

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems.



The Lawman of Tangia Part One
By Edward White/CP Bialois
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Luke Petronis shifted his weight as his cyber stallion carried him across the open plain of the Tangia Desert. It wasn't the most hospitable place for one to find themselves as night settled in, but at least he was prepared. One of the dangers of being in the open on the plains was the sudden dust squalls. Similar to tornadoes on Earth, they often appeared with little-to-no warning and destroyed anything in their path.

Following the first settlement on the large Earth-like planet, they learned the need for weather distorters the hard way. Having portions of the settlement of New Austin destroyed time and again gave the people back on Earth little reason to send the expensive equipment to their neighboring solar system. The events that changed their minds became the stuff of legend for those on Tangia. The thing that was important, at least to Luke, was he wasn't close enough to New Austin or Second Monaco, to share in the protection of the weather distorters.

It wasn't a problem, per se, but he would've preferred the protection the weeks traveling the plain looking for the outlaw Hudson Bailey. Not one to not come in with his man, Luke Petronis

didn't like running out of supplies. Returning to any settlement empty-handed to restock his inventory was humiliating.

So much for my growing legend. He scoffed at his own thought and shifted his weight to the other side. After riding a cyber stallion for ten years, he thought he'd be used to its unsteady shifting. That was the problem with the mechanical animals the settlers brought with them. They had no true understanding of balance like the real ones. Sure, they could sense their footing and adjust accordingly, making them appear as efficient as the real things, but riding one highlighted the lack of natural grace animals have.

He silently cursed and scratched at the stubble beginning to poke out of his face. From the estimates he'd last heard, it'd be another forty years until they could bring real animals to Tangia. The environment just wasn't strong enough yet to sustain them. If nothing else, it gave him a reason to continue living despite what hardships the planet would throw at him. He would feel the smooth gait of a real horse before he died or, so help him, he wouldn't die. They were brave words for a thirty-four-year-old man, but he intended to stay true to them.

A short distance ahead, he spotted the cave with the extended upper covering he'd been looking for. Making camp in the middle of the plains at night was a death wish, but inside a good, solid cave the wind squalls and what animals the planet had would be hard pressed to harm him. With a tug on the reins and kick with his heels, his cyber stallion responded as any horse would and turned towards their destination. The damn thing even made a whinny sound like a horse.

He shook his head and smiled at hearing the sound. For better or worse, he'd made his choice to come there years ago. Complaining about it wasn't going to do him any good. Still, it did offer him a way to feel better. Part of him was glad for the change. How many hours had he spent reading those old cowboy stories from Earth? If not

reading, he spent his free time watching the holo-vids documenting the American Wild West. When his name came up to go to Tangia, he hadn't thought twice about it. As much as his old world had its pleasantries, he could only take so much of twenty-second century life. Out there, in the wild of Tangia, he was a man like the ones he used to read about. He even had his outlaws to chase. They weren't like the legendary Jesse James or Billy the Kid, but they gave him purpose.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice his cyber stallion come to a halt by the entrance of the cave until it gave him a modified snort. He looked at the mechanical creature as if it'd just bitten him before he pressed a button that retracted the belt into the saddle and slid off.

The cyber stallion snorted once more as if approving of having its load lessened as Luke opened a compartment in its side and pulled out his bedroll, fire kit, and rations. "Don't you look pleased with yourself." He reached into the compartment and pulled out a fresh energy vial. "Alright, hold still." He rubbed the side of the cyber stallion's face as it lifted its head in excitement at seeing its food source.

Luke doubted he would ever understand how the cyber animals could display emotions like the real things. If he didn't know better, he'd swear they had their own personalities and feelings. After setting his equipment off to the side, he walked around to the front of the cyber stallion and tapped it on its nose. It opened its mouth to display an almost empty vial and a second slot that had nothing attached to it. With a quick flip of his hand, Luke pushed the fresh vial into the open sleeve.

"There you go. That'll keep you full until we reach New Austin." After receiving a whinny and head shake from the cyber stallion, he picked up his items and carried them into the cave with the cyber stallion following behind him. A loud clunk as the top of its metallic saddle bumping the roof of the cave brought a smile to Luke's face.

“Maybe I should check into having you upgraded so your saddle can be stored too, eh?”

The blank blue glass eyes of the mechanical animal stared at him a moment before it snorted again. Letting out a chuckle and shaking his head once more, he couldn't help wondering if he was losing his mind or if his steed really alive. At least it helped take his mind off of tracking Bailey. That hombre had been a bane to his existence for the better part of a month.

After a few minutes, Luke had his bedroll set up and a fire going. As he sat back and popped the can of beef rations open, he wondered how much longer Bailey would elude him. There weren't too many places for the man to hide.



**The haunted House Part Two
By Jamie White**

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**Author Note: This is the second
part of a continuing story.**

Steve Phillips pulled in front of the small house, raising an eyebrow as he shut off the engine and studied the house. *This is the place she went nuts over?* Granted, the house wasn't that bad. It was medium-sized, and he noted with relief that there were no visible issues on the outside. The same couldn't be said for the other places they'd visited. He cringed as he remembered the house with the front screen door falling off and the broken

window. Then there'd been the house with the broken shingles all over the roof, and the one that had grass so high, he felt like he'd needed a machete to make his way to the front door.

This house, though, was clearly much better cared for. The grass was freshly cut, and he couldn't even spot the most minor chip in the paint job. Still, it wasn't exactly this amazing to-die-for place his fiancée had made it out to be. He glanced over at her as he pulled the key out of the ignition. “Are you sure this is the place?”

Cheyenne nodded as her lips curved into an ear-to-ear grin. “Sure, it is.” She gestured to the mailbox before handing him the ad she'd cut out of the newspaper. “See? The addresses match.”

Steve studied the paper a moment before handing it back to her. “I admit, it's a lot nicer than some of the other places we've seen, but there's got to be a catch here. There's no way this place costs less than the one we saw yesterday.”

“I'm telling you, that's not a mistake. I checked when I called about it.”

“Then you better be prepared for what might be inside. This guy could just be making things look nice and cheap while the inside's a total mess.” He sighed as he opened the door and climbed out of the vehicle. Visions of half-finished kitchens and torn-up floors assaulted his mind as he headed for the front door. He'd seen far too many dumps over the past couple of weeks to let his guard down.

Cheyenne followed close behind and stopped beside him as Steve rang the door bell.

To his surprise, he heard a melodious chime echo through the home. *Okay, at least the doorbell works, and it didn't nearly electrocute me.* That had happened at a house in Riverside a few days ago, and he still got annoyed every time he thought about it. What landlord doesn't put a warning when the doorbell can leave your hair standing on its ends?

A minute later, the door opened and a man only a few years older than Steve stepped onto the porch to greet them. “Good afternoon!” His gaze strayed over to Cheyenne. “You were the one I spoke to yesterday, yes?”

Cheyenne nodded. “That was me.” She gestured to Steve. “This is my fiancée, Steve.”

The man nodded. “The name's Jonathan. Why don't you guys come inside and I'll show you around?” *He seems nice enough...* “Thanks.” Steve led Cheyenne inside, stopping in the small entry. He glanced around the living area, looking for anything out of place or broken. He was surprised to see the inside looked about as well-maintained as the outside did. Alarm bells started ringing in his head as he thought of the number listed in the ad. Why on earth would this place be going for less than most others they'd seen? It was not even close to being in as bad a shape as those. *Maybe it gets worse.* He waited while the other man shut the door and turned his attention back to them.

“So, this is the living area.” He gestured toward the center of the room before clearing his throat. “The carpet's new. I just had it put in a couple of days ago. As you can see, there are lots of windows so you'll get a lot of natural light in here.”

The man droned on for a while and Steve began to tune him out as he went over every detail about the improvements made to the room. The guy seemed to be used to this kind of thing, he rattled the information off so quickly, he sounded like a used car salesman. He didn't miss a beat, and Steve began to wonder how the guy managed to take a breath. *Okay, this has to be too good to be true here.* “If you'll follow me, I'll show you the kitchen area.” The man smiled and gestured for them to follow him. He veered off to the right and pushed open the door, standing aside to allow them to enter first.

As Steve walked into the small room, his confusion deepened. Clean tile floors the color of sand greeted his

eyes. As Steve's gaze traveled from one end of the room to the other, he couldn't see a single thing to complain about. The counters were clean, and the wood cabinets looked like they'd hardly been touched. He doubted it'd been more than a few months or so since they'd been stained a deep brown.

The appliances looked just as nice. He fought the urge to ask what the joke was as he took in the fresh shine of a recent cleaning job. When he tested the appliances, they appeared to work just fine. He became more convinced by the minute Cheyenne had been mistaken about the price, after all. As they went from room to room, he couldn't find a single thing wrong with it.

Steve spent most of the tour questioning the guy about the state of the roof and the wiring. He could sense Cheyenne felt he was being rude with the way he asked his questions, but he couldn't help himself. Every instinct in him was screaming "catch".

Once the man had taken them through each room, plus showed them the back yard, Steve smiled politely at him. "Can my fiancée and I have a moment, please?"

"Sure thing. I'll just be waiting in the living room when you're done." He nodded to them and turned to walk back inside, closing the door behind him.

Steve couldn't be sure, but he thought he detected a hint of nervousness in the man's demeanor after he'd requested a minute to talk. That didn't make him feel any better about the situation. Now that the man was out of the way, Jonathon turned to face her. "Okay, I admit it: this is a lot nicer than I thought it might be. Are you absolutely sure you heard that guy right? How can this place be cheaper than the others we saw? This neighborhood alone should be adding to the rent."

"I'm telling you, I checked that a couple of times. There's no way I was mistaken." Steve frowned. "There has to be some catch here, something wrong with the

place that isn't so obvious. What if it's got mold or something?"

Cheyenne laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "Really, sweetie... you worry way too much. Don't you ever think for a minute that maybe something good is happening and you should accept it? I can feel it... this house is definitely meant for us."

Steve shook his head as he watched her play with the crystal necklace she'd pulled out from under her shirt. Even after dating her for five years, he still couldn't get over the fact she was so calm about everything. She was forever talking about signs and fate while he just smiled and nodded. Still, he had to admit she was uncannily accurate sometimes. "I swear, this 'fate' stuff of yours is going to get us in trouble one of these days. You really can't just take the word of any person who talks to you."

She rolled her eyes at him and waved off his concerns. "Sure, I can. It's worked so far."

"The key words being, 'so far'. The lucky streak has to run out eventually." Once again, she rolled her eyes. "Luck has nothing to do with it. It's total instinct. You should really try listening to yours once in awhile instead of letting yourself get so cynical. Not everyone in the world is out to con you, ya know."

He shrugged. "I watch the evening news too much to not be suspicious here and there. Seriously, though, I think we should hold off and get my dad to take a look at the place before we make any commitments." She opened her mouth to argue, but he held up a hand to silence her before she could get started. "Come on, what could letting him check it out hurt? Just think of all the I-told-you-so's you'll owe me later."

Cheyenne looked like she wanted to argue some more, but she held up her hands in defeat. "Alright, if you insist."

With the matter settled, they walked inside to let Jonathon know they were interested, but wanted someone to come and check it out with them the next day. The man didn't look thrilled,

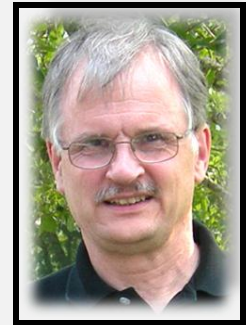
but he agreed to it. Once they'd made the deal, he walked them to the door and the trio exchanged goodbyes.

The young couple walked to the car and got inside, slamming the doors shut. As Cheyenne finished fastening her seatbelt, he gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry, but you know me, better safe than sorry."

"I know. You'll see, though. He's not going to find a thing wrong! I'll bet you anything."

Steve laughed, thinking of the last time they'd made a bet. He'd spent the next month washing her car while she gloated from the sidelines. He wasn't dumb enough to make *that* mistake twice. "I think we'll skip the bets this time."

"Chicken," she teased as he started the car and pulled out of the driveway.



The Anacreontic Song
By Rick Weber

I come to you from the past. My name is not as distinguished as those of my peers, so I have to let you know it. My name is, or should I say, was William Beanes. A couple of hundred years ago I practiced medicine in Maryland outside of Washington. Those were difficult times. The British invaded our country, and we were at war with them, again. I remember the first war when I tended to troops from the battles of Lexington, Concord, Valley Forge, and Long Island. This conflict was just as ugly.

I was already an old man when the second war started. I ended up being

coerced by the circumstances to allow a British general by the name of Robert Ross and a British admiral, George Cockburn, to use my home as their headquarters in Upper Marlboro for a couple days before they set out to invade Washington and Alexandria. Since I didn't give them a hard time when they came into town, hell there wasn't anyone one around except for me and a few others, Ross got the idea that I supported the British and their cause. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, but my Scottish accent may have contributed to this illusion even though I was born in Maryland. They outnumbered us which didn't give me much choice. I had to cooperate, even though it went against my grain. I certainly didn't know beforehand that they wanted to burn our Capitol and every other public building in Washington.

On the way back to their ships anchored in the Chesapeake Bay, the British again passed through our town. This time some of their troops deserted and pillaged several farms. Robert Bowie, one of our local land holders and former Governor of Maryland, had enough of their behavior. Bowie asked me and a few other men to help him take care of the matter. All of them knew the British forced me into quartering them on my farm, and I wanted to set the record straight. News of the destruction in Washington made it to us. We arrested a handful of the deserters and took them to the Prince Georges County Jail. One escaped, ran right back to General Ross, and told him what we did. Some deserter he was!

Ross was infuriated and thought I betrayed him and Cockburn. He put out the word to have Bowie, myself, and our other cohorts arrested. The next day British troops came to our homes and brought us into custody. Shortly thereafter, they let Bowie and the others go, but Ross and Cockburn took me back to their ship, the HMS Tonnant. Despite all of the fighting going on around us, Brigadier General William H. Winder, commander

of the Ninth Military District and appointed by President James Madison, sent a protest to the British about my detention to no avail. My friends secured an attorney, who went to President Madison for permission to approach my captors about releasing me. The president agreed and sent John Stuart Skinner, the region's Prisoner Exchange Agent, with him on a truce flag vessel.

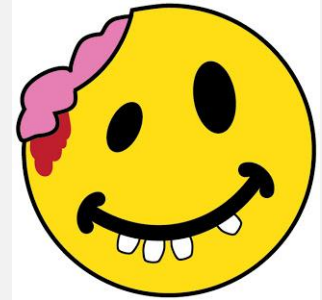
My attorney and Skinner made it to the HMS Tonnant anchored in the Chesapeake Bay and began a week of negotiations to secure my freedom. It was only after Skinner produced letters from wounded British soldiers about the level of care I had given them that they acceded to my release, but things were not over yet.

The Battle of Baltimore was at its height during the bargaining talks. The British, afraid we knew too much about their troop strengths and plans, did not let us go. Combat continued, and snipers shot Ross while he led his troops at North Point. He died en route back to the ship. I would have tended to Ross had he made it onboard alive. After all, I was a doctor, first.

My lawyer, Skinner, and I watched the bombardment of the city guessing at its outcome. We figured by morning we would know. At daybreak we looked out at the fort and saw huge flag with fifteen stars and fifteen stripes flying above it. This battle had been won, but not by those who came from afar to provoke it. We were released. My attorney took the time to make note of the events in a work he called, "The Defence of Baltimore," which he published a week later in "The Patriot."

He crafted his piece so that it could be sung to the rhythm of "To Anacreon in Heaven," the official song of a gentlemen's club in London. When you put it all together, it sounded pretty catchy. The song became popular and took on a name change, from "The Defence of Baltimore" to "The Star Spangled Banner." In Baltimore and the rest of Maryland, September 12th is a holiday called "Defenders' Day" when

all of this is remembered. All of it, except for my part.



Employees of Walmart By DiVitto Kelly

It wasn't exactly a festive Saturday evening for Ben and Ellen Garner. He needed to pick up medicine for his wife, who was suffering from a nasty cough, fever, and runny nose. Ben wasn't feeling so hot either. The couple, originally from sticky, humid Miami, decided they wanted a safer change of scenery and relocated to the rural confines of Wakefield, North Carolina, an hour's drive west of Raleigh. Apparently all that fresh mountain air wasn't agreeing with them.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" said Ellen, her cough approaching sea lion-esque proportions. She looked at the clock – 1:17AM to be exact. "Ugh."

Ben slipped on his worn blue jeans and Miami Heat t-shirt. "Don't be silly. Besides, it'll give me a chance to sample those new chocolate-peanut butter Pop-Tarts; they look tantalizing."

"Don't you dare," replied his wife, lying miserably in their queen-sized bed. "You keep whining about your love handles – it's time to start eating like an adult."

He introduced their six-year-old daughter Sophia to the rectangular pastries and she loved them, especially the cinnamon frosted. Like father, like daughter.

"Bah humbug," he said. "Besides, I've been doing my sit ups regularly, see?" Ben pulled up his shirt showing off his partially svelte frame. "No too bad."

Ellen fluffed her pillow and sat up. “Do you know what medicine to get?”

“Alka Seltzer, right?” answered Ben.

Ellen’s bleary eyes were itchy and irritated; her nose tomato red from all the excessive blowing. “Get Nyquil, and make sure it’s the nighttime stuff; I need to sleep”

Ben finished tying his tennis shoes. “Anything else?”

“Chamomile tea would be nice, the one with the bear zonked out on the recliner.”

“Got it.”

They were two months new to the area, enjoying the refreshing change of climate, but one thing that immediately took getting use to was driving far and away to the nearest anything. Before, trips to the doctor’s office, grocery store, or gas station were always within a mile or two, and in every direction. Now, the Garners practically needed a GPS to go anywhere. The alternative would be moving back to the Sunshine State, but they’d had their fill of the stifling heat, hurricanes, not to mention the robberies, three to be precise. No, a little driving would be fine. Having the convertible top down on their gecko green VW Beetle in the Carolina mountain air was all right with the Garners.

“How do I get to Walmart again?” asked Ben, who was a terrific driver – no accidents ever, but had an incredible knack for getting lost.

“Go left out of the driveway, drive about five miles then make a left at the blinking light. Make another left at Baskerville Road, then a right on Mockingbird Boulevard; you can’t miss it,” said Ellen as she applied more Vapor Rub to her upper chest and a touch just under her nose. Ben jotted everything down on the back of the local free newspaper.

“You know I’ve never been there at night,” said Ben, who’d been told by fellow coworkers at his new job with the community college that things got creepy at night, especially after the witching hour. He was introduced to the People of Walmart website and had to admit it was ‘interesting’, but at the

same time there was something a bit off kilter about this particular store. He couldn’t explain it.

“Wish me luck honey.”

“You have your cell?”

“Uh, I do now,” Ben replied, picking it up off his dresser. “Seal you soon.”

“Very funny,” barked Ellen. “Oh, would you mind picking up some canned sardines for me too? The ones packed in olive oil; I need something salty.”

Ben grimaced. He despised the smell. “Then I get to buy my Pop-Tarts.” “Your choice, Mr. Lipid.”

“Everyone loves a good fat cell joke.” Ben replied with a grin. He donned his Miami Marlins baseball cap to conceal his springy black curly hair. “I’m off!”

Their new home was spacious: two stories, three bedrooms, a fireplace, and a towering oak tree in the front yard big enough for a tire swing, a specific request by Sophia.

Their former home in Miami was a quaint two bedroom, one bath bungalow. The corner property was a mini tropical paradise, native Florida plants and citrus trees soaking up the sun in every crevice of the yard. But the third and final robbery was the last straw. On one splendid late Sunday afternoon, Ben planned to grill skirt steak and Argentine chorizos on their newish stainless steel gas grill. He went outside only to discover it had ‘not so’ mysteriously disappeared. They ended up dining on tasteless frozen pizzas and pink lemonade.

Their new neighborhood was one part trendy, one part Mayberry, a quaint parcel of town distinguished by its friendliness, cool historic downtown and a barbeque joint named Smoky Bones that served up the best pulled pork sandwich Ben had ever tasted. Ellen had relatives in nearby Carrboro, which made relocating to the Tar Heel State a less harrowing task to manage.

Ben drove down the gravel strewn driveway and made a left onto the meandering five-mile stretch of road, forest trees encroaching on both sides. He loved the dips and turns of the

roads, but at night it could be a bit harrowing. Following the directions to the tee, Ben pulled into the half lit Walmart parking lot twenty minutes later, most of it surrounded by soaring loblolly pine trees, some reaching ninety feet tall. It was a cozy location even for a mega store the size of a football field.

The first thing Ben noticed was he could count the amount of cars in the parking lot on one hand. In fact, there were only two, and his was one of them. Prior to moving, their local Miami Walmart was always packed to the gills no matter what time it was. He’d seen his share of oddballs there too: extremely overweight women spilling out of their tiny spandex garments, men drinking beer inside the store, sluggish employees, you name it. Having spent most of his adult life in weird and wonderful South Florida, Ben mused the only thing that would ever surprise him would be a two-headed guy.

As he got out of his car, Ben spotted two employees, a pair of twentysomethings for sure, pushing shopping carts towards the entrance of the store. The two were moving at a snails’ pace. It was almost as if they were battling to see who could move the slowest.

“Good evening gentlemen,” said Ben as he walked by. The two employees barely raised their heads, mouths agape, with a pair of blank stares. “Ah, millennials.”

People of Walmart indeed thought Ben as he entered the store. At least it wasn’t one of those cavernous megastores like the one he use to frequent; this one was a third of the size, almost intimate if that was possible for such a mega store chain.

The shopping carts were in complete disarray, blocking most of the inside entrance. Ben zigzagged around them like an obstacle course before spotting a lone cart up ahead. He grabbed the handle only to find it sticky.

“I’ve been here a total of five seconds and I’m already grossed out.” He quickly doused his hands with hand sanitizer stationed at the returns desk.

Ben took a deep breath and rolled forward, passing multiple displays of sodas, cereals, and snack foods precariously stacked like skyscrapers. Next, he eyed the produce section where the fruit and vegetables appeared way past their prime. Ben was taken aback; usually Wal-Mart's produce departments were exceptionally good -- this one not so much. His mind was so preoccupied that he accidentally bumped into a wall of a man with a stone-faced expression.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry sir," said Ben, feeling like a complete idiot.

The man glared down at Ben, who must have been at least nine inches taller than the science teacher. The human monolith had trouble speaking but managed to utter the word Help, minus the H. It came out more like a grunt than an actual word.

"Uh, yeah," replied Ben, being polite. "Could you please tell me where the pharmacy is?"

The tall man stared at Ben for a moment, trying to process the question. "E-l-p." The man did an about face, turning in slow motion before pointing in the other direction. He followed the sloth-like man before speeding ahead, yearning to return home at some point, preferably before sunrise.

Ben couldn't believe how sluggish the man was moving. In fact, as he scanned the rest of the store, he noticed all the employees moving at a turtle-like velocity.

"Ah, there you are," he said, spotting the pharmacy section. "Nyquil, Nyquil, where art thou Nyquil?" He browsed the endless shelves, finally locating the cold and cough medicines. After picking up a bottle, Ben strolled around the corner shelf and snagged a carton of cherry lozenges for his minor sore throat. He then made a beeline for the chamomile tea then waltzed over to the cereal aisle. Like all Wal-Mart's, the Pop-Tarts were located just past the assortment of pseudo nutrition bars.

"Let's see, cinnamon frosted, strawberry, cherry, chocolate chip, berry blast – good flavor, ah there you are, chocolate-peanut butter. Yum!"

Ben looked around slightly embarrassed. A thirty-six year old man shouldn't get that excited about a crummy pastry, but he was. Last stop, sardines. "How not exciting" he thought.

As Ben rounded the corner, he heard a peculiar groan. It was getting louder, now sounding more like multiple people. There was a sudden scream then silence. Ben hid behind a leaning tower of pasta display. He parted a couple of boxes of rigatoni to get a peak. "What the hell?"

He stood frozen, unable to move a muscle as a trail of blood flowed down the linoleum floor. Ben placed his hand over his mouth to keep from screaming. He watched a pair of employees chomping down on the hapless shopper, a middle aged man, short and doughy, built like a Weeble toy.

"Oh no, what the hell do you think you're doing?" yelled a voice. The man stormed over and threw down his clipboard. The two men lowered their blood stained faces, behaving almost like young children being scolded by a parent.

The man was very upset, shouting, as he looked up at the ceiling in disgust. "After all the training, how could you do this? You never, ever eat the customers! That's rule one!" He picked up his clipboard off the floor, trying to regain his composure.

"You know what this means? The two employees appeared full of shame, one almost appeared weeping. "This is absolutely, positively gonna kill my promotion!" He stormed over to a metal column and picked up the phone.

There was a screech of feedback before the man's voice boomed over the loud speaker. "Cleanup in aisle thirteen. Clean up in aisle thirteen, pronto. And bring the big mop." He shook his head, placing his hand on his chin.

"You two, go get cleaned up now, and try to move quickly."

Ben spaced the pasta boxes farther apart to get a better look when they came tumbling down. He stared at the employees and offered up a harmless wave. He almost wet his pants.

"Don't move," said the man, a no-nonsense Ross Perot looking type, short with a subpar crew cut, possibly a former military man.

"I'm not moving," replied Ben, still staring at the two killers, the tubby lifeless body lying on the floor like a beached walrus.

The cleanup crew finally showed up; it was the two dolts from outside the store. One of the men wrapped the dead person in a plastic body bag; the other brandished a damp mop and began wiping up the blood. Ben regained his composure, the blood starting to flow again in his veins.

"What the hell is going on here?"

The man walked towards him, sidestepping the stream of blood. "It's a tad complicated sir."

"I've got time. Now tell me what's happening here!" Ben was ready to call the cops when the man asked him politely for a chance to explain.

The man took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and slipped them back on. "Do you know why Walmart is able to offer people best prices, anywhere?"

"Everything's made in China?" replied Ben.

The man smirked. "No, that's a fallacy, only partially true. By the way, my name's Mitch Weber, overnight manager. And yours?"

The man extended his hand out. The science teacher, still in disbelief, shook it. "Uh, Ben . . . Ben Garner. My wife and I are new to the area."

"Well Ben, we've developed a unique evening workforce that doesn't require monetary fulfillment. They're dedicated, hardworking, and best of all we only have to feed 'em expired meats, sometimes deli. They seem to like Boar's Head a lot."

"Hold on," Ben interrupted. "I must be missing something here. You mean you feed your employees meat instead of paying them?"

"Yep. You see our nighttime employees are kinda of the non-living persuasion."

“I’m confused,” said Ben, trying to put two and two together, but coming up with five instead of four.

“It’s a unique program we’ve instituted at select Walmart stores across the country. You see, our nightshift employees are all . . . expired as they say.” The guy was coming off like a used car salesman.

“We’re not talking . . .” asked Ben, stopping himself. The man nodded in a YES motion. Ben shook his head in an implausible NO motion. The night was in full bloom weirdness mode. He glared at Mr. Weber, who sported a false smile that would viral a politician’s. The proverbial light bulb was finally beginning to shine above Ben’s head.

“They don’t call it the dead shift for nothing,” said the overnight manager, offering up a mild stab at humor. Ben corrected him – night shift, not dead shift.

“Hold on . . . Zombies? You’ve hired zombies to work at night?”

“It’s a pilot program we’ve developed over the last three years, mostly at our rural locations; also where we find a large congregation of weirdies. By the way, where’d you move from?”

“Miami,” answered Ben, feeling like he’d stepped straight into a George A. Romero parody film.

“Holy crap! That was ground zero for the ‘Z’ program. Corporate thought it would be less conspicuous, especially in the Sunshine State. Betcha didn’t even notice ‘em where you shopped. Lots of oddballs there – but I guess you already knew that.”

All those times Ben went night shopping at the Mart -- as he and his wife dubbed it, and he didn’t even notice. He thought of himself as a fairly observant guy, but apparently not.

“This is extremely bizarre. I mean undead workers? And what about . . . this?” Ben pointed at the victim on the floor. “It’s murder plain and simple.”

“Mishap Ben, we call them mishaps. It can get a bit tricky dealing with the bodies. We usually try to make it look like a traffic accident somewhere on the

outskirts of any town USA. Bottom line is Walmart will always do what it can to give you the best price – that’s our pledge to you.”

“How noble.”

“You’re welcome.”

“That was sarcasm,” said Ben. “A guy is dead and you say it’s a mishap? That’s a bit frigid on your part.”

“Look, I feel bad for the guy, but it IS extremely atypical,” replied the manager. “In fact, I can’t remember the last time we had a death. We spend weeks training ‘em. Our ‘Z’ staff does a good job; the only real issue – besides the very, very rare occasion when they dine on a customer is their speed. These guys are slow as molasses.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble Mitch, but they can barely talk,” said Ben. “And they’re not very helpful.”

“And the day time employees are any better?” joked the manager, blurring out in full laughter. Ben shrugged in agreement offering up a slight smile. “But seriously.”

The manager placed his arm around Ben’s shoulder. “Did you know we even have a speech therapist working with ‘em daily. Trust me; they’re getting the hang of it.”

Ben looked down at his watch. “Is it safe for me to leave? I gotta get back home to my wife, she needs her medicine.”

“You seem like an honest guy Ben, and I know you won’t say anything about tonight’s incident. Besides, the whole story is so whacked no one’s gonna believe you. Tell you what; your shopping is on us this evening.” The store manager patted Ben on the back. “Oh, watch the blood – looks like the night crew missed a spot.”

“Guess they need some more training,” said Ben, dryly.

Ben skipped over the red puddle, thanked the manager and began walking out the store. He noticed a few employees following him, waving their stiff limbs and trying to say good-bye. Ben jogged over to his car, hopped in and sped out of the parking lot, not looking back. When he got home, his wife was thankfully snoozing.

The next morning, husband and wife sat at the kitchen table sipping tea. Their daughter was still sound asleep.

“Thanks for getting the medicine honey,” said Ellen, still sniffling, but her cough subsiding. The morning news was on in the kitchen.

“No problem dear,” said Ben, taking a hefty crescent shaped bite from the new frosted chocolate-peanut butter Pop-Tarts. “By the way, do you know why Walmart is able to keep their prices so low?”

Ellen lifted her stuffy head taking a glance at the local television news, “Everything’s made in China.”

“Not everything,” said Ben. They actually keep their prices low by hiring zombies to work the night shift. They pay ‘em in raw meat.”

“You have a warped sense of humor, you know that?”

“Every joke has a half truth,” Ben replied before polishing off the rest of the sugary pastry.

“How sad,” said Ellen, pointing to the TV.

“What’s that?” asked Ben, getting up to pour himself some more orange juice.

The blond news anchor babe read off the teleprompter. “A man died late last night on Baskerville Road hitting a large deer. The victim apparently then plowed into a tree, dying instantly. Police however are investigating the strange bite wounds located on the man’s neck and arms.”

Ben got chills, almost dropping his glass onto the tile floor. “Probably a bear or mountain lion.”

“Maybe there are carnivorous deer lurking in the woods?” said Ellen. “How’s that for warped?”

“Not even close, dear.”



The Goldfish By DiVitto Kelly

The annual Saint Joseph Church carnival was winding down. It had been three and nine-tenths days fun-filled days, but on Sunday evening, eleven-year-old Thomas Garvey was running out of time. In between an assortment of nausea-inducing rides, devouring typical carnival food – burgers, pizza, fries, funnel cake, and soda, and playing games, it was time for Thomas to win something other than another stuffed animal.

Thomas wanted to win a goldfish, but not just any goldfish. There was one in particular that had eluded both Thomas and all the rambunctious children. Mixed in between all the traditional looking goldfish, this particular goldfish was the only one that was white, with tinges of silver and red painted around its paper-thin fins. It certainly had the shape of your basic goldfish.

All of the softball-sized fish bowls appeared to be the same size; ten rows of ten, and all neatly lined up, propped up a foot off the ground with the use of beat up red, plastic milk crates and a square sheet of plywood resting on top. Yet for some reason, no one had won the mysterious looking goldfish. Maybe the mouth of the fish bowl in question was narrower than all the others. Maybe all those children were just plain unlucky – or maybe they were lucky.

The carnival man working the goldfish toss booth was grubby, had missing front teeth, and wore his green Mack Truck baseball cap backwards, his hair sprouted out in all directions like oily hay. His blue jeans and olive-green colored t-shirt had an assortment

of stains, mostly grease from maintaining the hodgepodge collection of carnival rides.

“You want that fish pretty bad, don’t ya kid,” the carnie man asked, flashing the open gap between his front teeth. “You ain’t the only one wanting to win it; I’ve made a killing these last couple of days.” The man held up a wad of dollar bills three inches thick. He pointed his unkempt face at the boy, with bad breath that would make your eyes water.

Thomas stared at the fish; the visor of his Cincinnati Reds cap tilted down to block his face. He didn’t want to make eye contact with the man.

“You gonna try one more time son?” the man asked, knowing that Thomas had been there a few times before already. We’re closing up in thirty minutes kid so you better make it quick.”

Thomas studied the fish intently. He paused, and then reached into his back pocket for his navy blue wallet sporting images of sharks, a gift from his cousins from Sea World two years ago. He pulled it apart. The tearing sound of Velcro made the carnie man cringe.

“God I hate that Velcro sound!”

“Sorry sir,” said Thomas, thinking it was rather odd that a man working on noisy machinery and listening to ancient rock music all day and night would mind the slight tearing sound of Velcro.

“How much you got, son?” the man asked impatiently, watching the boy dig for change. “Come on kid, I got a line of people here.”

Thomas turned around but didn’t see anybody. He pushed the bill of his cap upward, “It looks like I’m it sir.”

“I guess so kid,” he answered with a smirk. The man was itching to leave.

“And if you want my last dollar sir, you shouldn’t be so pushy,” Thomas added. The man gave Thomas a glaring look, not appreciating his smart-aleck remark.

“Okay, okay kid, sorry. It’s just that we’re ready to close and I could really use a cold beer.” And a shower,

Thomas thought to himself. The boy pulled out a crisp, folded up dollar bill tightly hidden in a small crevice of his prized wallet.

“Alright kid, tell you what. You know you get three throws for a buck, but since you’re my last customer, I’ll give you six.” The man thought he was being extremely generous, considering how much annoyance he had endured these last four days.

At least the weather hadn’t been so bad, he thought, but tonight was looking like a different story. The man’s occupation, with its long hours, cramped living conditions, and constant traveling, was demanding, but the pay was better than decent, and most of it ‘under the table.’

“I’ll only need three this time,” replied the confident boy, blocking out the ten dollars he’d already spent the past two-plus days. “I’m gonna win it this time.”

A rumble of thunder reverberated over the carnival grounds; a light drizzle of rain began falling. “Better hurry up kid, it’s now or never,” he said, looking up at the menacing charcoal gray sky. Shots of lightning etched out over the clouds like flowing lava.

Thomas blocked it all out, instead focusing on the cue ball white goldfish barely moving in its bowl; it seemed to be watching him. The boy licked his lips and stretched out his arm, trying to get as close as possible to the target. He clutched the yellow ping-pong ball in his right hand and tossed it underhand. It clanked off the back part of the bowl, rising high before falling off to the side and onto the ground.

“One down, two to go young man,” he said, smiling. A bolt of lightning pierced the sky; thunder following. Thomas aimed again, this time taking a deep breath and squinting a little. The second throw clinked off the front of the bowl, coming up way short. Thomas slumped his narrow shoulders. “Rats.”

“You choked on that one kid,” said the carnie man. “Stay focused, one more time; you can do it.” Thomas turned around thinking the carnie was

starting to sound like his little league baseball coach.

“Thomas, where are you?” called out his mother, holding her seven-year-old daughter’s hand and an ice cream cone in the other, her purse sliding down her arm in annoyance. She was exhausted.

“Just one more chance mom; I’m gonna win that cool-looking fish.

“We’ve got to go now,” she exclaimed, struggling with her always-effervescent daughter, Fiona. “In fact I have to go now!”

You said I could have a pet, right?” asked Thomas, more determined than ever. The mother of two was worn out, having spent four straight days volunteering at the carnival, a big fundraiser for the Church and Catholic school, where Mrs. Kelly was also the art teacher.

“Thomas, I’ve spent thirty hours with you and your sister here, not to mention at your grade’s game booth. It’s time to go!” Mrs. Kelly was certain her husband planned his business trip this weekend on purpose.

“Just one more throw mom; I’ll get it this time!” replied her son.

“While we’re young kid!” said the carnie, sneering, already packing up his gear. The man handed Thomas the last ball. The boy took off his baseball cap, handing it to his sister, who put it on. He stretched out his arms, blew on his right hand and took aim.

“Alright fishy, this is it,” said Thomas, glaring at the target. The fish remained still, looking at the boy. It winked and offered up a miniscule smile. The boy straightened up, surprised. He paused for a moment. Did he really just see a fish smile? That would be weird he thought, and creepy. He began to second-guess himself, wondering if he should even try to win the fish now.

The fish pressed its nose against the round bowl, looking at the boy. “That’s so cute mommy,” said Fiona, tugging on her coat sleeve. “The fishy is smiling at me!”

“Fish don’t smile, Fiona,” said her mom quickly, wanting to leave ASAP.

“Oh this one does ma’am; it’s quite special,” the carnie man said emphatically.

“Fish smiling? Please,” she said.

“I said this one does,” he replied, flashing his bold, toothless gap.

“You need to win this fish, boy,” the carnie said, emphasizing the word, you.

Thomas tossed the ball just as a bolt of lightning struck a nearby oak tree, causing one of the large limbs to fall, sparks shooting everywhere. The ping-pong ball hovered ever so briefly before descending. It bounced straight up off the back edge of the glass bowl. The ball came down hitting the front end, flying up a few inches before dropping straight into the targeted bowl. A winner!

“I got it mommy, I won the fish!” screamed Thomas.

“Hurray for Thomas,” screeched Fiona. “Now we have a pet!”

“You mean I have a pet,” answered Thomas, proudly.

“Yippee to all of you,” said the carnie, prying open his blue and white cooler and popping open an ice cold Miller beer. “Salud kiddo, as they say in Spanish. And here you go little girl, a fish for you too.” The carnie man handed the girl a small goldfish in a bag and placed it inside a fishbowl.

“What do you say Fiona,” said Mom.

“Thank you.”

“Okay, okay,” the carnie man replied. “Now go so I can enjoy an adult beverage!”

The carnie man handed a bag with the big goldfish to Thomas. The boy held it up; the fish looking directly at him. The carnie man was bent over, collecting empty fishbowls and placing them in a big box.

“This goldfish looks like it has teeth,” said Thomas, surprised.

“What kid?” he asked, hearing only part of what the boy was asking. He dropped one of the glass bowls, breaking it then knocked over his beer. “Oh for the freaking poop! Sorry folks, but that was my last cold beer.” He picked it up and drank the rest, savoring every ounce before belching.

“We feel your pain,” said Mrs. Kelly, eagerly wanting to leave. “Thank you again for the extra goldfish.”

“No problem,” said the carnie man. “Son, let me know if that fish gives you a hard time, alrighty?” looking the boy straight in the eyes with a chuckle. “It’s very unique.”

Thomas stood still, nodding, “Uh . . . okay.”

The rain was coming down harder as the family left the carnival. The winds were blowing harder and more lightning painted the pitch-black sky.

“Hurry up kids,” yelled mommy. She fumbled for her keys and pressed the button for the sliding door to open on their minivan. Everyone settled in; the fish kept looking at Thomas no matter how he turned the clear, water-filled bag.

Fiona was spinning her bag around. “Mommy, do fish get sea sick?” Her mom rested her head on the steering wheel.

It was nearing ten at night; the kids had already changed into pajamas and brushed their teeth.

“Bedtime guys,” said Mom, getting into bed and finding a copy of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone on her pillow. Thomas had been bugging her mom for weeks to read it.

Thomas placed the fishbowl on his dresser, next to his bunk bed. An occasional lightning strike spotlighted the fish, now staring upward at the young boy. Thomas, resting on his side, looked down at the fish, watching it. He took out a mini flashlight he stashed under his pillow when he wanted to read late at night and shone it on the fish. It looking like it was smiling again. Thomas had a weird feeling about his new pet.

It was near midnight; everyone was asleep. Thomas had left the flashlight on, pointing it at the fishbowl, the gentle beam of light beginning to fade. The fish fluttered its fins and moved to the center of the fish bowl. The fish blinked its circular eyes, which then turned completely black; tiny triangular teeth sprouted up on the upper and lower jaws; only the front two were missing.

The fish sped around and around as the water level in the bowl began to rise, spilling over the edge. The fish swam faster and faster.

An hour later, the bedroom floor was covered in water, nearly a foot and filling up quickly. The bedroom door was shut tight, not a drop leaking out. The storm was going nowhere, rain coming down in sheets and lightning illuminating the blackened sky like lines on a map. More bellowing thunder followed.

It was nearing two in the morning; the water now covered the lower bunk bed completely. A gentle splash almost woke up Thomas, who turned to the other side of his bed facing the wall. A stuffed animal shark fell, barely making a ripple in the water. It rested on the surface momentarily when something pulled it under. An hour later, the water was halfway up the ladder leading to the second level bunk bed.

A crack of thunder made the young boy lift his head, turning towards the window. Before sinking back into his down pillow, Thomas noticed the fishbowl almost at eye level, floating. "What the . . .?"

Thomas jumped to his knees on his bed, terrified. He searched for the flashlight now under his blanket. He picked it up, shining the weak beam of light around his water-filled room. He heard movement coming from the front part of his bed facing the door. He picked up his pillow, using it as a shield, and peered just over the top. To his right in the water, Thomas noticed his favorite shark stuffed animal floating on the surface, shredded in half. He continued to inch closer to the front of the bed, still unable to see anything.

Closer to the edge Thomas moved. He reached back and tossed a stuffed animal seal into the water, wondering what would happen. Silence. The water kicked up and the stuffed animal's head appeared in front of him at the end of the bed. It kept inching up towards Thomas. He shined the flashlight at the seal when a grotesque head followed; the stuffed animal in its mouth. Thomas tried to scream but he was terrified with

fright. He grabbed his stuffed animal and then swung the pillow, hitting the horrific-looking thing, sending it back into the water.

Thomas jumped back to the other end of his bed, trying to make out where the thing was. He aimed the flashlight in every direction. There, at the other end of his bedroom, Thomas spotted the dorsal fin protruding from the water. The right pectoral fin, tattered green with black spots, lifted from the water, unveiling a grease-stained hat, the words Mack Truck standing out in bold red letters. The bulbous head poked out of the water; the fish grinning at the boy. The front two teeth were missing.

"You shoulda picked another fish boy!" the voice lashed out, laughing like a mad man. "It's dinnertime baby!" Thomas recoiled in horror.

"I hate kids, boy, especially ones that where red baseball caps, haaaaaaaaa." The fish torpedoed towards Thomas's bed. The boy leaned against the wall pulling up the mattress for protection. The hideous fish was five feet long, dark green and covered in grease marks. It barreled out of the water, smacking into the mattress with its dirty gray teeth. Thomas pushed back as the snapping jaws lunged closer.

"Mom!" Thomas screamed out weakly, his eyes frantically searching his room for protection.

"You're toast boy, and I like mine topped with humans!" Thomas noticed his baseball bat floating in the water. He reached for the thirty-inch Louisville slugger, grasping it in his wet hands.

"Alright Mr. Carnie fish, come and get me!" roared Thomas, one of the best hitters on his little league team. The fish pounced again, only to be met with the wielding bat.

"Oh for the freaking . . .!" screamed the carnie fish. "You little punk; now you're dead meat!"

Thomas noticed the water was spilling over his top mattress. Preparing for another attack, he looked over to the window and had an idea. If he could

get rid of the water, the fish would be helpless, and would earn a much-deserved pounding. Thomas turned to the window next to his bed. He pulled up the blind, and started smashing away, the top windows first then as the water receded, the lower ones. Water poured out like a crumbling dam.

The fish attacked again, this time having to jump up a bit to reach the boy. Thomas was ready, christening the ugly fish's head with a powerful whack.

"You son of a rat; I'll kill you!" yelled the carnie fish, shaking its now aching head. Thomas broke more windows, the water gushed out profusely.

"What's going on in there Thomas?" asked his mom, awakened by the sound of breaking glass, "I can't open the door!"

"Everything's under control mom," said Thomas, raising his tween-age voice. He climbed down the ladder to pummel the carnie fish. The water receded quickly, now only a couple of feet deep in his room.

"You snot-nosed rat," the hideous fish bellowed, reaching its repulsive head above the water and snapping at Thomas violently, determined to gobble up the boy. "The carnie fish always triumphs! Thomas rolled his eyes and smacked the fish again.

The rest of the water started retracting into the glass fishbowl, swallowing it up. Soon, only the damp carpeting remained. The fish flopped around helplessly.

Thomas raised the bat again but noticed the fish was shrinking, smaller and smaller. "What the heck?"

"This ain't over kid," screeched the carnie fish, flailing away with its fins on the floor, most of the water now gone. The carnie fish's voice rose higher and higher as if he'd inhaled helium. Thomas scooped the fish up with his baseball glove and dumped it back into the glass bowl. The angry fish cursed under water, a slew of bubbles reaching the surface.

"Are you alright Thomas?" his mom screamed, pounding on the door. She barreled in, finally able to open the

door. She noticed her son standing in the middle of his room, holding the fish bowl and baseball bat.

"What's going on here Thomas?" mom asked, soon realizing she was standing barefoot on the soaked carpeting. "What happened in here?"

"It's a weird story mom," said Thomas, clutching the fish bowl. He walked out and headed for the bathroom, whistling.

"Are you feeling okay?" his mom asked, calling down the hallway. "What are you doing with your fish?"

"I just need to use the bathroom real quick." her son replied with a grin. "But you may want to check on Fiona."

Flush.



Nightmares By Yeshua Espailat

She had nightmares every night for the past six months without fail. Terrifying nightmares of events that might happen, but the things she saw in her sleep always became jumbled up and difficult to remember when she woke up. For Sarah Hart, sleeping was the same as taking a trip into Hell and not being able to accurately recall what she dreamt of when she awoke was like being trapped in limbo. She had been to multiple therapists and was prescribed all kinds of drugs to help ease her mind, but nothing worked. Every night before going to sleep she would say a small prayer in the hopes that some cosmic being up there was listening and willing to spare her from the nightmares, but every night there was no reprieve.

Sarah awoke again covered in sweat and nearly screaming when she abruptly sat up from her troubled rest. Her heart was beating wildly out of control and her dark hair was wet and stuck to her forehead. After taking a moment to sit in silence while she caught her breath, she reached over to turn on the lamp placed atop the nightstand nearby. There was a bible sitting next to it and when she pulled away from the lamp she looked down at the book in hopeless defeat. Her prayers were ignored again and the monsters entered into her sleep to torture her worse than they ever had in the past. She grabbed the holy book and clutched it tightly in anger before harshly throwing it with all of her strength across the bedroom. The book struck a large vanity mirror cracking it, but not breaking it.

With an angry groan, mostly at herself for the destructive act, she stormed out of her bed to retrieve the book and put it somewhere out of sight. When she scooped it up off the ground she looked at the fractured mirror and the many broken reflections of herself in the glass. Something about the multiple images of her looking tired and worn struck a chord in her mind. There were so many different versions of her in that glass and they were all staring back at her with the same exhausted look in their eyes. It vaguely reminded her of the nightmares she had, of seeing the same terrifying event playing out in different ways each and every night. Then, she noticed a business card pinched between the damaged mirror and the wooden frame surrounding it and remembered she kept it as a last resort.

A friend recommended a hypnotherapist to her a long time ago and she refused because she believed it was a bogus scam parading as a legitimate practice. Since then, she tried every other form of therapy she could find with nearly every doctor in Gateway. Sarah still felt it would be nothing more than a massive waste of her time and money, but she was desperate now. All of her sleepless

nights were finally starting to take their toll on her weary mind and it was gravely affecting her career. She had done some research into the therapist and, as luck would have it, the company she worked for also recommended him for some of their help programs. She thought it a little odd that the company would recommend a hypnotherapist, but if it meant she could regain her sleep *and* save money in the process then it was the best last resort.

She snatched the business card from the broken mirror and stared at it quizzically, "This better not bite me in the ass later on."

Sarah spent the rest of the night wide awake with a pot of coffee always ready and the television playing as loud as possible. There was no point in trying to sleep, not when she knew another one of her nightmares was going to inevitably push her over the edge of her fragile sanity. The hours slowly crawled by as she spent her time switching between watching mind-numbing late night TV programs and reading online forums for people with the same condition. Her Siamese cat would sometimes wake up to cuddle on her lap, but he only stuck around until she moved back and forth between the TV and the computer. Even the cat was becoming annoyed with her behavior and took off to another room in the apartment after she moved around for the fourth or fifth time.

When the morning sun had finally started to come up she dialed the therapist to set up an appointment. The phone rang twice before the receptionist answered, "*Dr. Fine's office, how can I help you?*"

Sarah was nervous and her exhausted mind could barely string together the proper words she wanted to say, but she somehow managed to overcome it with a bit of effort, "Hi, my name is Sarah Hart and I was wondering if Dr. Fine could schedule me for an appointment today?"

"*The doctor has a pretty busy schedule today I'm afraid,*" replied the receptionist, "*but I have an opening*

tomorrow at 10 in the morning. Would that work for you?"

Sarah sighed at the idea of spending another night suffering from her terrible dreams, "Is there *any* way he can see me today? I've been having nightmares for half a year now and I've been losing too much sleep over this."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," was her quick response, "but the doctor's been swamped ever since *Future Sight* started recommending him to their employees."

"I work for them!" she blurted out. "I work for the same company and if these nightmares don't stop I could end up losing my job!"

"Can you provide proof of employment?"

"I've got paystubs, my ID card, keycards, even a parking pass," said Sarah feeling like she was finally making some progress. "Please," she pleaded, "is there *any* way he can see me today?"

"Hold on a moment," the receptionist on the other end of the line went silent for a few uneasy moments, but she quickly returned, "Hello, Sarah? The doctor says he can squeeze you in at 8 this morning before his other patients come in. He usually takes that first hour to go over paperwork, but since you work for the company he's willing to see you instead."

"Thank you so much!" Sarah groveled, hopeful that her troubles were seemingly one step closer to their conclusion.

"You're welcome. We'll see you in a bit."

Sarah ended the call on her cell phone and dashed off to her bedroom to get herself ready. After a quick shower and breakfast, she was out the door and in her car driving to the address on the business card she had put out of mind for so long. She was still unsure if hypnotherapy would actually do anything for her, but pills weren't working and talking to a normal psychiatrist only drained her checking account while doing nothing to her nightmares.

The drive lasted about 45 minutes and finding a parking space was incredibly easy since it was still a little early in the morning. With her purse strapped over her shoulder and all of her employment identification safely tucked away inside she was ready to end the nightmares once and for all. She realized she probably should've taken advantage of the company's help program sooner, but at least now she was doing something about it. Working for *Future Sight Industries* had been an overwhelmingly positive experience for her with more perks, benefits, and bonuses than she could have hoped for with any other job. This company really was devoted to helping people secure better futures for themselves and her career was proof of it.

When she finally arrived at the office she walked right in to find the waiting room completely empty save for the receptionist who raised her gaze from her computer with a warm smile, "Sarah Hart?"

"Yes, that's me," she said with an equally bright smile even though her level of exhaustion was clearly written all over her face. "Thank you so much for convincing the doctor to see me." She showed the receptionist all of the proof she asked for over the phone and then stuffed everything away in her bag when it was all verified on the computer, "I'm a little nervous, though. I've never been to a hypnotherapist before."

"Well, Dr. Fine is the best," she stated with a smile, "so if anyone is going to help you out it'll be him." She pointed at a door just slightly off to her left and went on, "You can go in whenever you're ready."

Sarah thanked the receptionist again and walked through the door and into the office of the man who would hopefully save her from her own dreams. The doctor was an average-looking man with thinning hair and a warm sincere demeanor that immediately put her at ease when he smiled at her. He rose from his seat behind his desk and walked around to greet her with an extended hand.

"Ms. Hart, I'm glad you could make it," he greeted as he shook her hand.

"Thanks for seeing me, doctor," she replied. "I didn't actually think you'd pencil me in so fast."

"Well, company employees get special privileges and when you said you hadn't slept right in half a year I knew I couldn't let you go another sleepless night without some help." He motioned over to a comfortable-looking chair obviously designed for this kind of therapy, "Go ahead and get comfy and we'll start with a few questions."

Sarah set her bag on the ground next to the long seat and laid down on it resting her hands on her abdomen, her fingers fidgeting in anxiety. Dr. Fine quickly jotted a few things down on a notepad he held and made a few quick observing glances. To say she was nervous would've been a *massive* understatement; she was obviously petrified of her nightmares judging by the way her eyes were darting back and forth taking note of everything in the room. She looked like she was about to have a panic attack if they didn't make some kind of progress by the end of this session.

The doctor set his pad down in his lap and cleared his throat, "How many therapists have you seen in the last six months?"

"Nine, I think."

"Really? And why did you keep moving from one to another?"

"All they ever did was prescribe me useless pills that made everything worse."

"And by 'it' I'm assuming you mean the nightmare situation? How did the pills make it worse?"

She let out a slight scoffing laugh at the thought of the previous therapists and their pointless prescriptions, "Before I took the pills, I would have the nightmares, but they wouldn't last long because I woke up almost immediately. When I started taking them I stayed stuck in the dreams longer and they got worse."

"Tell me what you dream about," instructed the therapist. "What happens in these nightmares of yours?"

"Horrible things," she started, "impossible things. I always have trouble remembering the details when I wake up and they always change from one dream to the next, but there's a couple things that stay the same. They pop up so often that I can remember them."

"Such as?"

"The moon," she quietly reminisced. "I remember seeing the moon, it was as red as blood. It had cracks all over it like it was breaking... and it started to fall on top of the city. The dreams change a little more every time I have them, but the moon stays the same; always red and broken and falling."

"Can you remember anything else?"

Sarah searched deep within her memories, but she couldn't recall anything other than the constant state of the moon. Still, she tried and she searched the deepest recesses of her mind to remember *anything* other than the moon, "I remember lots of screaming and running and," her voice broke a little and she did her best to stay strong as she summoned her worst nightmares into the waking world, "the ground opened up like a giant mouth and it... *swallowed* people whole! There was fire everywhere and monsters chasing people."

"Sounds like the end of the world."

"It definitely was, but it was *nothing* like what everyone keeps talking about." She paused for a beat as if something else came back to her, "There was... something else happening."

"Oh?" the therapist scribbled something on his notepad, "Please, continue."

"The sky was a darker shade of red than the moon and the clouds were pitch black," she recounted, "but I can remember seeing... dancing blue light. It was everywhere like ribbons floating through the air and it was all moving in one direction."

"Anything else?"

"The light... every time I had the nightmare there was less and less of it."

"Anything beyond that? Can you remember what triggered the event in the dream?"

Sarah desperately tried to dig deeper into her mind to find the answers she needed, but the dancing light was as far as she could go. She shook her head in shame and her eyes fell to her fidgeting hands.

"Don't worry about it," said the doctor. "When you're ready we can begin the hypnosis and we'll get to the root of the problem, but only when you're ready."

"I'm ready, doctor," she insisted. "I want these nightmares to stop."

"It could be a while before they stop completely, but we're already making helpful progress to recovery." The doctor set his notepad down again and leaned forward in his seat, "Let's get underway then. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths."

Up until now closing her eyes was the worst thing Sarah Hart could think of ever doing, but this wasn't going to be like all the other times. She was set on finding the source of her nightmares and ending it once and for all, so falling asleep or slipping into a trance was a small price to pay for her freedom. She complied with Dr. Fine's instructions and hung onto his every word as he took her through the beginning stages of the hypnosis. He spoke the usual countdown like she had seen in almost every form of media, but what she didn't expect was to quickly and suddenly find herself standing in her apartment with her car keys clutched firmly in hand.

"*Where are you now, Sarah?*" asked the doctor, his disembodied voice coming from everywhere but not in a way that frightened her.

"I'm home," she answered. "I think I'm on my way to work."

"*Well, go to work then.*"

Sarah exited her apartment and made her way through the building to her car in the parking lot. It seemed like a normal day outside; the sun was shining, birds were singing, a breeze was blowing, and everything was as calm as it usually was. It was just

another day on Gateway Island, but that was always how bad days started and the end of the world was no exception. Sarah got into her car, started the ignition, and drove off on her way to the office.

The ride was going as normal as expected, but she knew that's how it always went. Being inside the dream was giving her access to the parts she couldn't remember and it was all starting to come back to her. When she made it to the downtown area traffic slowed until she came to a grinding halt that seemed all too familiar. She put the car in park and stepped out to look up into the sky at the anomaly that signaled the beginning of her nightmare. The clouds were darkening and swirling together over a particular area a few miles away becoming thicker and blocking out the sunlight. Today happened to be one of those days when the moon was clearly visible and, as she thought, it was beginning to change in color along with the formerly blue sky and darkening clouds. People everywhere stopped in their tracks, some got out of their cars, and others pulled out their cell phones to record the unusual phenomenon.

"It's starting," Sarah said out loud, hoping the doctor could still hear her.

"*Describe to me exactly what you see.*"

Sarah went over every minute detail about the changing color of the entire sky up above, but then the ground beneath her rumbled and the moon overhead formed a giant visible crack on its now pink surface. Panic was starting to settle in until the ground shook much more violently than before causing all sorts of havoc to break loose. The Earth trembled as if in fear of a large predator it couldn't defend itself against and everyone started running and screaming in every direction not knowing where there would be a safe place to hide. Sarah could feel herself start to give into the fear of being killed in the chaos, but she managed to keep herself calm and remembered that this time the nightmare was induced and she could

control herself better than the other times. The moon in the black sky was now crimson red, riddled with cracks, and was very slowly descending onto Gateway Island.

"This is it!" Sarah shouted before taking off in the direction of where the clouds were swirling.

She didn't know what to expect when she reached her destination, but then the dancing ribbons of blue light started twisting and flying through the air over the streets and they were headed in the exact same direction. The ribbons of light were pouring out of everywhere, some through walls of buildings and some out of cars, but it seemed like they were actually coming out of people. For whatever reason, nobody else seemed to even *notice* the dancing light except for her. She ran as fast as she could following the blue ribbons weaving in and out of the massive crowds, between abandoned cars stuck in traffic, and sometimes even climbing over cars until the ground rumbled again and a large gap tore open in the middle of the street. Several people and a van were unlucky enough to be standing directly over it when it opened and they fell through into the dark bottomless abyss. Sarah had to keep running, though, even when holes appeared in midair and monsters emerged from them to destroy everything in their path, she kept running.

"Sarah, what's going on?" asked the doctor.

She did her best to answer between her gasps for air as she ran faster than she had ever run before, "Everything! Monsters are everywhere, the light is gathering in one place, and the moon is broken and its falling!"

"Are you okay, Sarah?"

"I'm fine," she huffed in exhaustion.

"Do you want me to wake you up?"

"No! Not yet! I have to know what's at the center of all of this!"

"Keep describing everything to me," he instructed.

She did as she was instructed and told him everything she witnessed on her way to wherever she was being led.

One of the large sharp-toothed monsters took down a man trying to protect his family, another one of the foul beasts smashed through a glass window of one of the larger buildings to attack the people inside, and up above some people started jumping out of high windows either to end their lives before something else could or to escape something that was already in front of them. The ground continued to rumble and random parts opened up to swallow whoever happened to be unfortunate enough to be standing over them. When someone managed to hit one of the beasts with a car she was finally able to get her first clear look and it was a foul creature born of nightmares. Long arms with razor sharp thick claws, dark scaly skin, a tail with an arrow point on the end like a cartoon devil, a raggedy black mane, and a wide mouth filled with multiple rows of jagged teeth.

Sarah managed to pull her eyes off the injured abomination and continued on her way to the center of the event, but the ground was rumbling so violently and constantly that she couldn't stand upright anymore. She fell over on her side, but pushed onward by crawling on all fours as other people did in their futile escape from the end of the world. A large tear in the ground ripped open just ahead of her and extended wide across the entire street cutting her off from moving any further, but it kept opening forcing her to move back. Looking up the moon was now larger than it had ever been in all of history and it was clearly entering the Earth's atmosphere because it started to catch fire. It was going to make impact with the planet killing every living thing that managed to escape the monsters and avoid falling through the holes in the ground. There was nowhere left to go except back, but when she turned, still on her hands and knees, one of the beastly monsters was clawing its way towards her with a look of bloodlust in its horrible reptilian eyes.

"I'm stuck!" she shouted. "Get me out, doctor!"

"Okay, Sarah," he began in a calm loud concise tone, "*I'm going to countdown from three and when I reach zero you're gonna wake up safe and sound in the real world.*"

The gap in the ground was now inches away along with the monster in the opposite direction and the moon was now tearing down the rooftops of the tallest buildings in the area. "JUST WAKE ME UP!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Dr. Fine ended the countdown with a snap of his fingers and Sarah Hart, covered in sweat with a rapid pulse beating in her ears, exited her nightmare before she could be killed and sat straight up like she did when she slept in her bed. She looked all around to take in her safe surroundings and started to cry when her mind finally caught back up with her from the chaos and the terrifying death she narrowly avoided. The doctor moved from his chair to sit next to her on the couch handing her a box of tissues and rubbing her back to help calm her nerves.

"It's okay," he said, "you're safe now."

"It was... it was," she was in so much shock she couldn't complete her thoughts.

"Hell on Earth?"

"No," she sobbed, "it was so much worse!"

"Were you able to find what you were looking for?"

She shook her head in defeat, "I was cut off. The moon fell, though. I could almost reach up and touch what was left of it."

"What was left of it?" he asked with a raised brow.

"It was red and it was crumbling while it fell. You could barely tell it was the moon." She continued to sob and wiped away her tears with the tissues he gave to her, "I was following the light, but I didn't get to see where it was going."

"It's alright, Sarah," began the good doctor, "we can try again during another session. Right now, I think its

best that you go home and try to take your mind off of what you saw."

"I can remember the whole thing now," she said when she realized the memory was still as clear as when it was happening.

"Everything?"

"Every scream," she replied, "every face, every piece of broken glass, and every spot of human blood staining the sidewalks. I can remember *all* of it."

"Try not to give it too much thought for now," he started, "and remember that everything you saw was nothing more than a dream. You need to go home and try to get some rest. I'm going to call you later this afternoon to schedule another appointment, okay?"

She nodded her head, wiping away the last of her anguished tears. Even though this experience was more frightening than she originally thought it would be, it was a massive breakthrough to be able to fully recall every moment and every tiny detail of the nightmare despite the horrors now permanently embedded in her conscious mind. After spending a few minutes listening to the doctor and his speech about people being afraid of the apocalypse, he gave her some papers that he thought would be helpful to her. She quickly thumbed through the stapled sheets that were all about different types of meditation techniques. The one thing that caught her eye more than anything else was the information about lucid dreams. She didn't know much about them, but they were worth looking into when she made it back home.

Dr. Fine then did his best to make sure she was calm and stable enough to get into her car and drive to her apartment. When he felt convinced that she was back to normal he sent her off with a smile and a handshake. He then locked the door behind her and sat at his desk with a distressed sigh and a heavy heart. With his notepad in hand and his eyes glancing over it for any mistakes, he was left with no choice but to make the phone call he hoped he wouldn't have to make. The phone rang and rang for what felt like an eternity

until someone finally picked up on the other end.

"This is Dr. Fine," he said, "and I've got a patient who happens to be an employee. She's seen it."

"*Everyone's seen it, doctor,*" replied the commanding male on the other end.

"She's different," he added, "she can *remember* it."

The man on the other end could be heard sighing just as heavily as the doctor did, "*How much of it does she remember?*"

"Everything."

"*We'll send an extraction team,*" was his stone cold response. "*Good work, doctor.*"

The trusted hypnotherapist hung up the phone and leaned forward over his desk looking over the notes he took again. He wished there was something more he could've done for poor Sarah Hart, but the fact that she could now remember her nightmare with perfect clarity made her a threat to everything. Unfortunately, she had to be detained for the greater good. The doctor knew in his heart it was the right thing to do, but that didn't make him feel any better.

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When Sarah arrived home, the first one to greet her was her sapphire-eyed Siamese cat who seemed delighted that she returned safe and sound. She set her bag down on an end table and walked to the kitchen to fix herself something to eat. Before she could decide on what she wanted and before she could even open the refrigerator, the front door of her apartment was forced open and a group of six men garbed in black body armor like a SWAT team burst in with rifles up and trained squarely on her. She was completely caught off guard and was too slow to react when one of the intruders pulled off a shot that caught her right leg. She fell down writhing and yelling in agony, but there was no blood as their weapons were loaded with rubber-tipped bullets. They quickly put her in handcuffs and hauled her away without giving any kind of explanation as to what she had done or where they

were taking her. It wasn't until they put a black bag over her head that she knew her life was never going to be the same from here on out. This was probably the last time she would ever set foot in her home again.

She kept demanding to know why she was being arrested and where they were taking her, but they refused to give her any answers and threatened to knock her unconscious if she didn't stop asking questions. All she could do was comply with their orders and, a few hours later, the bag was finally removed from her head and she found herself strapped into a metal chair locked in a tiny room with no windows and only a solid heavy steel door ahead of her.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the blinding light in the tiny room, "Where am I?"

"In a place where no one will ever find you," said a man in a white lab coat carrying a clipboard. "If you believe in any gods, I suggest you begin praying for some kind of miracle, because that's what it'll take for you to leave this place; a miracle."

"Why am I here?!" she yelled in desperation.

To which he replied, "You know *exactly* why."

The man along with two armed guards left Sarah alone in the cell and locked the door behind them as she screamed for someone to rescue her, but no one was ever going to come to aid her. Sarah Hart, the girl whose nightmares about the end of the world haunted her every night, now had a new nightmare to face. Unfortunately, this was a nightmare she was never going to wake up from.



Sorry, no poems this month!

Join the Writer’s Portal today!

Beginning in the month of August, meetings will be held the second Monday (6-7:30pm) and fourth Thursday of every month (1-2:30) in the second floor conference room.

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

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FEEDBACK CORNER

We want to hear from you!

Let us know what you think of our stories! Feel free to email Michael Kelly, head of the writer’s group at mkelly@broward.org or call (954) 201-8870. Please specify the story and writer. Thanks!

*The writer’s group meets the second Monday of every month from 6:00pm – 7:30pm and the fourth Thursday of every month from 1:00pm – 2:30pm. Thanks!

Remaining 2013 schedule

- Sept. 9: 6pm-7:30pm
- Sept. 26: 1pm-2:30pm
- Oct 14: 6pm-7:30pm
- Oct. 31: 1pm-2:30pm
- Nov. 18: 6pm-7:30pm
- Dec. 9: 6pm-7:30pm



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