoping you would regain consciousness. The stranger left and I looked in on you throughout the night. You had nothing on you to say who you were or where you were from just the clothes on your back.”

With that, I looked down and found myself wearing a blue striped collarless dress shirt and charcoal flannel trousers held up by a pair of suspenders and I was shocked to say the least. “Where are my baggie cargo shorts, my rock band t-shirt, and the gray hoodie that I had on?” I thought.

“If you’re able to make it downstairs, I’ll make us some tea,” the professor said.

With that I just nodded and followed Professor Dodgson down the stairs to the kitchen. I was even more amazed at what I did not see on the way to the kitchen. The house had no electricity or indoor plumbing.

“I must be in an Amish community,” I began to reason. “But how did I learn to ride a horse?” I asked myself. “I live in a high rise near Central Park. How did I get out here in the sticks?”

The professor put a tea strainer over a cup and poured me a cup of tea. This was all too strange. I never drank tea before and had just started drinking Lattes from a local coffee shop on the Upper East Side. I was a high school freshman getting my first grown up view of the world.

After we sat down at the kitchen table, the professor spoke to me. “I

guess we’ll have to send someone out to look for your folks. Not to worry, I’m sure we’ll locate them post haste. In the meantime, I could use your help. I’m finishing up some work on a mathematical project of mine. I call it Dodgson’s Method. To complete it, I am doing some work here in an upcoming election for the Prime Minister of Voidea and am working on the campaign of Winston Boylaria from the Quasers. He’s running against Lloyd Jamender from the Staffs. I’m sure you have heard of them.”



“No, I haven’t,” I answered still wondering where I was and how I got here.

“Not a problem,” said the professor. I’ll get you up to speed on everything including my Dodgson’s Method. We’ll get into that first before we go down to the Quasers’ campaign headquarters.”

“Great,” I thought. “I am flunking Algebra I and this guy is going to teach me a complex math theory.”

It was true that I was not faring well in school, particularly in mathematics. I also had no interest in any type of politics. My only interest at school was making it through the day without getting bullied too much by my classmates. Forging over my lunch money to the upper classmen and being stuffed into lockers by them were my daily rituals. I had been left depressed by this which resulted in poor grades but I never mentioned any of this to my parents since I wanted to be accepted by my peers.

Professor Dodgson gave me a scone to eat for breakfast while he left the kitchen to change into his work clothes. I drank the tea and ate the scone while waiting for his return still wondering why I was here.

I finished breakfast just as the professor came back into the room. “Are you ready?” the academic asked me and I could only nod my head.

“Well, the, the Dodgson’s Method is a voting system I came up with,” the professor began with a stutter. “A method of taking votes on more than

two issues, this is done by swapping candidates until you find a Condorcet winner. To do this a voter submits an ordered list of all candidates according to their own preference from best to worst. The winner is defined to be the candidate for whom we need to perform the minimum number of pair wise swaps added over all candidates before they become a Condorcet winner. In particular, if there is already a Condorcet winner, they win the election.”

My head spinning still when I asked the pedagogue, “What is a Condorcet winner?”

“Simply put, a Condorcet winner of an election is the candidate preferred by more voters.”

This was just more nonsense. For me and just about everyone else, the winner of any election was the one preferred by the most voters. Fancy names on theories did not win elections. “Perhaps,” I thought, “I should look all of this up in Wikipedia, if I only had a computer.”

Surprisingly, I absorbed this new math skill with ease picking it up quicker than I ever did Algebra. Armed with this new information, I accompanied Professor Dodgson to Quaser party headquarters which turned out to be in a barn on Winston Boylaria’s farm just outside of town.

Inside the barn, I saw a large homemade table in the middle of the floor with campaign posters stacked on it. Each poster has a picture of candidate Boylaria on it with the slogan, “Here to Change”. The barn reeked from the odor of domestic farm animals which bothered me, a New Yorker more familiar with the smell of car exhaust.

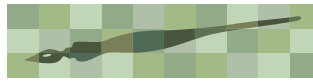
“Nice pictures, who took them?” I asked.

“I did,” replied the professor. “Now, let’s get to work.”

I gazed around the barn to see it occupied by about twenty men and women dressed in garb out of the 1870’s. The men were in great coats and sack suits and the women were in bustle dresses and capes. Everyone

both men and women each had on a hat, everyone but me. However, all were too busy to notice that my head was uncovered.

The workers gathered around the boffin who addressed them, “I have conducted sufficient sample polls throughout all of Voidea and I am here to tell you that Winston Boylaria can win this election. The numbers are strong in the towns of Amity and Valor but, weak in Stealth and Nabob. There are yet a few undecided hamlets. Tonight, we will venture to one of them, Blankful, to woo them to our side.”



As the doyen was speaking, Winston Boylaria entered the barn. I found him to be very impressive. He was as tall as Professor Dodgson but, with a beefier physique having worked daily on his farm until recently when he decided to run for prime minister. Mr. Boylaria had a natural way about him and genuine caring nature which was easily discerned by all who met him, even me the New Yorker. Winston Boylaria’s smile truly endeared him to those around him. He was the type of man I hoped to become someday. As soon as he finished addressing the staff, the professor introduced me to Mr. Boylaria.

Winston, as he wanted everyone to call him, then stood beside us and spoke to his workers in a strong quiet voice. “My good friends, we still have some time until the election. We need to reach out to those who have not yet aligned themselves with a candidate and court them. We have to do this to defeat Lloyd Jamender and the Staffs. You have seen his tactics and know that he does not have the interests of Voidea in his heart. Tonight, I will be speaking in Blankful to get our message across. I understand that Mr. Jamender will also be there delivering a speech of his own. Let’s stick together because we are ‘Here to Change’. Thank you.”

Applause broke out in the barn and Winston turned to the professor and

me. “Are you ready for tonight’s speech?” asked Professor Dodgson.

“Yes, I have it right here, Charles,” replied Winston as he pulled some handwritten pages from his inside breast pocket.

“Let us look it over,” the professor told him. “We have some other pressing items to do first but we should be back to you before we hit the road to Blankful.”

The rest of the day we worked up the latest poll results. The calculations were much easier than I expected despite being a lot harder than those I had in Algebra class.

We finally got to review Winston’s speech as the sun began to set and discovered that it needed to be revised. There was no time to do it at the barn. They had to work on it on the wagon ride to Blankful.

“There won’t be enough light to see what we’re writing down,” I complained.

“I have an invention of my own that can do the job. It’s called a nycograph. I use it to put down things in the dark when my oil lamps are out at home,” the teacher responded. With that he pulled out a stencil with a number of shapes on it. After a few minutes of instruction, I mastered the use of the device and made the changes to the speech as dictated to me by the academic on the bumpy wagon ride.

The town hall in Blankful was crowded with its mostly undecided electorate anxious to hear what the candidates had to say. With the revised speech in hand, Winston Boylaria took the dais and began his oration by saying, “People of Blankful, I am ‘Here to Change’ our principality for the better.”

Winston’s oration started strong but he began to falter midway through it. Professor Dodgson and I looked at each other and could not determine why until the teacher pointed out a figure at the back of the room. It was a thin man in a dark suit whose skin had the gray pallor of death about it and the man was weakly waving his arms back and forth.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“That’s Lloyd Jamender from the Staffs and he is up to his usual tricks,”

the sage replied. “You see. He is a bit of a magician and everyone knows it. He’s casting a spell on Winston. He’s one of those people who can only come out ahead by making the next man look bad. He cannot go too far here with this slithy behavior since it will be noticed but he will go to the limit.”



Winston finished and found that his speech was only mildly received by the Blankful electorate. Jamender took his turn with the crowd and began to seduce them from the outset of his speech. From the back of the room, Winston, the professor, and I watched him wave his arms as he spoke with sharp flashes of light emanating from the tips of his fingers creating an aura over the crowd. The Blankful populace was taken in by it and there was nothing the Quasers could do about it, for the moment.

Turning to Professor Dodgson and me, Winston spoke in a subdued tone, “We have to do better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, what’s happening tomorrow?” I asked.

“Tomorrow is the final debate before the election and we must work through the night to get prepared or it,” Winston replied.

On the ride back to Canoct, I quizzed the savant, “What special powers does Jamender possess?”

“He mesmerizes the weak minded,” Professor Dodgson began. “He has a magic energy that takes control of their minds. He did it tonight in Blankful but, he will not prevail. We can overcome him.”

“What other tricks does he use?” I asked.

“You will see,” the wise one tersely replied.

Winston remained silent on the journey as if he were lost in his own thoughts. Once back at the barn, he sat down on a bench and fell into a trance-like state. Professor Dodgson and I just looked at him briefly then turn toward each other to begin the task of crunching the last minute poll data from the speeches and formatting the

responses for the debate topics. We worked tirelessly all night in a barn lit by only one oil lamp. The oil lamp the professor told me was magical because it never needed to be refilled.

As the sun began to rise, a rooster crowed to announce the start of a new day. Winston also came out of his trance and announced to us, “We are ready.”

We looked at each other with no sense of bewilderment and simply nodded. With that Professor Dodgson and I left the barn and walked to a tea shop in town for breakfast. On the way, we encountered some Staffs who were defacing Quaser campaign posters.

I began to get riled up wanting to retaliate but, Professor Dodgson pulled on my arm and stopped me.

I looked at the guru and heard him say only, “Now is not the time and this is not the place.”

Along the way we heard Jamender supporters telling potential voters that Winston Boylaria used black magic offering to them some contrived forms of proof as evidence.

I knew that they were setting the mood for the debate to be in Jamender’s favor. They had to be stopped before they made things worse for Winston.

At the tea shop, we sat alone at a corner table waiting for our tea and scones to be brought out to us.

“What other dirty tricks does Jamender use?” I asked the pundit.

Professor Dodgson took a moment to look up at the ceiling before looking me squarely in the eye to respond to the interrogatory. “Jamender has been in politics his entire life. He started out working for his father who was a Member of Parliament for many years. I also want to add that the apple did not fall far from the tree in this case. The old man as an MP did nothing for the people in his riding. He said a lot but only delivered to himself. For example, plans to build the railroad were conveniently redrawn so that the tracks would run along the edge of his property.

For this he received a handsome payment for the right of way and a stop built just for him was put on the tracks

not too far from his house. The list is endless and I do not want to bore you with more details. Suffice to say, the elder Jamender made out at other people’s expense. The thing which bothers me most is the black magic.”

“Black magic?” I gasped.

“Yes,” the professor responded.

“You see. The rumors were rampant years back that Spencer Jamender, Lloyd’s father, was holding rituals with a chosen few followers several times a month at their home. None of the locals would attend but, the train would make stops at their estate to discharge passengers from other towns. These people would supposedly spend the night there participating in séances and learning spells from Spencer, who may have been a wizard. Nothing to confirm these allegations ever came out but, after every one of these so called events, bad things would happen to good people who spoke out against the Jamenders. Whether it was a re-election campaign or a capital project, as we just discussed, those who stood up for what was right always were silenced. Now, we have the opportunity to put this situation to rest for good.”

“What makes the present time so special?” I asked.

“You see, Jon. A few years back, Spencer Jamender passed away leaving everything to his only child, Lloyd. Lloyd’s mother had died many years ago during childbirth. This made Lloyd the sole heir to the Jamender fortune, both good and bad.”

“Good and bad, what do you mean?”

“The good part you can easily see; the estate with its mansion and all of the property around it. The bad part is the black magic. Unlike his father, Lloyd is no wizard and this is obvious to any strong minded person around him. His father’s other black magic followers also knew this. There have not been any visitors to the estate since the old man’s death. The son tries to conjure up a spell to put himself on top of a situation but, he is not always successful. You saw some of it at last night’s speech. Winston started out strong but finished a little weak because Jamender was working his

magic from the back of the room. Before his father died, Jamender would have made mincemeat out of someone like Winston in this type of forum because Spencer would have been there to help his son.”

“Why is Lloyd Jamender not as powerful as his father?”

“Whatever deal Spencer cut with the dark powers to be, it did not include his son. This is just guesswork but after his father died, things were not the same. Some of the people here began to take umbrage with his representation as an MP. They disagreed with him on a number of issues. In the past, he would just wave his arms and the magic sparks coming from his fingertips would make things go away. Physically, it also showed on him. Before this election campaign for Prime Minister, he was equal in size to Winston; strong like an ox with a broad muscular build and a perfect smile. The tone of his voice alone would garner anyone’s attention.

Winston and his family have suffered at the hands of Jamender. When Lloyd decided to run for Prime Minister, Winston threw his hat into the ring to challenge him for the job. We all know that if Jamender wins the country will be in trouble. Jamender had been strong but with each speech and each debate, he was weakened by Winston. At first, he just appeared to look sullen but, as time has progressed, he has lost weight. Some of his teeth have fallen out and, his skin, as you saw, looks like that of a corpse. However, he still has some strength and the Quasers feel that if he wins, he will become reinvigorated and more powerful than ever.”

“If Mr. Boylaria wins tonight’s debate, will Jamender be finished?”

“It will help our cause,” the professor replied. Then changing the subject abruptly, he uttered, “We best be going. We have much to do before tonight’s encounter.”

With that we left the shop and went back to the barn where we spent the remainder of the day preparing Winston for the debate.

Night had fallen and all of the gaslights around the Canoct town square were lit. The square was full of people waiting for the candidates to arrive. The bandstand in the center of the square would serve as the stage for this final debate. Winston in the company of the professor, me, and members of the Quaser campaign were the first side to arrive. We made our way through the cheering crowd to the steps of the bandstand. There, we waited. A few minutes later, cheers again went up as Jamender and his minions arrived from the opposite side of the square.

The Mayor of Canoct was tasked to serve as moderator and walked down the bandstand steps to greet the candidates. After the candidates shook hands, the mayor tossed a coin to select who would go first in the debate. Jamender won and walked up the steps to the podium to give his position on the three issues for the debate; *whearns*, *expenins*, and *gleemplinece*.

“Regarding *whearns*,” Jamender began waving his hands with only a few magic sparks being emitted. “I will make this the number one priority during my term as your prime minister. *Expenins* and *gleempliance* are also part of my defined strategy.”

Before he could continue, shouting and booing rose up in the crowd drowning out Jamender’s voice. Even those there to support him began to call him a liar. The Professor and I could only look at each other in disbelief while Winston stood quietly at the side of the bandstand with his head down with his eyes closed. Jamender was not able to finish stating his position and stormed off of the bandstand almost running out of the square.

It was now Winston’s turn to address the crowd and he stepped up to address them. “My fellow Voideans,” he shouted. “We are ‘Here to Change’ and I promise you that.” This was all that Winston had to say. Everyone in the crowd erupted in applause and loud cheers. Winston did not have to say anything more. The debate was over and he was carried by the crowd to his carriage at the edge of the square.

Professor Dodgson and I watched with the rest of the crowd as Winston’s carriage drove away from the square into the direction of his farm. We then turned toward each other and I asked, “Where do we go from here?”

“Home,” the savant tersely replied.

“What do you mean? We have work to do. The election is right around the corner...”

Before I could go on, the sage interrupted me. “Jon, our job is done. The numbers proved us right. The tortoise has spoken to Achilles.” With that he pointed in the opposite direction where my horse was saddled and ready to go.

“Time to mount up,” the professor told me. With that, we walked up to the steed, stopped, and shook hands. He gave me a leg up to get on the horse.

Looking down from the horse, I asked, “Which way do I go?”

My mentor just nodded his head toward the road leading out of town and bid me, his pupil, one final word, “Godspeed!”



With that the horse was off at a full gallop and I was completely in control riding down the road. I did not look back listening only to the thundering hooves as darkness enveloped me. I knew Winston had worked his own magic and could handle things without my help.

My ride was interrupted by the blast of a siren. I opened my eyes and found myself on the ground looking up at a paramedic, who asked, “Are you all right. You fell off a horse.”

“A horse?” I asked.

“Yes, a horse, Jon,” another voice said. It was my father standing next to me. “You went out with your friends this morning and rented some horses here in Central Park. You were not on the horse for more than five minutes when the horse you were on got spooked and threw you off of his back.”

I looked down at myself and saw I was dressed in my baggy cargo shorts and t-shirt with my hoodie on. I tried to get up but the paramedic told me to

stay down. I was told that I would be going to the hospital to be examined. Despite being hurt, I was ready for the day. The problems I had yesterday were not my issues today. As the ambulance made it was through traffic to Lenox Hill Hospital, I wondered how I would ever thank Professor Charles Lutwidge Dodgson for the gifts he had shared with me.



The Refuge By DiVitto Kelly

Will Kenney had an hour to kill before dinner. His family was on their vacation in Sanibel Island, a small seaside town on the southwest coast of Florida. They've been coming to Brody's Bayside Cottages for the past twelve years, enjoying the natural sights and sounds of an unspoiled coastal community. Will, turning thirteen in a month, was eager to try out his new mountain bike, an early birthday present from his grandparents.

"Mom, Dad, can I take the bike out for a ride today?" he asked, optimistically. The Kenney family arrived two days ago, but Will still hadn't tried out his sparkling, tangerine orange mountain bike.

"I'm starting the burgers in about an hour," replied Dad, who'd just finished up a kayaking trip in Sanibel Bay, zigzagging in and out of mangrove estuaries with his wife Andrea of fifteen years. Will's mom took off her water sandals, pouring out sand and bits of seashells. She stretched out on the front step of their cabin, overlooking the pristine water landscape.

"You want cheese on yours?" asked Dad.

"Of course," said Will. "Cheddar if we have it, with onions please! Do we have any pickles?"

"I think so," replied Dad. "Man, it's still hot out today, que calor!" He wiped his perspiring brow with a towel.

All three sat in the front screened porch of their two-bedroom cottage, the ceiling fan set at half-speed. Will's dad popped open a couple of freezer chilled Red Stripe beers for he and his wife. "In a few years Will; cheers dear." Will finished off a bottle of orange flavored Gatorade.

"Take a bottle of water with you; it's hot, and don't go too far, okay? Oh, and bring your cell phone just in case." said Mom, kicking back in a lounge chair draped with a yellow and blue beach towel. Will's head was spinning. All he wanted to do was go for a quick ride on his new bike.

"And remember to always wear your helmet, okay?" said Dad, wearing a straw hat; his face already incurring a patented facial suntan around his sunglasses. His dad liked to point out when he was growing up, he and his friends never wore helmets and yet, somehow survived childhood. Sometimes, Will wished he'd grown up in the 1970's so he wouldn't had to deal with the prevailing over-the-top, protective mentality of today's parents. But since there was no Internet back then, Will made the small sacrifice and strapped on the helmet.

"I'll be fine guys," said Will, understanding his parent's concern, but not wanting to be treated as a kid anymore. After all, Will Kenney was about to become a teenager in exactly twenty-nine days.

Will set off on his trek in fifth gear, figuring he'd ride steady for about a half hour, stop off for a water break, maybe even do some sightseeing up close and personal, and return back in time for grilled burgers. Six years ago, the town of Sanibel Island installed a bike path for locals and omnipresent vacationers, mostly for the latter. The winding trail ran parallel along the seven-mile stretch of road leading from the tip of the island to the main intersection in the touristy part of town, the place where tourists bought t-shirts and cheap souvenirs.

The stretch of road on each side was filled with sabal, fan, and

occasional coconut palm trees. Red mangrove trees intertwined with the shallow brackish waters; the black and white variety preferring dry land. Florida scrub filled in open spaces, providing cover for native Florida animals, an assortment of birds, raccoons, bobcats, and even on ultra-rare occasions, the Florida panther. Most of the paved bike path baked in the sun. A few locations along the way offered only morsels of shade.

Will shifted down into a lighter gear, a little tired already from the blazing heat and humidity. July was always a brutal time temperature-wise to visit southwest Florida, but the hotel rates were cheaper. On some occasions, when the weather actually cooperated, cool gulf breezes pushed the humidity inland. Today was not one of those days.

Will passed the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum, a quirky wood-framed building featuring a giant clam painted in pastel blue and green at the entrance. A fountain churning water inside the gaping shell was littered with small change and big wishes. Will knew he'd already gone two miles, pretty fast he calculated. Will pulled over, spotting a pair of sabal palms providing respectable shade. The tween drank almost half the contents quickly, even pouring a few drops on his face. Looking up, he watched a dozen pelicans fly in the direction of the Gulf of Mexico, not a bad place to be, the boy thought.

Will hopped on his bike again and resumed his journey. A dangling branch from a large sea grape tree spilled onto the bike path, blocking the lane. Will rode around the obstacle, slightly irked.

Farther up, about half a mile, was the JN "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge, a place the Kenney family had visited on many occasions, mostly by car. Will never saw much there, other than a few variety of birds and the same solitary six-foot alligator that hung out by a weathered dock near the refuge exit. One time, three years ago, Will's family decided to walk the trail, thinking it would be a nice change of pace. They were wrong. Later that day,

and forever more, it would simply be known as ‘the death march.’

Will remembered a water fountain inside the exhibit hall, the one thing he actually liked about the refuge. It had some interesting historical information and displays, a gift shop with books, nature-themed toys, and T-shirts, but most importantly, it was air-conditioned! Will saw a thick, gnarled rope with a sign stating the refuge was closed – *Absolutely no entry after 7:00 PM*. He noticed an old jeep parked behind the exhibit hall that gave him hope it was still open. He picked up his bike, hurdled the barrier, and then peddled over to the shaded entrance. Will parked his bike and jogged up the recycled plastic steps to the double sliding glass door which, unfortunately, was locked. All the lights were out, nothing but the remaining sun shining through the dozen skylights from above. “Rats,” said the twelve-year-old.”

Will walked over to his bike, looking around. Near a green plastic garbage can, he spotted a pair of raccoons, rummaging for food. A black racer snake darted from the warmed parking lot surface into nearby brush.



The dusk sun still cut through the orchard of towering sea grape trees, their rounded leaves scattered around the parking lot. Will took a quick sip of water, trying his best to conserve what was left. He got on his bike and quietly peddled towards the exit, but glanced back at the refuge entrance, a yellow plastic-coated chain hooked up from one side of the trail to the other.

A bright orange sign hung in the middle displaying park hours. On the left, a green plastic donation box with a slit opening hung from a wood pole, standing about four feet high. The boy reached into his tan, khaki shorts and produced a dollar bill, placing it in through the narrow slot. If he was going to sneak in the refuge after closing, at least he wouldn't feel too guilty about it.

Will guided his bike around the chain and mounted up again, peddling

leisurely. It was the first time he'd traveled alone on the familiar trail, a new experience for the tween. The hot summer sun was settling in nicely behind clouds, no-see-ums and mosquitoes buzzed annoyingly around Will's ears, but not as bad as he thought. Usually the mosquitos attacked tourists like piranhas.

An honest person by pre teen standards, there was something exhilarating about riding illegally alone. Cruising through the unspoiled natural refuge at dusk brought a new perspective to Will. Watching the gentle setting sun reflecting off the mangrove tidal estuary and its inhabitants was breathtaking. Great blue herons patiently tiptoed in the shallow, brackish water, hunting for fish with their pointed, lethal beaks. Roseate spoonbills slashed back and forth with their flattened bills, searching for small fish and crustaceans; their vibrant pink feathers beautifully reflecting off the water.

Will wished he'd brought his camera. When he was a little younger, he questioned his parents why photographers would want to spend days on end photographing birds. Big deal, he thought. Now he understood. He could snap some pictures with his cell phone alright, but the picture quality wasn't too great.

Halfway through the trail, Will reached a simple, two-story, wood-framed observation deck, sun pouring through the wood beams, creating a skeletal ribcage of shade. A nearby water fountain was a welcomed relief for the tween. Will pressed the lever, letting it run for a few seconds. He took a drink, but the water had a peculiar taste and was still 'room temperature.' “Ugh,” the boy said, spitting it out.

“Heck, at least it's water,” Will thought, taking a heavy gulp then splashing water on his sweat-soaked face. He pooled his hands and wetted his course, curly-brown hair, water dripping onto his Mucky Mackerel restaurant T-shirt. He parked his bike near the base of the front steps, partially hidden from the road. The young man strode up the steps, reaching the top quickly. He sat on the

bench to rest for a moment. He took out his phone to call his parents, letting them he'd be home in a half-hour or so. No reception. “No biggie,” Will thought, he'd be home soon anyway.

He stood up and stretched a little, strolling over to the wood railing and peered out over the panoramic view. It could have been a scene straight out of Jurassic Park minus the dinosaurs, of course. He savored a freshly caught breeze; the distinctive stiff salt flavor of mangroves permeated the air.

“That was strange,” thought Will, noticing a station wagon-sized wake appear out of nowhere in the middle of the tranquil waters. Birds scattered in every direction. Will knew currents are normally quite mild in estuaries, which made this one stand out significantly. The boy scratched his head and shifted over to the viewfinder to get a detailed look.

“Where are you,” Will asked, thinking it could be an alligator, “Or maybe a big crocodile!” he hoped. Will had just watched a pair of cool killer croc films with friends, so maybe life could imitate art. His excitement quickly turned to dread. “No, I don't want that!” referring to the people getting eaten in both films.

He looked up again, scanning the estuary. Nothing – hold on, the teen spotted the churning waters again. Will went back to the viewfinder, focusing on the specific spot.

There, he saw an eye, big and slanted like a crocodile. “Cool,” said Will, who turned back as the sound of a car approached. “Oh no.”

A four-door black pickup truck drove up the gravel and dirt road towing a six-foot trailer behind, the top covered up with a gray tarp. The pickup stopped a few feet past the lookout. Will crouched down, begging not to be seen. The man, dressed in long olive-green khaki pants and cream-white long-sleeved t-shirt, got out of the truck and walked over to the trailer. He appeared to be an employee from the refuge. In fact, Will recognized the man from previous visits to the exhibit hall. In his late fifties perhaps, the fit man stood a shade under six feet tall. He had long peppered hair in back wore a

wide-brimmed baggy red hat and tan hiking boots. He untied the rope holding down the tarp then pulled it back, making a loud, ruffling sound. Will couldn't believe what he saw.



Stacked at least three feet high were huge sides of raw beef, something you'd see hanging at an old school meat market. He took out a sharp, heavy-duty pitchfork and pierced the meat.

"What the hell is that for," Will asked himself, as he remained crouched down in a corner. The boy turned his head toward the sound of thrashing water, and a deep, resonating hiss.

The thing began to surface, big as school bus and prehistoric-looking as . .

"A Dinosaur?" said Will, stunned and scared out of his mind. He turned to the other side of the street only to see another creature, exactly the same as the other one only a bit smaller. Will wished he could disappear and return to the cottage eating burgers with his parents. But no, he was present, now staring at two horrific creatures, both over twenty feet in length, with dark green plated skin, claws, tails, and gleaming white teeth. The legs were a bit longer than a crocodile's, enabling it to hoist their study frames higher off the ground. The last time Will peed in his pants was at the tender age of four, jumping into a mountainous leaf pile for hours in the back yard. He was young, a rookie mistake – but this time? He did his best not to.

The creatures lurched out of the water, causing the ground to shake. The park ranger hollered, then heaved an animal carcass to each side of the road. The creatures calmly and methodically, grabbed the meat and devoured it. The sound of crunching bones crackled in the early evening sky. He repeated the feeding process four more times. Will clutched his cellphone with his sweaty hands, but it slipped out of his grasp. It fell to the ground, hitting the observation tower's

concrete base. The noise surprised the creatures, especially the larger one, who lifted up its head and glared over to the tower, squinting.

Will hunched over even more, his head between his knees, praying. A voice called out.

"Who's up there?" the man asked with a strong hint of irritation in his deep voice. Will kept his head down, not moving a muscle. The creatures followed the man's eyes looking at the observation tower. Sweat poured from Will's face, dropping onto the wood. He was miserable and scared to death. The boy heard movement and then felt hot breath on the top of his head. The smell was nauseating. Will turned his head ever so slightly, shifting his eyes, now almost in tears.



The creature glared at the boy and bellowed, causing Will to scurry back like a monkey and screaming. The creature, with its crocodile-like face, stuck its head through the observation deck railing, cracking two beams of wood. It moved closer to the boy. The smaller creature went back to eating. The bold voice called out again, "No! Come back here Ralph!" The creature, still staring at Will, retreated ever so slowly; the teen dropped to his knees quivering in terror.

"Ralph?" Who the hell is Ralph? Will asked himself, frightened to death.

"Son, come down here right now," said the man, firmly. Will stood up on his wobbly legs and staggered downstairs, clutching the handrail. He reached the bottom, watching as the beasts finished off the rest of the carcasses.

"You're not supposed to be here son; can't you read?"

"Uh . . . yes sir," stammered Will, unable to peel his gazing eyes away from the two creatures.

"You mean you can't read or you know you're not supposed to be here?"

"Uh . . . the last one you said -- sir." said Will, still standing on the bottom step of the lookout tower,

clutching the guardrail like his life depended on it.

"Come out son, I don't bite . . . but they do," he said with a grin.

"Are you . . . gonna feed me . . . to them?" asked Will, his throat dry as beach sand.

"Don't be stupid son – they're all nice and full now," said the man, with a wink. "You do realize this needs to be kept hush-hush; do you understand me?" Will nodded ever so slightly in agreement.

"Uh . . . what are they," the tween asked, still paralyzed in fear.

"Dinosaur of some sort – closely related to today's big crocs. I discovered these two almost thirty years ago when I first started here," said the man, his tone not nearly as stern as before.

"One evening I was closing everything up when I discovered my favorite sunglasses were missing. I remembered taking them off when I was giving a tour at this very tower. Well, I went back to get 'um and spotted the smaller one sunning itself in the shallows, just hanging out."

"But it didn't try to eat you?" asked Will, the whole moment totally surreal.

"To be honest son; by the way, what's your name?"

"Will sir; Will Kenney. My family and I have been coming here for twelve years."

"I'm Mr. Blake," shaking the boy's hand. Pleasure to meet you.

"You too," replied Will, still nervous.

"Well, Will," said the park ranger, "Well Will, that's kinda funny, don't you think?" repeating the line with laughter. Will offered up a weak smile.

"Almost pooped my pants when I saw it," said Blake. "I couldn't believe it at first, of course. We made eye contact and it winked at me, I swear to God, it winked at me.

"And then?" asked Will, intently.

"I waved back of course," said Blake. "Later I went home and polished off a good bottle of Argentine red wine – Mendoza region, remember that Will when you're able to drink legally. Anyway, I didn't say a word to anyone,

not even to my co-workers. They'd think I was nuts."

"So nobody knows about . . . this?" asked the tween, pointing his arms at the creatures, who, to Will's horror, were walking towards him. Will hid behind the man, who stretched out his arm and started petting the creatures on the nose. Will almost fainted on the spot.

"Relax," said the man, holding the weak-kneed boy steady. "They're actually quite gentle. I'm the only one who knows about 'em; now you do too. Did I mention how much they like tourists? Just kidding, Will." The boy turned pale as a bleached out sand dollar, still convinced he was going to be fed to the creatures.

"Ralph and Alice actually don't eat too much, and definitely not humans. I feed 'em twice a month like this; I tell our local butcher in town I throw a lot of barbeques at my house. If any more appear though, I'll have to tell 'em I opening up a barbeque restaurant!" he said with a bombastic laugh.

"Ralph and Alice?" asked Will.

"Yeah, you know; well, maybe you don't know -- from the Honeymooners television show starring Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows." Will served up a perfectly blank slate look.

"Never mind son, that was half a century ago!"

"Have they ever eaten anybody?" Will asked, feeling a little less queasy, but still wary.

"I've found a few cameras littered here and there from time to time by the waters' edge; I'm sure people just panicked a bit and ran. But honestly, I don't think so."

"I hope not," said the teen.

I usually stay late to double check no one's hiding out. Then again, I don't know who else has sneaked in here after hours, something I'm sure you won't do again, right Will?

"I'm certain that will never ever happen again Mr. Blake," replied Will.

"I would greatly appreciate it," the man replied, and so would Ralph and Alice."

"But wouldn't it be cool if people knew about . . . Ralph and Alice?" asked Will, "It would be a huge story!"

"And that's why it has to remain a secret. This tranquil landscape would never be the same. It'd be a zoo here every day," replied the park ranger.

"I guess that makes sense," said Will, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"You've gotta swear Will that you will never say anything about what you saw here today; that's a direct order, do you understand?"

"I promise," replied Will. The ranger walked over to the boy's bike and rolled it over to him.

"Here, ride home, but please, not a word to anyone, not even your parents?" Will nodded in agreement.

"Bye Ralph; bye Alice," said Will, who even got a chance to pet their cold and damp reptilian snouts.

The park ranger watched the tween ride down the dusty path until he was out of view. He looked back at the two beasts then walked over to a storage shed near the lookout tower. Blake unlocked the padlock and pulled out a huge four-foot wide rubber beach ball.

"Alright guys, playtime!" The park ranger rolled the vibrant multicolored ball over to Ralph, who nudged it with its snout. The two creatures began playing together. Will had stopped and returned, hiding behind a towering cypress tree, witnessing the whole episode. How cute Will thought . . . yet completely bizarre. He got back on his bike and rode home.

"Your timing is impeccable son, how was your bike trip?" asked Dad, now savoring a tall glass of lemonade loaded with ice.

"Kinda interesting," replied Will, who quickly guzzled down a glass of lemonade himself.

"Can we visit the refuge tomorrow late afternoon?" he asked, but not hinting at what he saw.

"I suppose so," said his mom, rather surprised.

"I though you didn't like going there?" said Dad, flipping the hamburgers and adding cheese slices.

"I changed my mind," said Will. "And make sure you bring your cameras." Both parents looked at each other, a bit perplexed, but shrugged in agreement.

"Shall we walk it?" asked Dad. His wife gave him an icy stare.

"Death March, remember?" said Will, with a slight smile.

"Sorry, we'll drive it," said Dad.

The next day was brutally hot, nothing but clear blue skies and void of any breeze to speak of. The family drove back from dinner a little later than planned, but there was still time to go to the Refuge.

"Got your cameras ready guys," asked Will.

The Kenney family pulled onto the dirt road entrance in their pearl white Volvo wagon. The Refuge was closing in thirty minutes, not much time to experience the scenic estuary, but enough to maybe experience something . . . big and unique.

"Dad, can you pick up the pace?" asked Will, "I want to go to the observation deck and see the . . . birds, yeah, all the colorful birds – spoonbills and stuff."

"But we'll miss seeing . . . all this," said Mom, pointing to the small open spots of water and abundant red mangroves."

"We've seen that a hundred times," said Will, "But there might be something really cool at the observation tower – maybe a big croc!"

"Alright, alright, we're going," said Dad, hitting twenty miles per hour now. "You know I could get a speeding ticket here."

"By who, the squirrels?" joked Will.

Dad parked the car just before the tower. Will asked his mom if she had her bottle of pepper spray in the glove compartment.

"The what?" she replied. "Why would I need pepper spray here? Mosquito repellent, yes, pepper spray? No."



"Don't go too close to the water," asked Will, "Keep the car doors open dad, just in case," he added, thinking of every precaution to take. Will also brought along a golf club and canoe paddle.

“Are you okay, Will,” asked his mom, wondering if puberty had anything to do with their son’s odd behavior. The sun was setting; a hint of cool, along with no-see-ums was in the air.

Will raced up to the top of the two story deck and peered out; nothing but birds. Suddenly, Will spotted movement in the same spot as yesterday. His heart raced in excitement, but fear as well. He wanted his parents to see what he witnessed yesterday, but what if they get attacked? What if the creatures did emerge from the waters? He didn’t see the park ranger anywhere. The boy panicked. What a stupid idea to come back here.

Will looked through the viewfinder, but didn’t see any dinosaurs or mutant crocs. Then suddenly, he saw something. A fish? The creatures? No. The bright object churned in the brackish water. Will focused the viewfinder more closely; now he could tell what the object was: a hat. A red floppy hat just like the one Mr. Blake wore yesterday.

“Oh jeeze,” muttered Will. “Mom, Dad? We better go right now!” His voice trembled with fear. He ran down the steps and shouted again to his parents who were blissfully observing the birds from ground level, taking photographs. Will got into the back seat of the car waiting for his parents, honking the horn. He saw his parents staring at something in the water. Will jumped out of the car and looked towards the water.

“Oh God, no!” Will thought. I’m going to get my parents killed. “Those things ate the park ranger and now . . .”

Will’s parents strolled back to the car. “Roseate spoonbills, wow!” said Dad, “I’ve never seen so many here. Good idea to come here Will, but why are you so uptight?”

“I’ll explain later, but we really need to leave RIGHT NOW!” Dad started the car, and drove away. As they approached the exit, a man jumped out waving his hands frantically. Will’s dad slammed on the brakes.

“I gotta ask the park ranger something important,” said Will with a sense of urgency, “I’ll just be a second.”

Will jumped out and ran up to the man. They were the only ones still at the Refuge “Don’t you just love how our son enjoys learning,” said Mom proudly, dad nodded in agreement. “I bet he’s going to ask the ranger an interesting question.

“Hi Will, the park ranger said, minus his floppy red hat. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I thought you were eaten or something,” said Will, relieved the park ranger was still in one piece. “I saw your hat in the water and thought, well, you know . . . I promise I didn’t say anything to my parents.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” the park ranger said with a smile. “After you left, me and the monsters were playing and Alice took my hat – she likes to do that from time to time. She’ll bring it back; always does.”

“My dog sometimes does that to me,” said Will. Both he and Mr. Blake chuckled.

“Enjoy the rest of your vacation Will, and stay in touch!”

“I promise. Take care Mr. Blake.”

Will Kenny was running late. Everything was locked up, no more visitors. He double-checked the exhibit hall doors before running back to the employee kitchen area and opened the refrigerator.

“Ah, there you are,” said the tall young man, sunglasses pinned up on his course hair. He lit the candles, a pair of light blue numbers – seven and zero, then walked into the large conference room decorated with streamers and balloons.

A retirement party was held for Mr. Blake, celebrating forty years of dedicated service at the JN “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

“Nice cake Will, you bake it?” asked Blake, joking.

“Not a chance,” replied Will, laughing. “It’s from Carney’s Bakery; only the best for you!”

The party went on for hours. Dozens of co-workers, past and present congratulated the best park ranger the Refuge had ever seen; a

special plaque was presented too, but it was bittersweet because Mr. Blake had cancer. He still looked fit, but his latest round of chemotherapy didn’t go too well. He placed his arm around Will’s shoulder and took his aside.

“Will, you’re gonna have to take care of Ralph and Alice, you hear?” said Blake, near tears. “I love this place more than anything else and I don’t want anything to happen to ’um. Promise me you’ll do the right thing.”

“I promise,” said the twenty-three year old park ranger, holding back tears himself. He gave the old man a hug.

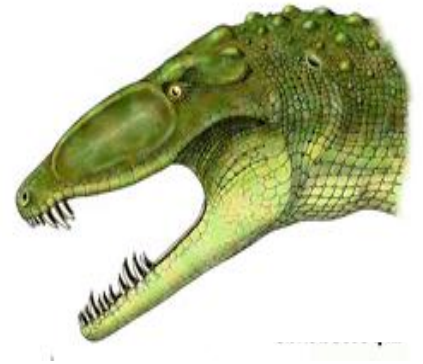
“You know the price of beef is getting expensive; any chance they’ll go vegetarian?” asked Will. Mr. Blake laughed then coughed a bit.

“You do that and they’ll be a lot of missing tourists!” joked Blake.

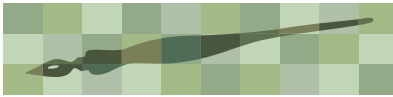
“That’s what I thought,” said Will, “I’m really gonna miss you; all of us.”

“I know,” replied Blake, “But who knows, maybe this next round of treatments will do the trick; I’ll never give up hope.”

“Me either” added the young man, putting his arm around Blake. “Now, how about another slice of cake?”



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