

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



Learning Me Excerpt
By Jamie White

Chapter One

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

Her cue sounded from the stage and, like magic, her mind and body calmed. Courtney didn't know how she never missed a cue, but she

hadn't. She stepped onto the stage and panic gave way to confidence. Once again, she surrendered to her character. Every word she spoke resonated deep within. Before she knew it, she was soaking up the cheers from the audience with the rest of the cast. Courtney took her bow, then retreated to the wings where their drama coach and crew waited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The whole ride home, Courtney stared out the window and replayed the performance in her mind. How she remembered any of it, she had no idea. She went into autopilot every time she stepped onstage. The words flowed out of her as though she had no control of herself. It was a terrifying, yet

exhilarating feeling that she chased without a second thought. Maybe one day she'd get them to understand just how important acting was to her. She wasn't going to place any bets on it, though.

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

"Hey, Babe."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They rushed you out again, huh?"

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

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

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

"Sounds good."

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

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

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

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

Courtney laughed. "Thanks." She turned and made her way back into the building, her nerves on edge. The end of the day couldn't come fast enough. Whatever she wanted, Courtney couldn't help feeling as though it would be much more than she could imagine.

Courtney arrived before Miss Hernandez did. She plopped down in one of the seats, trying her best to keep the nerves at bay. To

distract herself, Courtney started working on the paper she had due in English next week. There was nothing better than concentrating on a task to steady her nerves. She became so engrossed in her work that a sound to her right made her jump. The sight of her teacher brought a sense of relief.

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

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

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

"I don't get it..."

"Have you heard of Steven Miller?"

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

"That would be the one."

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

Miss Hernandez smiled, opening her brief case. She dug through the contents and pulled out a yellow sheet, which she gave to Courtney. "He's casting a new project next month and there are plenty of roles available. I thought you might be interested in checking it out."

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

"Why not? Courtney, you're a very talented young lady and I don't see why you couldn't get at least a small part in this. You've been talking about applying to a drama program and this would look great

on your resume. Not to mention the pay could go a long way toward tuition.”

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

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

Maybe she has a point.

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

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

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



Soul Catcher Serial - Part One By CP Bialois/Ed White

Chapter One

A shadow passed over the form of a man with a broken back laying across a concrete highway divider. His eyes remained locked on whatever had been their focus before death took him. Everything around him was still. Not even the sounds of traffic a few feet away found him.

Into the stillness, a shadow stepped out from nothingness. Its form was shrouded by a black cloak so dark it seemed to steal the light and color from the objects around it. Because of that, the cloak’s edges appeared to bleed into the surrounding night.

With a movement more closely resembling a glide than a walk, the figure approached the dead man. Once next to the man, the figure stopped, remaining immobile for a few seconds until a dark stained wooden box appeared in a whitish hand. The figure’s right hand appeared from within the shadow and moved to the top of the box. The box’s lid opened with a flick of the figure’s hand, revealing several wood-like sticks of various colors that resembled the cores of colored pencils.

With the box open, the figure bent over the man’s shattered form and pressed its right index finger to

the center of the man’s forehead. There, it paused for a handful of seconds before grasping something between its forefinger and thumb. The figure pulled in a slow, steady motion, drawing a thin light-blue stick from the man’s forehead.

In another second, the end of the stick pulled free from the man’s flesh. It was barely six inches long and was as thin as the others in the box. In a smooth motion, the figure pulled the stick away and placed it in the box and closed the lid.

With its task done, the figure turned and glided back to where it had appeared. When it reached the correct spot, the figure disappeared and life returned to the world.

Sounds of sirens and people being told to stay back filled the air as flashing blue and red lights highlighted the dead man’s ashen face

“What happened to him?” Logan Dietrich crouched next to the dead man as he studied the look on his face. “He doesn’t look like he felt anything.”

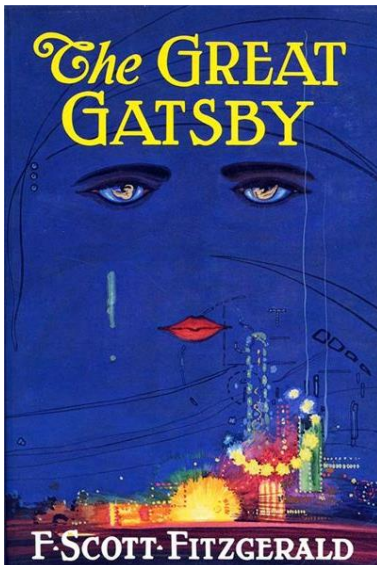
“He fell... pushed, according to some witnesses. He probably didn’t have a chance to understand what happened before he hit.” Patricia Dahlman flipped through her notes as she answered.

Logan looked upwards at the walkway running alongside the overpass. It wasn’t much more than twenty feet by his estimation, but it was more than enough to kill depending where someone landed. “Murder?”

“Mugging. Two witnesses said a man in his early twenties tried to grab his briefcase. The victim fought back.”

Letting out a sigh, Logan nodded. “Do we have a name?”

Patricia tapped her notebook with her thumb in an effort to fight



off her irritation. After twenty years on the force, this was the first fatality she had to deal with. Making things worse was that she *knew* she'd seen a shadow move out of the corner of her eye. But when she turned to look, nothing was there. Her beat didn't feel so safe anymore. "Manny Ramirez. Don't know who the perp was. He got away."

Logan glanced at the body and shrugged. "Let the medical examiner tag him and bag him. Does he have any family?"

Patricia shook her head. "Nothing that came up in the system. It'll take a couple of hours for anything to turn up. At least, that's what I was told."

Logan let out a chuckle.

"Is there something funny?"

Patricia asked. Her mouth was pressed closed in a thin line.

Logan shook his head. "No, just wishing for a case we have a chance at solving. Where did he live?"

The fire left Patricia's eyes as she hesitated in thought before looking back at her notes. In the confusion that followed the man landing a few feet from her cruiser, she had the presence of mind to write down the man's name and address before his wallet was bagged. Blowing out a frustrated breath, she rattled off the address, which she noted the detective wrote down. "Aren't you going to wait to confirm his identity? What if it's the perp's wallet?"

Logan paused for a couple of seconds in thought. "Did you see his picture on a license or something else?"

She opened her mouth to answer yes when she understood what he meant. "Still, shouldn't you wait?"

Logan paused as he thought over what she asked. "Maybe there's more the tech guys can give us."

Patricia raised her eyebrows at the use of the word us, but she chose to remain silent. This was more excitement than she expected or wanted.

The figure reappeared in an alcove built into a stone wall that was among the oldest walls in the world. With only faint torch light to lighten the room, it stepped forward, then turned left and moved toward a niche in the wall. Once there, the figure placed the box in the niche and stepped backwards.

The figure admired the box for a few seconds before a deep, guttural laugh came from under the cloak's hood. Rising in pitch, the figure's laugh grew until it echoed off the walls and filled the chamber. Turning, the figure disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 2

The hours passed as though they refused to allow the passage of time. Through it all, Patricia did what she could to help. Toward the end, she stayed more out of curiosity once she calmed her nerves. By all rights, the case was simple enough, but as the minutes ticked by, she was surprised that her thoughts continued returning to the shadow she thought, no, knew she saw.

It was something she had noticed multiple times before. Ever since she was ten, she could see things others couldn't. Each time, it was nothing more than a fleeting shadow. Nothing more. But there was something different about that

time. Something she couldn't put her finger on aside from things *felt* different.

Oh, that's a wonderful way to put it. Sarcasm had managed to bleed into her thoughts. Not that she minded as being sarcastic and cynical was a way of life for her.

It was because of her nature that she had never told anyone about what she saw. Not since that one time she told her mom and she... Patricia shoved the memory aside before it took her down a path she didn't want to walk.

Letting out a breath, she looked around and was surprised to see most of the officers and forensic team had left. The few that remained busied themselves with packing what equipment was left while a pair of officers worked to take down the yellow crime scene tape. Even the cement k-rail and roadway had been washed clean with a pressure washer and what little traffic there was now passed them by without a glance. The whole scene held a macabre vibe she didn't remember experiencing before. Even when her Uncle Jimmy hung himself while she stayed with him hadn't been like this.

A chill ran up her spine as her next exhale came out as a fog. "What the hell?"

She rubbed her arms in an effort to warm herself. "Not scramble vision. This ain't a pay-per-view." The words came out as little more than a whisper as the sharp edges of everything around her blurred and wavered like in a funhouse mirror.

She steeled herself until the event passed. It was something she had noticed when her Uncle Jimmy died. Over the years, she had come to think of it as a merging of two

worlds, which made more sense to her than an angel appearing out of nowhere to take the deceased to Heaven or Hell. *Like the shadow?*

Patricia clamped her hands over her ears as if that would stop her internal voice. “Shut up... Just shut up, please!” As if dealing with the nicknamed scramble vision wasn’t bad enough, her thoughts refused to allow her to move on.

“Lady?”

The voice seemed far away as Patricia focused on regaining her composure once more.

“Hey, lady? You alright?” That time the voice broke through enough to catch her attention. When she opened her eyes, she was greeted by a grizzled old man with white hair and beard and dark smudges covering his face. A brief breeze fluttered his grease covered faded yellow rain slicker. It wasn’t until she blinked that she noticed everything had returned to normal.

Lowering her hands and clearing her throat, Patricia tried to appear like she hadn’t nearly torn her ears off to quiet her thoughts. “I’m...” Her voice came out as little more than a squeak, so she swallowed and tried again. “I’m fine. Thank you.” There was something about the way he looked at her that was familiar.

The old man watched her for a second before nodding. “I suppose you’d know, though I don’t mind telling you, you looked like a fit caught you.” A quiet cough escaped from him before growing loud and strong enough to cause his body to nearly double over.

Though it took her a moment to gather her thoughts, Patricia stepped forward to offer help, but the man held up a hand stopping her. With his other hand, he pulled a stained and crusty looking

handkerchief from a pocket and dabbed at his mouth. When he pulled the handkerchief away, she thought she saw blood on it.

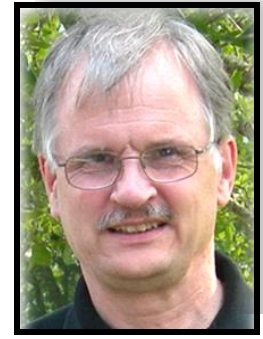
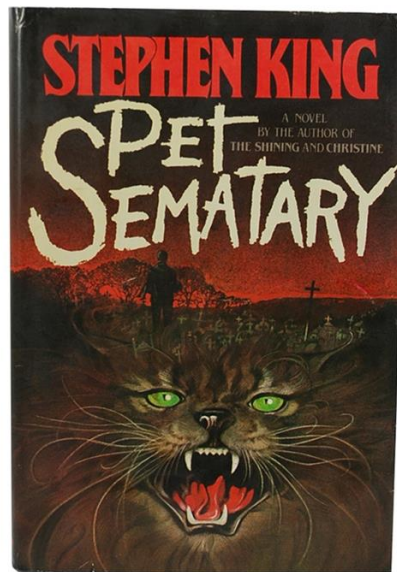
“No need to bother yourself.

Just wanted to make sure you were okay. Don’t want you to get sick.” He turned away from her and took hold of a beaten and worn shopping cart. “Be seeing you, lady.”

As she watched him move away pushing the cart, all Patricia could concentrate on was not seeing them man before her scramble vision episode. Even worse, she couldn’t figure out why the scramble vision hadn’t appeared earlier with the dead man as it had with her Uncle Jimmy.

Despite the air around her being warm once more, a second chill raced up her back.

Check out other novels by CP Bialois/Ed White at Amazon.com!



**The Repast
 By Rick Weber**

“What to serve? What to serve?” Jason Pardo asked himself repeatedly. Standing alone in his designer kitchen with cookbooks strewn across the counter, he spoke out loud again. “Today is the day and I still haven’t decided on a menu. Not to worry, I’ll go over last year’s selections. At least, I’ll know what not to serve.”

It was early Saturday morning, and Jason needed to prepare for his annual feast to take place that evening. From the printed menu, he reviewed last year’s accomplishment, Spice-Glazed Lamb Chops with Red Wine-Coffee Pan Sauce. This was compromised of Ancho chili powder seasoned lamb chops topped with a sauce made with beef broth, red wine, and coffee. He felt lucky that he got the recipe from *Food and Wine magazine*. An awkward mixture of ingredients, Jason remembered, and he received not a single complaint. “Will I be that lucky again this year?” He asked himself out loud.

The guests, he thought to himself, were all family members, and some were picky. Aunt Gert, Uncle Bob, cousins Lana, and Mike had always been the toughest of the lot. “If I can serve them, I can serve anyone,” Jason let out. He

knew his parents, Joe and Sally, would be the easiest of the bunch, along with his wife Camille. To him, a group of eight to feed presented no problems.

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

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

With the entrees decided, Jason had only side dishes and dessert to work out. "Not a problem," he declared. Grabbing a pencil and a sheet of paper, he compiled the list for his trip to the market.

Cooking had always been an avocation for him. He started as a teenager busing tables in a neighborhood restaurant near the family's apartment in the City. The owner saw that young Jason not only had an interest in cooking, but

also, a talent for it. Jason went from busboy to salad chef all before graduating high school. He continued working at the restaurant rising to *chef de partie* while he was getting his degree in business administration. This impressed Camille whom he met when they were undergraduates. Jason remembered Camille telling him that he was the only boy she ever met who could actually cook.

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

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

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

"Tony, I'm having a get together at my house tonight and will be serving both Beef Wellington and Arroz con Pollo. When you get a chance, can you pack me up a couple of pounds of beef tenderloin and a couple of three pound broiler-fryers. I have some other things to get and I'll pick them up on my way to check out."

"Sure thing, Mr. Pardo."

Jason pushed a cart to the produce section to look over the

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

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

Jason started by doing what he felt was the hardest task of all, making dessert. He preheated the oven, and as it warmed up, he sprayed several baking pans with vegetable oil and dusted the insides with flour. In a mixing bowl he poured boiling water over the German Chocolate, stirred it, then set it aside before grabbing another mixing bowl for the flour, baking soda, cocoa, and salt. A large mixing bowl came out for him to blend it all together along with other ingredients before filling the baking pans and getting them into the oven. As the cakes baked, Jason mixed his own brand of coconut-pecan filling to connect the layers of what would become two separate cakes. He then put together his own dinner roll dough which he would pop in the oven when it came closer to dinner.

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

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

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

After showering, shaving, and donning a blue serge wool suit, Jason was ready and went back to the kitchen to put the food into serving dishes. He made it out to the dining room filling Waterford crystal glasses from bottles of red and white wine according to the preferences of his guests.

Jason stepped up to his place at the table, raised his glass, and proposed a toast. "To my parents, Joe and Sally Pardo, who sacrificed so much for me and helped me get

where I am today, Happy Anniversary!"

Sitting down, he announced, "Now, let's celebrate!" and started a conversation.

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

Looking across the table he said, "Dad, how's the Beef Wellington?"

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

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

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

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

"Mr. Pardo, what was the occasion this time?"

"My parents' wedding anniversary, I made their favorites and had plenty of leftovers."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason sat quietly at his desk looking at the menu from the evening before. Reaching for an open folder, he placed it with the previous years' menus. After closing the folder and dropping it into the bottom right hand drawer, he locked the desk with a key he had in his vest pocket.



It Came upon a Midnight Clear By DiVitto Kelly

It was the latter half of December, the twenty-fourth to be exact. Peter and Danielle Anderson, from Cincinnati, Ohio, were enjoying day four of their annual week-long holiday escape to Lone Key, a southwest Florida island oozing of refined charm and jungle landscapes.

After a full day of sunburn and Red Stripes, husband Peter prepped for sleep. He slid open the panoramic bedroom window to savor the acoustics of the Gulf of Mexico waves. It put him to sleep in minutes. Back in Cincy, he rolled and turned like a wind-up toy. Danielle, seven months pregnant, was already asleep, out like a KO'd boxer. Both relished the vastness of the condo's plush king-size bed. At home, the two shared a queen model that was approaching vintage status. In April, it would most likely partake in their annual spring cleaning yard sale.

After inhaling an after-dinner double scoop hot fudge sundae, Peter thought chasing it down with

a midnight snack of chilled shrimp doused in cocktail sauce would be a good idea -- his wife's recent eating habits seemed to be rubbing off on him. Two hours past the witching hour, his gut voiced its disapproval. Anderson got up, relieved himself in the bathroom, before doing a shot of Pepto Bismol.

The thirty-five-year-old opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the lanai wearing a t-shirt and shorts. It felt cool as an opened fridge, with just a hint of tropical humidity. Anderson tweaked his posture, turning side to side like a churning washing machine hoping to induce gastric relief.

Burrrp! "Uh . . . finally," grinned Anderson, bending forward like he'd just completed a long distance marathon.

He was about to step inside when something caught his attention. Anderson turned back, observing the tranquil landscape. No lights; not one single light on. "Power outage," he thought. It'd happened before. The resort's electricity was spotty and about as reliable as Andy Dalton come playoff time. But what really startled the die-hard Bengal fan was the silence. He didn't hear one God-damned sound. You ALWAYS heard the waves no matter how calm the water was. Their condo was no more than a solid 8-iron shot away from the beach.

Anderson stood up and surveyed the grounds, perplexed. "This is too weird." He went back to the bedroom and thought of waking his wife.

"Not a good idea," he uttered to himself. Danielle was two months away, give or take a week, from

delivering a new addition to the Anderson household. Besides, if he did wake her up, she'd probably crave some disgusting concoction like a peanut butter and sardine sandwich. Or maybe an ice cream sundae topped off with a ring of cocktail shrimp.

Anderson slipped on a long sleeved t-shirt, and laced up his neon orange running shoes. He picked up the flashlight set next to the tackle box and headed towards the beach.

As he rounded the condo complex, he gazed up at the night sky. It was black, crystal clear, with every star out in full force. He easily made out four constellations: the big and little dipper, Leo the Lion, and Orion the Hunter. At home in the Buckeye State, he was a sportswriter for the Cincinnati Enquirer and part time astronomy geek. Knowing Christmas was just a day away, he started singing one of his favorite holiday tunes.

"It came upon a midnight clear that glorious song of -- owl!" Anderson, still star-gazing, managed to amble directly into a coconut palm tree. He touched his nose, receiving a mild scrape. There was a spot of blood on his index finger. "More like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer now," he mused.

Standing a shade under six-feet tall with mid-length blond hair, Anderson scaled the sand dunes, making sure not to trample on the freshly planted sea oats. The beaches always suffered some form of erosion, plus or minus, throughout the year, especially after severe storms. Years ago, Hurricane Hillary bellowed through, stripping away yards of pristine

beach. He and Danielle entertained ideas of selling their timeshare of four years and mosey up the suncoast to Longboat Key. Midwesterners seemed to gravitate to that part of the Sunshine State. The beaches there were snow white and spacious as the grounds at Paul Brown Stadium.

The flashlight crapped out. “Rats,” uttered Anderson as he squinted out into the darkness. It was still quiet, not a sound. He could usually count off the number of steps it took before reaching the Gulf. He trekked ahead; still nothing. He bent down, resting on one knee. The sand was moist on his skin. With the help from the glimmering moon, he spotted a handful of dancing shiners and a lone stingray in fluttered panic.

Anderson turned back towards shore. He was far away now. The flashlight bounced back on. He gazed ahead, hoping to spot the white foam from the breaking waves. “Oh shit.”

The water had receded, the beach now extending out a hundred yards. Tsunami, he could only assume. He didn’t feel any earthquake. That wouldn’t matter. It could have occurred hours ago, twenty, fifty, a hundred miles away from his little slice of holiday heaven.

A frequent jogger and tennis player, Anderson sprinted back to the condo, trampling over the sea oats. No time to care. He rushed inside, turned on the bedroom light, and woke up his wife, clutching her shoulder with his perspiring hands.

“What are you doing? What time is it?” asked Danielle, the words coming out slurred and sleepy.

Despite the short distance, Peter was gasping for air. “We need to leave, now!”

“Why?” asked Danielle, removing her Hello Kitty eye patches from her squinting face.

Peter was knee-deep in fear. “I think we’re going to get hit.” He grabbed only the essentials from the top of their dresser: laptop, wallet, car keys, his wife’s purse and iPad, before jamming them all into his leather backpack. He took in a deep breath.

“Get hit by what?” asked Danielle, sitting up, now appearing nervous as a chihuahua. “What’s wrong? Is it a hurricane?”

“Worse,” answered her husband. “I think we’re gonna get hit by a tsunami. I’ve got your things.”

“A what?” said Danielle. “We’re in south Florida, not . . .” Her voice trailed off. “Did you just say tsunami?”

“I just came from the beach. Only it wasn’t there, I mean the Gulf – it’s like . . . far away! I think something is going to hit us so we need to get to safety.”

The condo building began shaking. “Oh no,” uttered Peter.

The rush of seawater blasted across the barrier island, crashing into the condo building, flooding everything. The sliding glass doors from the ten units below blew out, shattering on impact. There were screams.

Danielle slid out of bed and rushed over to the bedroom window, catching a spray of seawater. “Oh God, the Garcias!”

The water kept coming, methodically. “Get changed,

honey,” said Peter. The surge of water engulfed everything natural and man-made. He ran over to the front door and opened it. Cars were already swamped with the steady rise of the Gulf of Mexico’s finest. Smaller compact models shifted out of the parking lot like floating leaves in a stream.

“As long as the water doesn’t rise too much I think we’ll be okay,” said Peter. “

“What about the condo?” replied Danielle. She glanced down at her protruding belly. “Please tell me it’s gonna hold.”

Peter hugged his wife, placing his hands on her shoulders, looking her in the eye. “We’ll be okay.” The two stood in the darkened living room in frozen disbelief. The whole building vibrated for fifteen minutes solid when it abruptly stopped.

Danielle snatched the flashlight just as it rolled off the dining table and waddled back to the lanai. Hey, I think it’s receding! Look, look!”

“Thank God,” said Peter as headed back to join his wife. “Here, let me see that for a second.” He took the flashlight and shined it over the grounds.

“It’s like everything’s going in reverse,” said Danielle, her left arm wrapped around Peter’s waist. The phone rang. Startled, she stepped back into the living room area and picked it up.

“Who is it?” asked Peter.

She made a ‘hold on’ motion with her hand off trying to listen to the warbled message. “It’s a recording.” She hung up a minute later and turned to her husband. “The bridge to the mainland is damaged and out of commission; the power is out indefinitely.”

“Damn it.” Peter walked into the kitchen and grabbed two bottles of water from the refrigerator, nearly stumbling over the cooler on the floor.

Danielle focused through the mesh screen, spotting a half-dozen drunk people sloshing their way through waist-deep water. “Unbelievable.”

“What’s that?” asked Peter, standing behind her.

“Those people are walking towards the beach. What, are they nuts?”

“Never underestimate the stupidity of vacationers,” said Peter, who quickly recalled a certain midnight hot tub rendezvous involving chilled adult beverages and his premarital wife.

“Probably Steeler fans,” he added with a mild laugh. “I bet they’re just curious to see what’s up with the Gulf. Maybe I should see how other people are faring.”

Danielle gave Peter a bonafide ‘are you crazy’ glare. “What if another wave does come out of nowhere? No way! I don’t want our son growing up without a . . . oops.” The redhead, a children’s librarian and former college soccer player at the University of Dayton, started tearing up.

Peter placed his hands on her shoulders. “Honey, a lot of people may be hurt so I should . . . Hold on, it’s a boy? It’s going to be a boy?” Peter let out a joyous shriek then broke into the Ickey Shuffle. He embraced his wife then pelted her with smooches.

Danielle suddenly pouted. “It was supposed to be a Christmas morning surprise. I even bought you Pop Tarts; the cinnamon frosted

kind.” She broke down in tears. I’m really scared.”

Peter ran his hands through Danielle’s shoulder length hair. “I’m scared too.” He looked down at his watch. “You know, technically speaking, it is Christmas morning so it’s all good. I’m gonna check and make sure the Garcias are okay. Stay here. I’ll be back in a few minutes, I promise. He retrieved the Kelly green battery operated lantern from the lanai and turned it on.

Danielle took a sip of water. “So what do I do while you’re gone?”

“Get cozy and read a book, of course.” He kissed his wife on the forehead before heading out the door. A second later, he reappeared. “Oh, and thanks for the Pop Tarts. Stay safe.”

“That’s my line.”

Peter trudged down stairs and waded into the parking lot, the water coming up just below his calf. Half the cars were either gone or had shifted from their designated parking spot, including their red convertible Mustang rental. He heard a noise coming from the Garcia’s condo. “Adolfo, Beatrice, are you alright?”

Anderson approached the door and surveyed the damage. All three hinges appeared a twisted mess. He spotted water trickling out at the base.

“I’m trying to open it,” called out Adolfo, “but our unit is filled with water.”

“You probably got a few mullet swimming around in there,” joked Peter. “Pull on the door handle and I’ll push.”

“Got it.” The elderly gentleman and class-A fisherman managed to

pull the door back a few inches. Peter rammed it open with his full frame. Water gushed out like a broken dam.

Peter gave his favorite fishing partner a hug. “Are you both okay?”

“I’m fine, a little soaked but the missus is shaken up; I think her arm may be broken.”

“Why don’t you two find some dry clothes and head upstairs,” said Peter. “I’m sure Danielle can help. She’s a librarian so she knows everything.”

“Where are you going?” asked Adolfo, watching the young man maneuver through the waterlogged lot.

“Danielle spotted a bunch of knuckleheads going to the beach. I just want to see anyone needs help. I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful, knucklehead!” shouted Adolfo.

Peter flashed a ‘thumbs up’ sign before circling around the two-story building. He assessed the damage. All the lower condos were trashed, suffering the same fate as their neighbor’s unit. There was a dip between the grass area in front of their condo and the sand dunes. In between, the water pooled like a lake. He freestyled towards the partially visible walkway leading to the beach. He slogged up the hill praying to see calm waters.

Peter slipped on the wet sand then stood up. He snagged a discovered flashlight covered in seaweed. He wiped it off before directing the beam towards the water. Everything seemed back to normal.

“Alright, that’s how I like to see Gulf, smooth as glass. Peter

glanced up at black ink sky, outlined with infinite stars. Feeling blessed with the good news about having a boy, he broke into his favorite holiday tune again.

“It came upon a midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,

To touch their harps of . . .”

Peter abruptly stopped singing when something caught his eye. The soon to be father stepped closer towards the calm surf when he tripped over something rigid. He shined the light and abruptly puked.

There, scattered on the beach were mutilated bodies, all six of them, a pile of ravaged flesh and exposed ribcages.

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Authors!

D.H. Lawrence Sept. 11
Agatha Christie Sept. 15
Stephen King Sept. 21
H.G. Wells Sept. 21
T.S. Eliot Sept. 26
Truman Capote Sept. 30



Portal Poetry Corner

Temptations By Jacqueline Whyte

Temptations come in many forms
Some from a distance recognizable
Others not visible to the naked eye
Temptations never the lest
Slouching in the shadows
beckoning your name
Passing off as a mystical thing
Masking its face as a friend
Making demands
As they secretly possessed you
Suffered your faith
Left an emptiness to your soul
Did not ease your mind did they
Leaving madness on your tongue
as you again chewed on defeat
Eased into that old familiar pain
Searching for answers
Should not have dimmed the lights,
ever
Allowing yourself to be freed from
distractions or drowning in their
debris
Entertained courage to lurk in some
shadow
Pictured my face in your hands
instead
Finding your own hope, let it take
you home
Reclaimed your dignity

Be free, be free, be free
In Jesus's name
Be free

Check out Jacqueline's new poetry book, *Life's Journey: An inspiration*, by Jacqueline Whyte, available at Amazon.com

Let's Cover The Mirrors By Suzzette Dawes

Rainy days used to scare me.
As a child, I would run inside
When thunder rolled and lightning
flashed in the sky.

Grandma would cover the mirrors
So lightning couldn't come inside
And we would be safe and dry.

Oh, the tales I was told!
We'd entertain ourselves by reading
But I'd often wonder about the
mirror world.

The mystique about thunder and
lightning lessened
As I grew older, science debunked
the legends and lore
And I grew bold and at times braved
the elements,

Traveling. I had developed a thirst
to explore
From flipping through the pages of
our encyclopaedia -
the portal to other places where I
dreamt to go.

I have visited quite a few places but
still so much more to go
See. Smell. Feel. Hear. Taste.
But when it rains, I still think of
Grandma.

I once drove to nearby Ponce Inlet
on a rainy day

And the white haze made me think
about back in time
Before the comforts of electricity.

Back in time before fancy gadgets,
Before radar navigation and GPS,
When ships relied on the lighthouse
to safely come to bay.

Even when it rains, the ships could
safely come to bay.
Rainy days are even scary today
due to the way some people drive,
it's wild!
Yet we have all these fancy
gadgets!

I'd rather be inside, dry, reading a
book.
Listening to the roll of thunder and
watching the flash of lightning,
Maybe I should cover the mirrors
For Grandma.

The Tempting Darkness
By Lisa Romer Math

That first encounter draws you in,
creating a sense of rapture
beyond measured boundaries.
Bewildering, subtle, and
overpowering
all at the same time;
what has this power to elicit
suggestive thoughts
as it slides by?
No act of solitary defiance will
prevent this union
as temptation creeps in and
wrestles with your inner voice.
Surely time will not be your friend,
for it will stand still
and bear witness as your senses
are held captive
by the feeling, the smell, and an
ever so exotic taste.
A mere touch of its dark and
luscious soft outer layer

will bring to mind the finest silks and
the offer of seductive sensations-
but beware of its innocence,
for it is masking its sinful way of
intoxicating and consuming its prey.
Fighting the temptation to escape
without guilt,
you relent and for just a moment,
chocolate holds the power to alter
your emotions.
With one bite, reality is suspended
and nothing seems ordinary.

Freedom
By Alice Kashuba

tall oak
stands near
flowing river

nestled on soft down
protected by woven twigs
two eaglets peer out

rustling sounds
rise from
forest floor

mother perches listening
eyes searching
a quick leap

swooping down
rabbit is caught
eaglets' lunch

two eaglets look
out beyond to
racing river

father flies high
plummets
skimming the water

sharp talons
grasp fish
eaglets' dinner

four tiny eyes

watch intensely
parents

soaring, diving
rising, falling,
turning

Oh to be free

scattered with
discarded remains
of old meals

imprisoning bowl
too small for
maturing eaglets

practice
hopping, jumping
flapping new wings

it's time - step up
unsteady perch
on nest's edge

it's time - step out
falling
spreading wings

warm air rising
lifting them
towards heaven

flying free

Be What Changed the World
By Gabrielle Lawson

You say you're a normal person
Average as average gets
Here you stand unaware of what
you possess
Something so special I can't
express
Deep into your center
What rocks you to the core
Is the fear that's blinding you
You don't have to be scared
anymore

See through your humble eyes
Things that can't be described
Lonely is a sacrifice
Come out of the shadows
Reappear from the background
The spotlight is on you now

Look at me now
No longer afraid
It makes me laugh to look back on
the old days
And those days were long and
those nights were even longer
Those fights were tough
But your battles make you stronger
Your will was weak but now you're
willing to seek
Your place in this world, your cry for
peace

You turned water into fire
With your love and burning desire
Seeking knowledge from the past
Searching your mind time after time
For the answers to the questions of
life
It was no surprise that you realized
That your purpose was to change
lives
You'll live on forever I know
Helping the minds of others grow

You walked out through the fire
unscathed
The world raved about your
success
You lay your weapon down
You are changed now

To every lie worth repeating
Every invisible person worth seeing
I want to break through to your
heart's truth
Bring you back to life, see what you
can do
I know what I'm signing up for
But fear never stopped the greatest
of wars
Join me and together we can be
what changed the world

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

***Upcoming dates 2015:**

**Sept 14, Oct 12,
Nov 9, and Dec 14.**

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