

Prompted to Write

by Joe Sweeney

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“The Ghost of Little Annie”

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Introduction

I usually have a hard time generating ideas for starting a story. I've found that it helps if I have a prompt of some sort to spark my imagination. Most of the stories collected here are from contest entries that provided that spark in the form of writing prompt. For those stories, the requirements of the contest are listed.

I hope you enjoy them.

Part I: NYC Midnight

NYC Midnight (<http://www.nycmidnight.com/>) is a website that holds many contests throughout the year in filmmaking, animation, screenwriting and creative writing. The cost to enter is relatively low, and you get free feedback for every entry. You are given a very short period of time to write the story, and are ranked more on creativity than style, grammar or punctuation. They offer very interesting prompts; usually a genre and a subject. Sometimes they also throw in an object that must appear in the story. The entry must meet the criteria of the prompt.

I found this website in April 2010 and have been entering contests ever since. I have found their feedback to be spot-on.

Gateway to the Eastern Seaboard

Screenwriters Challenge

1st Round (April 17-25, 2010)

Genre: Political Satire

Subject: Jet Plane

Limit: 15 Pages

Logline:

An interview with JPMorgan Chase regarding their new hanger at Westchester County Airport. Are they being environmentally and financially responsible?

FADE IN

EXT. WESTCHESTER COUNTY AIRPORT - MORNING

People are gathering outside of an aircraft hanger for a ground-breaking ceremony. News crews are everywhere as politicians and corporate executives pose for photo ops.

RORY SIMMONS is interviewing ALAN RICHARDS.

Rory is a cub reporter for CorpWatch, a non-profit investigative research and journalism agency. She is a tall woman with long brunette hair parted in the middle and a cherubic smile. Rory tends to make deadpan statements and gesture a lot with her pencil while talking.

Alan is a cub spokesperson for JPMorgan Chase. He is an immaculately charming corporate lackey who sincerely believes everything he says. Alan tends to be a bit of a drama queen.

RORY

Hi, I'm Rory Simmons, reporter for CorpWatch, here at the ground breaking ceremony for JPMorgan Chase's "Gateway

Part 1: NYC Midnight

to the Eastern Seaboard" - their new premier corporate aircraft hanger located in the southwest corner of the Westchester County Airport. With me is spokesperson Alan Richards from JPMorgan Chase. How are you today, Alan?

ALAN

I'm great, Rory! Before we get started, though, I must make this disclaimer: The opinions expressed by me during this interview in no way reflect the opinions of JPMorgan Chase & Company. JPMorgan Chase & Company cannot be held liable for anything I say during this interview.

RORY

Uh, okay, thanks for that. So, you must be very excited about the opening of the new hanger.

ALAN

Yes, I am! The new hanger will be a state-of-the-art green building.

RORY

What exactly does that mean?

ALAN

The hanger will be built with reclaimed wood and quarry tile, and feature a vegetated roof garden.

RORY

A vegetated roof garden.

ALAN

Yes, ma'am. In my opinion, it will be the best feature of the hanger in that it symbolizes JPMorgan Chase's commitment to the environment.

Gateway to the Eastern Seaboard

RORY

Has JPMorgan Chase investigated the possible side effects of jet fumes on the plants in a roof garden?

ALAN

I don't believe the plants will be affected in any way, shape or form. I think the roof garden environment will be very well-protected.

RORY

What about the environmental impact of the increase in jet traffic?

ALAN

I am certain that JPMorgan Chase is doing everything in their power to minimize the environmental impact.

RORY

I see. Did you know that quarry tile is porous and susceptible to water damage? And that it provides a hospitable environment for mold and fungus?

ALAN

Yet, it is inexpensive, durable and natural! And, it comes in a range of shades which pair well with a wide variety of design schemes. A brilliant choice.

RORY

That is truly amazing.

ALAN

I'm just as amazed. A lot of careful planning has gone into this.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

RORY

I understand that this hanger used to be operated by Avitat Westchester, and that Mike Dolphin, the president, opposed the new hanger.

ALAN

Yes, that's true. Now, I've met Mike, and he's a wonderful person. But you can't oppose progress, can you?

RORY

Even if that progress pushes smaller companies out of business?

ALAN

Progress is the way of the future!

RORY

But progress for the sake of progress--

ALAN

Bigger! Better! More efficient! We are becoming more environmentally friendly!

RORY

The Westchester County government seems to agree with you. They are impressed with the amount of money committed to green construction. They even said JPMorgan Chase is, and I quote, "a high quality corporate citizen".

ALAN

Well, there you have it.

RORY

Okay, then. So, a larger hanger means more private jets coming in and out of the airport.

ALAN

That's right.

Gateway to the Eastern Seaboard

RORY

Rates for a private jet start at close to \$2,000 an hour. How do business men justify the expense, especially in this economy? I mean, that's how much the average person pays for their mortgage every month.

ALAN

It's a privilege. They've earned it, and they deserve it.

RORY

They've earned the privilege to spend twenty times more than the average ticket price?

ALAN

Absolutely!

RORY

At a time when they are struggling to recover from the financial crisis? Don't you think it'd be wiser to conserve their money, especially since they had to borrow from the federal government to stay afloat?

ALAN

Image must be maintained. Can you imagine what people would think if they saw a bank president flying first class on a commercial flight?

RORY

I'd think: hey, there's a guy who's willing to make sacrifices to save his company.

ALAN

Sacrifices! Sacrifices! You don't know what these people have been through! The layoffs, the cut-backs in their personal expense accounts. It's horrible!

Part 1: NYC Midnight

RORY

Tell me how the layoff of an employee can so adversely affect a bank president.

ALAN

I heard of one man who lost one of his secretaries. The other two just can't keep up. He's frantic!

RORY

What about the secretary who lost their job. Don't you think that person is a bit frantic right now?

ALAN

They don't have a multi-billion dollar corporation to worry about. It's just not the same.

RORY

No, I suppose it's not. I'm sure I'd rather starve to death or be out on the streets. Or even fed to the dogs.

ALAN

Exactly my point!

RORY

So, we're going to be seeing more private jets in and out of this airport. How is this better for the environment?

ALAN

I believe there will be very strict regulations about the aircraft housed here. Fuel efficiency and noise are very important considerations.

RORY

Won't those considerations be counter-balanced by the fact that there are more jets?

Gateway to the Eastern Seaboard

ALAN

The goal should be to encourage the use of the quietest and most fuel efficient jets available.

RORY

Then why is JPMorgan Chase thinking about replacing two of their four jets with Gulfstream G650's? I hear they are larger and faster, so they can't be very fuel efficient.

ALAN

Ah, but the G650's are also the most comfortable, with superior cabin amenities. Passenger will be able to work much more efficiently.

RORY

Work efficiency and fuel efficiency are two very different things.

ALAN

But they both save money! Saving money saves the environment, right?

RORY

How do you figure that?

ALAN

If an executive can work more efficiently, he won't have to spend all those extra hours in the office, thus saving the cost of electricity in the office. Not to mention the expense of take-out food.

RORY

I don't see how you could save enough in electricity and take-out food to cover the cost of fuel.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

ALAN

Savings are savings. You've got to be willing to make those cuts where ever you can.

RORY

Spending money to save money?

ALAN

Right!

RORY

Throwing good money after bad?

ALAN

Oops. Look at the time. Hey, I've got to get back.

RORY

Thank you very much for your time.

ALAN

Thank you! It's been a pleasure.

RORY

That was Alan Richards, spokesperson for JPMorgan Chase. I'm Rory Simmons, reporting for CorpWatch from the JPMorgan Chase's ground breaking ceremony at their new aircraft hanger located at Westchester County Airport.

FADE OUT

The Biker's Ball

Flash Fiction Challenge

Challenge #1 (August 13-15, 2010)

Genre: Comedy

Location: A Dance Club

Object: A Motorcycle

Limit: 1000 Words

Logline:

Several local motorcycle clubs band together to sponsor a ballroom dance to benefit Alzheimer's research.

Jan was startled by the thundering sound of motorcycles outside of the Southside Ballroom Dance Club. She ran to look out the picture window.

"Ron!" she exclaimed, running back into the office. "There's a gang of bikers coming into the studio!"

Ron looked up from his desk, a stunned look on his face. After a moment, he rubbed his forehead as if trying to scrub out a memory.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "The BAA Ball tonight. They're here to help."

"The ba-ball?"

"No. BAA."

"As in baa goes the sheep?"

Ron shook his head. "As in Biker's Against Alzheimer's." His hands fell to the desk in despair. "I completely forgot."

"How could you forget something like this?" Jan said, a wild note edging her voice.

"Relax. You're panicking. It will be alright."

Summoning his reserve, he got up from his desk and walked out to the main dance floor with Jan at his heels. Half a dozen bikers were hanging around the main desk.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

"It's good to see you again, Sirius Jake," Ron said, extending his hand. "How's your father?"

"Doing okay," answered Sirius. "I really appreciate you letting us use your club for this."

"Not at all. We're happy to oblige. Allow me to introduce my event coordinator Jan." Ron moved aside and gently nudged Jan forward. "She'll direct you for what needs to be done. Jan, this is Sirius Jake, leader of the East End Boys Motorcycle Club."

"Ma'am," said Sirius, engulfing Jan's tiny, quivering hand in his own. "My girl, Tish. And this here's Big Loni, leader of the West End Girls."

Images of the Pet Shop Boys video flashed through Jan's mind, but she bit her lip and said nothing. She couldn't image either group as working class or cosmopolitan, much less getting along together.

"What do we do?" Loni asked, smacking her fist into an open palm. A habit she had whenever she was itching to get to work. Unfortunately, it often gave people the wrong idea. Jan jumped involuntarily and attempted to sidle her way back to her hiding place behind Ron. Ron casually step aside, leaving Jan exposed.

"Well," she began in a meek voice. Before she could finish, another motorcycle roared up. Two people got off the bike and entered the studio.

"WSOTT, Blu Dude!" Sirius greeted the man who just entered. The two of them clasped hands in an over-the-head handshake that looked painful. Loni pounded him on the back and leaned into his companion for a pseudo-hug.

"This is Blu and his main squeeze Berta," Sirius introduced the new-comers. Blu sported a logo on his jacket that said "Wrong Side of the Tracks Motorcycle Club."

Jan looked at Ron and mouthed "main squeeze?" Ron frowned and shook his head.

"Well, Sirius, I have some paperwork to finish up. I'll leave you in Jan's capable hands." With that, Ron left her with this unwieldy seeming bunch.

"Well," she began again. "The, uh, first the floor must be swept. Broom closet..." Jan darted over to a door next to the office.

Big Loni motioned to two of the bikers. They grabbed brooms and began sweeping like men on a mission. Dust filled the air within moments.

"Hey!" hollered Sirius, his voice echoing in the large and mostly empty ballroom. The mirrors on the walls and the panes of the picture windows rattled. Everyone stopped and looked at him. "Ya gotta be gentle. Nice an' easy."

While those two returned to their task, Sirius asked Jan: "What else?"

"Ulp, well, chairs..." her arm attempted to indicate yet another door. Sirius walked over and opened it. The room was filled with folding chairs and tables. He signaled to the other bikers.

"Where do they go?" he asked.

"They go..." Jan made circular motions with her arms and indicated places around the edge of the dance floor.

Sirius looked confused, so Tish spoke up: "She wants the tables along the walls and chairs around the tables, don't ya, honey?"

Jan nodded. Tish took over, giving directions to the others. Jan and Sirius walked over to the main desk where Blu was still standing, waiting for something to do.

"I don't get this fancy dancing," Blu said, his eyes darting around and taking in the pictures of elegantly dressed men and women. "It's a little uncomfortable in here."

"It's easy, bro," Sirius said. "Just like riding a hog." Sounding a shrill whistle, he hollered: "Tish!"

Part 1: NYC Midnight

Tish dropped what she was doing and hurried over.

"This is what's called a Waltz box," Sirius said, getting into dance position with Tish. "You're going through your six gears like this." Sirius counted out six steps, leading Tish in a box step.

"Steer her just like your bike," Sirius continued, "kinda lean into the direction you wanna go. Forward, side, together; back, side, together. One, two, three; four, five, six. You try it."

Blu took Berta, who had wandered over to watch, into his arms. But when he took his first step he slammed right into her.

"No, bro, don't steer your chick like a limp dick. Stiffen up, man! You're riding a hundred and sev--, uh, a hundred pounds of dynamite. Take charge!"

Blu tried again and managed to get through two boxes, twelve steps of lumbering like Frankenstein's monster.

Ron stepped out of his office to check on progress, and saw Jan watching with a half amused, half fearful look on her face.

"You know," she said, "when you told me it was going to be some 'bikers' I thought you meant people who ride bicycles."

"Eh, yeah. I did forget to mention that little detail."

"Can you imagine how our students and guests are going to react?" Jan spread her hands in supplication and looked imploringly up to heaven. "The day the bull visits the china shop."

Ron rubbed his forehead. "I really hope it won't be that interesting of a dance."

The Snow Shovel Convention

Flash Fiction Challenge

Challenge #2 (September 17-19, 2010)

Genre: Romantic Comedy

Location: A Bed & Breakfast

Object: A Snow Shovel

Limit: 1000 Words

Logline:

During a romantic get-away, a woman dreams that she's losing her husband to snow shovels.

John and Sally pulled up to the quaint bed-and-breakfast nestled in the foot hills of the snow-covered mountain. They had mixed reactions when they read the greeting posted on the large sign by the entrance: Welcome to the 35th Annual Snow Shovel Convention.

John's eyes lit up in anticipation. Sally groaned.

"Let's find another place to stay the night," she suggested.

"No, no, it's okay."

The foyer was quiet. No one was there except a man in a dark corner examining a number of snow shovels. He turned as they walked in the door.

"Howdy! Here for the convention?"

"Not exactly," Sally said.

John said nothing; he just stared intently at the collection of snow shovels.

"I can see you're a discerning man," the man said, taking John by the arm and leading him into the corner.

"My name's Roger and I sell snow shovels."

"John," Sally pleaded, following along helplessly.

"Is that a Wovel?" John gasped.

"It sure is! The world's safest snow shovel!"

"I've heard about them, but I've never actually seen one."

Part 1: NYC Midnight

"John, it's just a snow shovel with a wheel. Can we please check in?"

"In just a minute, honey. Now, it doesn't use a metal blade, does it? I've had trouble in the past with snow sticking to metal blades."

"No, sir! But, I'll tell you a little secret." Roger brought a hand up to hide his mouth and his tone got conspiratorial. "Spray some non-stick cooking spray on a metal blade and the snow won't stick!"

"Really?"

"John, please. This is not what I had in mind for a romantic get-away."

"Now, the Wovel is fine, but if you're into physical fitness you'll want a traditional shovel like this one." Roger selected a shovel with a wide plastic blade and handed it to John.

"What can physical fitness possibly have to do with shoveling snow?" Sally asked, momentarily distracted.

"Well, ma'am, it's a fact that just 15 minutes of shoveling snow is considered moderate physical activity. It's in the Surgeon General's report! 30 minutes 3 times a week and you've got yourself aerobic activity."

"Sure, but who wants to shovel snow for a living?" Sally replied.

"Wow! This is light!" John exclaimed, hefting the shovel and pretending to shovel snow.

"It's made of the latest composites for strength and durability. Guaranteed for life!"

"John, will you please put that thing down!" Sally pulled the shovel out of his hands and set it down.

"What about grain shovels to shovel snow?" John asked.

"Shh!" Roger hissed. "Do you want to start trouble?"

"What do you mean?"

"Snow shovelers and grain shovelers don't exactly get along. There's a long standing feud, no one knows

The Snow Shovel Convention

what started it. But if you don't want to get lynched, I suggest you never say that word again while you're here."

"Are you serious?" Sally demanded. "A feud between snow shovelers and grain shovelers?"

"Please!" Roger begged, his eyes glancing furtively around the empty room.

"I've had enough of this. John we're going." Sally stormed back to the entrance and picked up her bags.

John stood frozen; torn between his wife and the snow shovels. His eyes bounced back and forth between them. He couldn't make a decision.

"Please, honey. Just a few more minutes. I promise!"

"No! I'm leaving now, with or without you. It's time you decided what's more important: our marriage or these damned snow shovels!"

John stared in bewilderment at his wife. She was serious. He looked back at Roger, smiling benevolently and indicating the snow shovels neatly arranged in the corner, enticing the unwary traveler. John involuntarily made a slight move towards the shovels.

"Fine!" Sally sobbed. She slammed the door behind her as she left the bed and breakfast.

* * *

"Sally! Sally!" John whispered urgently, his hand on his sleeping wife's shoulder.

"Uh! Huh? What?" she said groggily as she sat up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "What an awful dream!"

"Snow shovels again?"

Sally nodded.

"It's okay," John said in a consoling voice as he drew her close and held her tight. "It's going to be okay."

As he comforted his wife, his gaze fell upon the snow shovel in the corner.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

Damn! he thought to himself. I have to remember to hide that before she sees it.

The Exalted Pumpkin

Short Screenplay Challenge

Challenge #1 (October 29-31, 2010)

Genre: Romantic Comedy

Location: A Pumpkin Patch

Object: A Moving Van

Limit: 5 Pages

Logline:

The seeds of romance sprout for two people waiting in a pumpkin patch on Halloween Night.

FADE IN

EXT. A CITY STREET ON HALLOWEEN - AFTER DARK

It is a clear night and the stars shine brightly in the moonless sky. There is very little traffic. Most of the trick-or-treaters have gone home for the night.

WALLY has just finished his last run of delivering pumpkins using the rental van. He stops the van in front of his favorite patch, the Pumpkin Wonderland. As he approaches the gate he notices a woman sitting in the middle of the patch.

LYNNIS has a serene look on her face. Her eyes are closed and she's sitting in a lotus position with her hands resting lightly on her knees. Her palms are facing up and her thumbs are touching first fingers.

WALLY

Uh, hello?

Lynniss's eyes pop wide open.

LYNNIS

Oh!

Part 1: NYC Midnight

WALLY

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.

Lynnris rises to her bare feet and takes a few steps towards Wally. She whispers urgently to Wally.

LYNNIS

What are you doing here?

WALLY

I, uh, like to come and look at this pumpkin patch. It soothes me.

LYNNIS

Oh.

WALLY

What are you doing here?

LYNNIS

I'm meditating. And waiting for the...

Wally waits a moment for her to finish her sentence.

WALLY

Waiting for what?

Lynnris sets her mouth in a hard line.

LYNNIS

I'm sorry. There are three things I never discuss: religion, politics, and the Exalted Pumpkin.

Wally looks confused.

WALLY

The... Exalted Pumpkin?

Lynnris hangs her head and shakes it slightly.

The Exalted Pumpkin

LYNNIS

You wouldn't understand.

WALLY

But, I thought the Exalted Pumpkin was a myth.

LYNNIS

Do you believe?

WALLY

I want to believe!

LYNNIS

You must leave if you are not a believer! You will insult the Exalted Pumpkin!

Lynn timer back towards the center of the patch.

WALLY

No, please, wait. I really want to believe. Will you tell me about the Exalted Pumpkin? Please?

Lynn timer and looks intently at Wally, scrutinizing his expression.

LYNNIS

Are you sincere?

WALLY

Truly sincere!

After a moment, Lynn timer nods assent.

LYNNIS

Sit with me, then, and I'll tell you the story of the Exalted Pumpkin.

Wally carefully opens the gate and enters the Pumpkin Wonderland, closing the gate behind him. He sits down next to Lynn timer, who has

Part 1: NYC Midnight

resumed her lotus position. After several attempts, Wally decides to cross his legs.

LYNNIS

In the mists of time, the Great Spirit saw that we had lost our sincerity. She sought the largest pumpkin she could find, since pumpkins are where the Gods come from and orange represents the best qualities of outgoing social nature. She imbued the pumpkin with a portion of her own spirit and instructed the Exalted Pumpkin to seek out only the most sincere on All Hallow's Eve. Also known as All Souls Eve, the Great Spirit chose that night as a symbol of the death of sincerity and her prayers for its resurrection. The Exalted Pumpkin searches the world and grants them their most secret desire, providing that they are truly sincere and are willing to accept whatever the Exalted Pumpkin brings.

Wally remains silent for a few moments, absorbing the story.

WALLY

Wow. That was beautiful.

Lynn timer opens her eyes and turns to face Wally. She takes both of his hands in hers and stares deeply into his eyes.

LYNNIS

Do you believe?

WALLY

I believe.

LYNNIS

I see that you do. Will you wait with me in my Pumpkin Wonderland?

The Exalted Pumpkin

Wally takes in the entire patch with a quick, astonished glance.

WALLY

This... is all yours?

LYNNIS

My life is this pumpkin patch. I grow it to honor the Exalted Pumpkin and to spread the word of sincerity. Every All Hallow's Eve, I sit and await the Exalted Pumpkin, meditating on sincerity and acceptance.

Lynniss and Wally both close their eyes. Time passes as they meditate.

The waning crescent moon begins its ascent into the sky. Lynniss and Wally open their eyes and stare in wonder at the moon.

A shadow falls over them. They both look straight up. An immense pumpkin is floating over the patch.

LYNNIS AND WALLY

The Exalted Pumpkin.

A fine, glistening powder falls from the Exalted Pumpkin and lightly dusts them and the patch.

They watch, spellbound, as the Exalted Pumpkin takes off, disappearing into the rising moon.

Lynniss and Wally hug enthusiastically, clearly excited by the visitor. As they laugh and cry together, his lips find hers in a long, passionate kiss. Wally breaks suddenly from the embrace.

WALLY

Oh! I'm so sorry.

Lynniss smiles the smile of the truly happy.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

LYNNIS

It's okay. The Exalted Pumpkin has granted us our most secret desire.

Wally realizes the truth after only moment.

WALLY

Yes. True love!

They hug and kiss fervently for several minutes, until they finally lie down side-by-side in the middle of the patch.

They stare at stars in the sky in silence for several minutes.

LYNNIS

Do you know any pumpkin carols?

WALLY

A few. Which one is your favorite?

Lynn timer laughs.

LYNNIS

Well, of course I've always been partial to "Pumpkin Wonderland."

WALLY

Ah, I should have guessed that one.

Wally sings softly.

The Exalted Pumpkin

WALLY

The pumpkins call,
Are you listening?
Beneath the moon
All is glistening

A magical sight
We're happy tonight
Lying in this Pumpkin Wonderland!

Lynniss giggles.

LYNNISS

That's not quite the way it goes.

WALLY

Poetic license. Besides, my version
fits better.

Wally puts his arm around her and pulls her
close. He kisses her on the forehead, and they
both fall asleep.

FADE OUT

Kyra and Wayne at the Oction

Short Screenplay Challenge

Challenge #2 (December 3-5, 2010)

Genre: Fantasy

Location: An Auction

Object: An Octopus

Limit: 5 Pages

Logline:

Kyra's first experience at an oction does not end well.

FADE IN

EXT. MELDON'S OCTION HOUSE - EARLY AFTERNOON

KYRA and WAYNE stop in front of the oction house. It is a very large building with no windows and a small door.

KYRA is a half elf, half human. She is wafer thin and on the pale side. She is carrying several bags.

WAYNE is a full human. He is portly and not as pale. He is also carrying several bags.

KYRA

Oh, no! Not another stop!

WAYNE

Please? This will be the last one - I promise!

KYRA

That's what you said two shops ago. My feet hurt and these bags are heavy.

WAYNE

I just want to look for one second.

Kyra looks up and reads the sign.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

KYRA

Meldon's Oction House? What is it?

WAYNE

You've never been inside an oction house?

Kyra shakes her head and pouts.

KYRA

No.

WAYNE

It'll be fun! Trust me!

Kyra rolls her eyes.

KYRA

Oh, alright. But this is the last one. Promise me!

WAYNE

I promise! I promise!

Wayne manages to grab her arm and drag her inside.

INT. - FOYER OF MELDON'S OCTION HOUSE

The foyer is large. There is a desk on the opposite wall next to a doorway that leads into hall. A lot of people are milling about, talking in small groups.

WAYNE

We can check our bags at the desk.

KYRA

Okay.

MUNDO the dwarf is sitting behind the desk.

MUNDO

Are you here for the oction?

Kyra and Wayne at the Oction

WAYNE

Yes. We'd like to check our packages.

MUNDO

That will be five bronze for the day.

Wayne hands Mundo five bronze coins and accepts a small bag in return. Wayne and Kyra place all of their packages inside the bag, and then Wayne hands the bag back. Mundo makes a note of a number on the side of the bag, writing that number down on a receipt. The bag then floats up and into an empty cubbyhole in the wall over their heads.

MUNDO

Here is your receipt and a catalog of today's items.

WAYNE

Thank you!

Wayne eagerly begins paging through the catalog, drifting blindly toward the center of the foyer.

KYRA

So, what is this place? What goes on?

WAYNE

I keep forgetting! You said you've never been to an oction.

Wayne looks around and spies a few empty chairs along a wall.

WAYNE

There! Let's sit down for a minute.

After they sit down, Kyra looks impatiently at Wayne, who is still absorbed in the catalog.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

KYRA

So, are you going to tell me or not?

WAYNE

Sorry! They've got some really good stuff in here. I think I might have to bid on something.

KYRA

Bid? What do you mean?

WAYNE

It's an auction house. Where the put stuff up for auction.

KYRA

I don't know what that means. What is an auction?

Wayne looks up from the catalog and stares off into space a moment.

WAYNE

An auction is where you can buy stuff that people don't want anymore. But you have to bid on it. If you have the winning bid, then you get to buy it.

KYRA

Buy what?

WAYNE

Whatever you were bidding on.

KYRA

What are you bidding on?

WAYNE

Whatever it is you want to buy.

Kyra shakes her head.

WAYNE

Here, let me show you.

Kyra and Wayne at the Oction

Wayne flips back a few pages and points to a picture.

WAYNE

Here. See this Elven night stand? It would be perfect next to my bed. Bidding starts at 10 silver.

KYRA

Yeah? So?

WAYNE

Well, we go into the oction room and I bid on the night stand against others. If I have the highest bid, I get to buy it.

Kyra pouts and shakes her head.

WAYNE

Okay. Let's go into the oction room so you can watch.

Wayne and Kyra walk past the desk and into the hall. On the left is a large double door. The door is open, and inside they see a lot of people in chairs facing a stage. Other than the rustle of people in their seats, the room is quiet.

MELDON, an Octopodan, is levitating behind a podium. One of his eight arms is holding up a large white card with a number written in black on the face.

KYRA

Oh, Wayne, I don't think this is a good idea.

WAYNE

Come on! It'll be fun. Meldon is the best octioneer.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

Wayne drags her into the room and they take a seat.

KYRA

Ah!

Kyra winces and rubs her temple.

WAYNE

Kyra! What are you doing?

KYRA

Ow, my head.

Wayne puts his hand on her arm.

WAYNE

Kyra, you have to stop!

KYRA

Ah... stop... what...

WAYNE

Bidding! You have to stop bidding!

Kyra falls to the floor in a faint. Wayne frantically looks down at her, then back up to Meldon. Meldon is signaling to another with one of his free arms. A look of relief passes between Wayne and the other.

Wayne carefully picks Kyra up and helps her out to the foyer. He sits her down and brings her a glass of water.

WAYNE

Kyra! What happened in there?

Kyra sips at the water and sighs.

KYRA

The Octopodan. His race is telepathic.

WAYNE

Yeah. So is yours.

Kyra and Wayne at the Oction

KYRA

Elves are. But they operate on a different frequency. I'm half human and can't block the interference.

WAYNE

I'm so sorry! I didn't know. Look, how about we get out of here?

Kyra nods weakly. They retrieve their packages and leave.

KYRA

I'm sorry you didn't get your Elven night stand.

WAYNE

Oh, that's okay. I'm glad you're alright. I'll take you home now.

Kyra smiles and rest her head against his arm as they walk down the sidewalk.

Attention

Tweet Me A Story

1st Round (January 13, 2011)

Subject: Attention

Limit: 140 characters

Rules: Write up to three tweets, no more than 140 characters each, that use the word “attention.”

1. If I could have your attention;
I would say without contention;
I'm sure that my betters;
In 140 letters;
Could write with greater invention.
2. In this episode of short attention span theater
we'll take a glimpse at concepts that can be
expressed in one-hundred forty characters or...
3. I have an attention deficit. It's not a disorder, I
just ran out of it while you were telling your
story. Can you start over? Tomorrow?

First Aid for Romance

Short Story Challenge

1st Round (February 4-12, 2011)

Genre: Romance

Subject: First Aid

Limit: 2500 Words

Logline:

On her first trip off the Isle of Man to a reception at Buckingham Palace for her achievements with St John Ambulance, a young woman and her charismatic friend meet a handsome man on military leave.

The threat of rain hanging over Douglas, combined with the salty sea breeze blowing in from the Irish Sea, reinforced the aura of electricity in the air. A storm was brewing, but it would hold off for the rest of the afternoon.

Sara Gresham bounded off the bus in front of the Steam Packet Sea Terminal. Closing her eyes and raising her face to the sky, she breathed in deep and sighed contentedly.

"It's going to be a great afternoon for a ferry ride," she thought to herself.

Sara was like ball lightning - a blond bundle that moved erratically from place to place and rarely sat still for long. A very in-the-moment sort of person, she spent every second loving life.

Laura Ingram stepped off the bus with somewhat less energy. It's not that she lacked the enthusiasm radiating from Sara. Laura was simply more restrained and, on top of that, very nervous.

Laura was about as different from Sara as any person could be. Her light brown hair, black rimmed glasses and sedate nature often left her unnoticed,

Part 1: NYC Midnight

especially when Sara was around. Sara attracted attention like moths to a flame. Laura watched life with trepidation, allowing it to pass her by.

Despite their differences, the two young women had been friends since primary school. It was a true case of opposites attracting. After high school, Laura took a job on the isle while Sara found her niche in the travel industry.

"Come on, Laura!" Sara said, spinning on her toes to face her friend. "Let's grab our bags! We've got about half an hour before the ferry leaves. I want a good spot!"

The women picked up their bags, entered the lounge and checked in. Their walk along the pier to the Liverpool ferry was slowed by Laura, who drank in the site of the harbour while Sara raced ahead and then back like a yo-yo. They arrived eventually at the boarding ramp, where Laura stopped with one foot on the ramp.

"Laura, you okay?"

Laura gulped and nodded. "I've never been on a ferry before."

"You've never been off the isle before!" Laura laughed with Sara at that. "It'll be fun!"

"Yes," Laura said as she started up the ramp.

Once on the boat, Sara came around and grabbed Laura's hand, dragging her to the rail. They had a great view of the harbor. Sara gazed out to sea with anticipation, while Laura looked out with apprehension.

"I'm worried about getting sea sick," Laura said.

"If you worry about it, you will! Relax and enjoy the ride!"

Laura took a deep breath and tried to quell the butterflies in her stomach as the ferry was released from its moorings and began the two-and-a-half hour trip to Liverpool. She and Sara would spend the night there, and the following day sightseeing.

* * *

After a full day running the streets of Liverpool, Laura was very happy to finally sit down. Sara insisted on The Cavern. They arrived during a lull in the late afternoon, and were able to find a table by the front stage without any trouble.

"You sit right here," Sara said. "I'll get you a drink."

"Okay." Laura settled in to a chair and looked around the bar. It was a lot bigger than the ones she'd been to on the isle, and it appeared to have an impressive sound system.

Sara walked up to the bar and caught the bartender's eye.

"What'll ya have?" he asked.

"I'll have a pint of whatever you've got on tap, and a rum and coke."

Sara looked down the bar and noticed a young man watching her out of the corner of his eye. He was standing as if at attention, and his clean-shaven, cherubic face was topped with very short black hair sporting a faint part on one side. His face had an odd, semi-lost expression on it.

Sara slid along the bar over to where he was sitting.

"What brings you to Liverpool, GI Joe?" she asks.

"GI Joe?"

"Yes. You're American? In the military?"

"Uh, yeah. How'd you know?"

The bartender brought her drinks. Sara paid him and turned back to the young man.

"My name is Sara. I'm here with my friend Laura." Sara nodded over to the table where Laura was sitting.

"I'm David," he said, refraining from a salute.

"Why don't you join us? We're celebrating!" Sara picked up her drinks and walked back to the table.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

David grabbed his drink and followed her. He arrived at the table and stood there, uncertain what to do next.

"David, this is my friend Laura. Laura, David." Laura stood to shake his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure."

"Sit, sit." Sara said, waving her hand at the chairs.

David sat down, placed his drink on the table and nervously wiped his hands on his pants.

"So, what are you celebrating?" he asked

"Well," Sara said, "two things, really. The first is, it's Laura's 21st birthday."

"Oh. Happy birthday, Laura. Cheers." David lifted his drink to toast.

Laura blushed and looked down at her own drink. She felt suddenly like a character out of one of her romance novels. He looked so, so... dreamy.

"Uh, it was actually a few days ago," Laura said.

"And second," Sara continued, "Laura is going to a reception at Buckingham Palace to receive an award!"

"Really?" David asked.

"Tell him, Laura!"

"Oh, it's for the winners of the Grand Prior Award."

"What is that?" asked David.

"The Grand Prior Award?" Laura said. "It's an award given to cadets in St. John Ambulance."

"Laura studied twenty-four subject areas for this award!" Sara said with pride in her voice.

"I'm sorry to sound stupid, but I don't know what St. John's Ambulance is."

"It's St. John ambulance, no 's'," Laura said. "It's a charity dedicated to the teaching and practice of medical first aid."

"Oh. Like the Red Cross?"

"Similar. The Red Cross focuses more on humanitarian aid. Our main focus is first aid."

"Laura will meet Anne, the Princess Royal!" Sara said.

"I'm afraid I'm not up on the royalty. What is a Princess Royal?"

"It's a title awarded by a monarch to the eldest daughter," Sara said in an authoritative voice. "Anne is Queen Elizabeth's eldest."

"You seem to know a lot," David said.

"I work in the tourist industry, so I have to know these little details."

David nodded and took another sip of his drink.

"That explains how you knew I was American."

Sara smiled sweetly and finished off her drink.

"Another round?"

"I'll get this one," David said.

"Cute, isn't he?" Sara asked after David left for the bar.

"I guess so," Laura said, her eyes trailing after him. She turned back and gulped down her drink. The alcohol seemed to have no effect; she felt just as warm and giddy inside. It all started when Sara brought David over to the table.

"He seems to like you," Laura said.

Sara shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe."

David returned with three glasses precariously intertwined with fingers and set them down on the table.

"So, David," Sara said. "You haven't answered my question yet."

"What question is that?"

"What brings you to Liverpool, GI Joe?"

"Oh, that one. Well, I'm on leave, my first one since after boot camp. I'm with the 100th Air Refueling Wing stationed at Mildenhall. Thought I'd see what there is to see."

"Taking the tourist route?"

Part 1: NYC Midnight

"Yeah, I guess."

"If you haven't any plans for the day after tomorrow, we'll be in London. Laura will be at her reception, but I've got no plans. I can show you some off-the-beaten-track places."

"That'd be great! Thanks!"

"Hey, Sara? Could we find someplace to eat?"

Laura asked.

"Great idea! There's a really good place just a few blocks from here. Care to join us, David?"

"Sure!"

* * *

Laura stared out the window as the train pulled out of the Liverpool station. It was going to be a very long trip to Henley-on-Thames. How could she allow her mood to be so disrupted by such a little thing as meeting a guy? Not like Sara. She was off somewhere making more friends, no doubt. She was good at it, unlike herself.

"Lunch?" Sara's voice sounded, startling Laura out of her reverie.

"Sure. Is it lunchtime already?" An entire morning spent in a brown study.

Laura followed Sara to the dining car, and they sat at a booth.

"Why so glum?" Sara asked. "Tonight we'll be settled into our room at the Cherry Tree Inn, and tomorrow is your reception at Buckingham Palace."

"Mmm."

The waitress stopped and took their food order. After she left, Laura said:

"You were out late last night."

"David and I went back to the Cavern to listen to the bands play."

"Oh."

"He seems really nice."

"Yeah."

"So, what would I do if I wanted to learn first aid?" Sara asked.

Laura glanced up at Sara, and her voice crept out of the monotone she'd been speaking in. "You want to learn first aid?"

"What if I did? What would I do first?" Sara giggled at her inadvertent pun.

"Oh, well, I guess probably the 'Emergency First Aid at Work' course, since there are few health and safety risks at your workplace. It's only one day. Ask your boss to sign you up for the next training class, the schedule is in the St John Ambulance web site."

"What kinds of things would I learn?"

"Uh, well, basic life saving first aid, of course. They also teach you about health and safety regulations."

"That sounds interesting."

Laura squinted at her friend. "You're not really interested. Why are you asking me about it?"

"I'm actually asking for David," Sara confessed.

"Oh." Laura's monotone was back.

Their lunch was delivered, and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

"He said he'd done a few training courses through the Red Cross for first aid and CPR. He was really interested in Cadets training that you've been through. I couldn't tell him enough about it. He kept asking all kinds of questions."

"He's interested?"

"Very interested! He really wants to ask you about it."

"He does?"

"Really! He does!"

"Okay," Laura lowered her head to her plate for another bite and to hide the hint of a smile on her lips.

* * *

Part 1: NYC Midnight

Laura woke up to an empty room. Sara, as usual, was already up and about. Laura crawled out of bed, showered and dressed. There was a note on the dresser from Sara. She had gone to The Crooked Billet for breakfast, less than half a mile away. A hastily drawn map showed Laura how to get there.

Sara had finished eating. Laura's heart skipped a beat when she noticed David was sitting with her drinking some coffee. Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the table.

"Good morning!" Laura said as she sat down.

"Good morning, sleepy head!" Sara replied.

"Hi," David said.

"I was so tired after the reception yesterday, I just came straight back to the Inn and fell right into bed!"

"What was it like?" asked Sara,

"It was so amazing!" Laura's eyes shone with excitement. "The palace, and the guards, and the royalty, and the ballroom and everything! I felt like Cinderella at the ball! Here, look at my badge." Laura pulled a small box out of her purse, opened it and handed it to Sara.

"Oh, this is really nice!" Sara handed it to David.

"It's one of the few I can wear on my adult uniform."

"This is fantastic," David said, handing the box back to Laura. "What's next for you?"

"There are two courses I can take to become a Patient Transport Attendant. Then I think I may go to university and study to be a paramedic. I've almost got enough money saved up."

"You know," David said, "I'm thinking about looking into more first aid training on the base. I really like helping people."

Laura's breakfast arrived. She didn't recall ordering, but the sly smile on Sara's face confirmed what she suspected. Sara had ordered breakfast earlier for her. Laura dug in.

David added cream and sugar to his refilled cup of coffee.

"So, Sara won't tell me why you and she chose The Cherry Tree Inn."

"I thought he should hear it from you," Sara said. Laura chased down a mouthful of eggs with some juice.

"It's partly owned by Carol Decker," Laura said, taking a bite out of a slice of ham.

"Who's she?" David asked.

Laura wiped her mouth, placed her napkin on her plate and pushed the plate aside.

"Well, she used to be the front woman for the band T'Pau."

David shook his head. "Never heard of them."

"Oh, they're great! You'll love them! I've got all their songs on my iPod if you want to listen later."

"That'd be great!"

"Well," Sara said as she stood up. "I have some errands to run. You two have a wonderful day together!"

Sara gave both Laura and David a quick hug and then left the dining room. She glanced briefly through the window to see the two of them deep in conversation.

"I may not know much about medical first aid," she thought to herself, "but I know a lot about first aid for romances."

Grisslee's Last Stop Tavern

Screenwriter's Challenge

1st Round (May 13-21, 2011)

Genre: Fantasy

Subject: Bad news

Character: A bartender

Limit: 12 pages

Logline:

A man who loses his family to the forces of evil finds solace and acceptance in a tavern frequented by outcasts and misfits.

FADE IN

EXT. GRISSLEE'S LAST STOP TAVERN -LATE EVENING

REZ ASTON is a middle-aged, fair complexioned, short, bookish man. His clothes are filthy, wet and ripped in places. His hair is unkempt and his face unshaven.

Rez stops to catch his breath and notices a tavern.

Grisslee's Last Stop Tavern is a forlorn looking building that sits just off an isolated section of the road. There is a signpost in front of it, upon which two wooden arrows are nailed, pointing in the opposite directions along the road. On one arrow is written "Wedgeton 5 km" and "Nadley 3 km" on the other.

It's a dark looking building, but Rez can see lights on inside and can hear people talking.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

INT. GRISSLEE'S

Rez steps inside and stops near the entrance. The room is dimly lit, and about a dozen people are scattered in a few small groups. A woman is sitting alone at one end of the bar, and a large man stands behind it mixing drinks. A large sign behind him reads "Keep your wand holstered."

Rez absentmindedly places his hand on his belt, feeling for his missing wand. He staggers a step or two before catching his balance.

GRISS LEE is a large, slow moving man with jowls set in a permanent frown. He looks up from pouring a drink to see Rez standing by the door, mouth agape.

Griss finishes pouring the drink and hands it to the woman at the end of the bar as he comes around.

GRISS

Ho, there, friend!

A few people at a nearby table look up. Two of them stand and catch Rez just as he begins to slump to the floor.

GRISS

Bring him to the bar, mates.

The two people half carry Rez to a stool while Griss goes back behind the bar. He pours a mug of Witches Brew coffee and places it in front of Rez.

GRISS

Freshly brewed. That'll brace you.

Rez takes a cautious sip of the hot brew. A few more people gather around the bar.

Grisslee's Last Stop Tavern

WIT MIRZLE, the woman sitting at the end of the bar, looks up from her glass of mulled wine. She has a hollow, angular face and stringy blond hair that dips into her drink when she turns to look at Rez.

WIT

Either he's a ghost or seen one.

What's your story?

GRISS

Leave him be, we don't pry around here.

Wit shrugs.

WIT

Just being friendly.

GRISS

He'll speak or not, as he's ready.

The rest of you, back to your seats.

Rez takes a slow pull of his coffee and grimaces.

REZ

How much for the-

GRISS

We're good.

Rez drains the rest of his coffee and signals for another. He looks around the dingy tavern until Griss places a fresh mug on the bar.

Rez reaches for his wallet, but Griss shakes his head.

REZ

Thanks.

I, uh, never seen this place before.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

WIT

A tavern for strays.

REZ

Strays?

WIT

Strays. This place has a spell on it. Only people in desperate need can see it.

REZ

Oh...

WIT

That's Griss Lee, owner and barkeep.

Griss wipes his hands on a towel and reaches across the bar and shakes Rez's hand.

WIT

He doesn't talk much. My name is Wit Merzle.

REZ

Wit?

WIT

Yeah, because of my pithy banter. And also, I'm part witch.

REZ

Ah.

Rez takes another long drink of his coffee.

GRISS

Nip of whiskey in that, mate.

Rez nods and puts the mug down.

REZ

This place, uh, really has a spell on it?

Grisslee's Last Stop Tavern

Griss nods.

GRISS

That it does.

REZ

Wh-what kind of desperate need?

Wit signals Griss for another glass of wine.

WIT

A bit over a year ago, I was attacked by the Morla not far from here. They were able to cast a dampening spell and left me for dead. I crawled aimlessly for days before I found Griss' place.

REZ

I'm sorry.

Wit drains half of her glass of wine.

GRISS

That's your last.

Wit rolls her eyes.

WIT

I can be a nasty mean drunk. I don't know where I'd be without Griss.

Wit raises her glass and faces the room.

WIT

Or the rest of the riffraff in here!

Everyone in the tavern raises their glass and cheers with Wit.

REZ

What did he do?

Part 1: NYC Midnight

WIT

He saved me. A witch without her powers is nothing. Or so I thought. He's been like a father to me, to all of us.

REZ

Hm.

Rez nurses his drink, staring at the mug in deep thought.

REZ

Th-the Morla attacked me.

The tavern becomes quiet as everyone stops to listen.

WIT

They're getting braver.

GRISS

Talgen.

WIT

No doubt about it.

REZ

Who is Talgen?

WIT

A warlock. He was beaten back many years ago. We'd hoped he was gone for good. Rumor has it he's organizing the Morla again.

GRISS

Bad news.

WIT

Very bad news, it is.

Rez puts his head down on his hands. His shoulders shake a little as he quietly sobs.

Grisslee's Last Stop Tavern

Wit walks over and puts a hand on his shoulder.

WIT

What happened to you, friend?

Rez raises his head and takes a deep breath.

REZ

We were sleeping.

Rez catches his breath and stares up at the ceiling.

REZ

It-it started in my dreams. I could feel them approaching.

Griss put a fresh mug of spiked brew in Rez's shaking hands. Rez takes a large gulp.

REZ

I-I fought them, as best I could. They broke through. There were too many, they were too strong.

Rez finishes his drink, and Griss immediately fills the mug again.

REZ

They ensorcelled my children. My wife was too distracted with them to help me fight the Morla. I was outside the house driving some of them back, when...

His voice breaks and he takes another drink. Wit puts her arm across his shoulder and gives him a hug.

REZ

They managed to catch the house on fire. It was a magic flame, nothing I did would douse it.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

Rez puts his head down again and cries. The rest of the room sits in mournful silence.

Rez lifts his head. He takes the napkins Griss offers, blows his nose and wipes his eyes.

REZ

Thanks.

Rez finishes his drink. Griss starts to pour another, but Rez stops him.

REZ

Water, please.

Griss nods and gets Rez a glass of water.

GRISS

They spared you.

REZ

Yes.

GRISS

Wit, too.

WIT

They don't usually leave survivors. I figured they thought I was dead.

GRISS

They'd make sure.

WIT

True enough. Which begs the question. What's so special about us that we were spared?

REZ

C-could it be that we were protected somehow?

Grisslee's Last Stop Tavern

WIT

It's possible, if a witch or wizard was strong enough. Why?

REZ

My, uh, talent is shielding. The Morla broke through mine, but just before I passed out I felt something shielding me.

GRISS

You said the same thing, Wit.

WIT

Oh, yeah, I vaguely remember that.

Can you still shield?

Rez concentrates for several moments, and then shakes his head.

REZ

No. I've lost the ability.

WIT

Griss?

Griss nods and disappears into a back room. He returns shortly with an odd colored crystal.

GRISS

Open palm up.

Rez does as he is instructed, and Griss places the crystal into Rez's palm. The crystal immediately turns smoky.

WIT

Interesting.

REZ

What?

Part 1: NYC Midnight

WIT

You have a dampening spell over you.
That's why you can't shield.

Rez looks stricken.

REZ

Oh.

What am I going to do?

Griss takes Rez's water away and replaces it with another whiskey brew. He also brings Wit another mulled wine.

GRISS

Drinks for you are free tonight.

WIT

What Griss is saying, in his own sweet way, is that you are now part of our family.

Wit raises her glass and turns to the room.
Everyone else stands and raises their glasses.

ALL

(in unison)

Welcome to the family, Brother Rez!

GRISS

May you always find your way home.

FADE OUT

Late

Flash Fiction Micro Challenge

August 11, 2011

Subject: Late

Limit: 100 characters

Rules: Write up to three stories, no longer than 100 characters each, that include the word "Late."

1. "Sorry." Jill took a seat. "I'm late."
"Meeting starts in 5," Bob said.
"No, I mean LATE, is in..."
2. Sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Unicorn. You are too late.
The Ark has been sealed shut for the Flood.
3. Late Night Vacancy: now holding auditions to
replace the late "Lopez Tonight."

Note: #3 above was selected by the judges and qualified me to move on to the second round.

Oxygen

Flash Fiction Micro Challenge

August 18, 2011

Subject: Oxygen

Limit: 100 characters

Rules: Write up to three stories, no longer than 100 characters each, that include the word "Oxygen."

1. Oxygen: a part of all. From first breath to last, thank you for being there. You made life possible.
2. Too late, I figured out the oxygen gauge symbols. My last thought? Symbol for "empty" not intuitive.
3. Love is like oxygen? Ever suffocated from being smothered by it? Glad I ended that relationship.

Note: #2 above was selected for the third and final voting round.

The Magic Sax

Flash Fiction Challenge

Round 1, Challenge 1 (August 19-21, 2011)

Genre: Comedy

Location: A Mansion

Object: A Saxophone

Limit: 1000 Words

Logline: Jack and Jill go up the hill to a scary mansion to fetch a magic saxophone.

*In Memory of Clarence Clemons
January 11, 1942 – June 18, 2011*

Jack stopped the car in front of the run-down mansion at the top of Stadley Hill.

“Are you sure this is the place?” he asked his sister.

“How many other mansions are there on Stadley Hill?” Jill consulted a piece of paper. Peering through the windshield, she asked, “Does the moon look full to you?”

Not waiting for an answer, Jill opened the car door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

“So, what is our plan of action?” Jack asked after joining Jill. She was studying the mansion entrance.

“How typically creepy,” she said. “So cliché.”

The gate was rusty and barely hanging on at the hinges. Pillars stood on either side, topped with unlit lanterns. The pillars merged into a brick wall surrounding the house, too tall to climb over. In the yard, a chipped and cracked sidewalk lined with dead flowers and dark garden lights led to the porch. The porch light was out, and there was no sign of light in the house.

“Allow me,” Jack said, bowing gracefully before approaching the gate. He rattled the lock, causing it to break and fall onto his foot.

Part 1: NYC Midnight

“Ah!” he cried, hopping around on the other foot. “That thing’s heavier than it looks!”

Jill ignored him. Walking up to the gate, she lifted the latch and pulled the gate. After opening about two feet, it stopped and wouldn’t budge any farther. As she struggled to widen the gap, a loud, tinny creak sounded.

“That sounded like a rusty gate opening,” Jack said.

“Really?” Jill studied the pillar next to her. At its base she found a speaker grill. Losing interest, she sidled easily through the gate opening.

“Agh!” Jack struggled to follow her through. A loud rip preceded him stumbling into the yard.

“Oh, man! My good jacket!”

Jill paid no attention. Instead, she was looking at a graveyard on the right. There were half a dozen weather-worn headstones sitting at odd angles.

“Why would anyone bury people like that?” Jack asked. “Wouldn’t the graves overlap?”

Reaching out a tentative hand, Jill touched the closest headstone. It fell to the ground without a sound.

“Now look what you’ve done!” Jack cried.

Squatting down, he grabbed the headstone to stand it up again. Expecting a heavy stone, he was surprised when it came up without effort. The force of his action caused him to topple back flat onto the ground. The headstone landed on his stomach.

“Oh! Get it off me!” His flailing caused the headstone to slide off.

“My hero,” Jill said, reaching down to pick it up. Just as she touched it, a loud crumbling sounded from the grave site, followed by the *whomp!* of a heavy object hitting the ground.

Jill looked closely where the headstone had been and saw another speaker grill. Picking up the headstone, she hefted it briefly before nonchalantly tossing it back onto the grave.

“Hm. Styrofoam.”

Jack stared at it as he dusted himself off and straightened his torn jacket.

“Dilapidated, naturally.”

Jack looked over and saw that Jill was already climbing the steps to the porch. He hastened to catch up with her.

“Tell me again why we’re *here* for a saxophone,” Jack said.

Jill handed him the slip of paper. Four short lines were written on it with blood-red ink in a very fancy calligraphy. Jack’s lips moved as he silently read:

Come hither, dear Jill, to Stadley Hill
By light of a moon that’s full.
An you should ask, then the Magic Sax
Shall be yours, and that’s no bull.

“Huh! ‘no bull’? What kind of rhyme is that?” Jack thrust the paper back at Jill. “And what’s this ‘Magic Sax’ it’s talking about? Is that the saxophone we’re supposed to pick up?”

Jill sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” Jack said. “I’m not going another step until you tell me.”

Taking a deep breath, Jill said, “Okay. The Magic Sax is supposed to be of such craftsmanship that it is imbued with magical properties.”

“Magical properties?”

“Yeah. It’s supposed to help the saxophonist sound really good.”

“You mean, like Bill Clinton good?”

Jill rolled her eyes. “Bill Clinton’s a dabbler. I mean Clarence Clemons good.”

“Clarence who?”

“Clarence Clemons. You know, The Big Man? Saxophonist for the E Street Band?”

Part 1: NYC Midnight

“Uh, Bruce Springsteen?”

“Whatever! I don’t know why I even talk to you.”

Jill turned and rang the doorbell.

Thunder boomed, lightning cracked, and all of the lights flashed on and off in a frantic and discordant manner. Post lights, garden lights, porch light, even the interior lights, participated in the frenzied light show.

The house went dark and silent. The door opened.

“Yes?” A tall, imposing man dressed in a formal suit answered the door; the typical scary mansion butler. His voice was a deep baritone with enough bass to rattle their bones.

Jack gulped. Jill swallowed hard. The tinny squeak of an opening door sounded from a speaker overhead.

“I-I’m here for the Magic Sax,” Jill said.

“Are you Jill?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Come in.”

The man stood aside. Jack and Jill walked into the dark house. Jill jumped at the sound of something falling over.

“Ouch!” Jack said. “Bumped into something.”

“Wait here.”

“Is he crazy? It’s dark in here.”

A moment later the room was flooded with light. A loud click of a switch echoed against the walls. The man who had answered the door stood there with a huge grin on his face and a golden saxophone in his hands.

“Pleased to finally meet you, Jill,” he said in a high-pitched, nasally voice. “I’ve heard so much about your skill with the saxophone. Here you go! Thanks for dropping by!”

The man placed the saxophone into Jill’s hands and ushered them out. They found themselves back on the porch so quickly they didn’t know what happened.

“That was too weird,” Jack said. “I say, you got the sax, let’s go.”

Jack ran down got in the car and Jill came running after.

Alternate Ending

Author's Note: I wasn't happy with the ending, but I had run out of words – the limit was 1,000. I came up with following three paragraphs after I submitted the story to the contest. They are intended to replace the last line, which puts the story at 67 words over the limit. If I would have thought of this ending sooner, I would have trimmed the 67 words from somewhere. Ah, well, such is the life of an author.

Jack and Jill walked down to the car.

“Wait,” Jill said. “I’m too excited! I have to try it.”

Jack stopped as Jill raised the saxophone to her lips. He wasn’t an expert, but even he could tell that the notes were exceptional. As he watched, mesmerized, the air around Jill began to shimmer. She began to morph, growing larger, taller and darker. When the air finally cleared, Jack stared with mouth agape.

“Oh, my God!!” Jill screamed in a much deeper voice. “I’ve turned into Clarence Clemons!”

Making a Scene

Flash Fiction Challenge

Round 1, Challenge 2 (September 23-25, 2011)

Genre: Open

Location: A Children's Playground

Object: Police Tape

Limit: 1000 Words

Logline: Investigating a knifing at a playground.

Derek picked up the roll of police tape and ran over to where Megan was standing.

"I found a roll of police tape!" he said.

"Cool!" Megan replied. Looking around the playground, she spied a tree near the edge of the sidewalk. Pointing to it, she said, "Start at that tree."

"Okay," Derek said, and took off.

"Hey," Mark said. "Who made you boss?"

"I'm the investigating detective at this crime scene," Megan said. "Go look for evidence."

Mark sulked and walked away.

"Susan," Megan said. "Where's the body?"

Susan looked around. Pointing to the see-saw, she said, "Over there!"

They walked over to the see-saw. "Good," Megan said. "What about a weapon?"

"I think it was a stabbing," Susan said. "I'll go look for a knife."

"Who's the coroner?"

"I am," Steven said.

"Can you give me a report?"

Steven knelt down by the prone figure lying on one end of the plank. "I'd say he's been dead for... eight hours!"

"Look for more evidence on the body," Megan told Steven. Looking up to check on Derek's progress, she

Part 1: NYC Midnight

stomped over to where he was tying police tape to a jungle gym.

“You’re not doing it right!” Megan told him. “The tape is not supposed to cross over itself. You have to make a circle around the crime scene.”

“Megan!” Susan called from the other side of the playground. “I found something.”

Megan ran over to where Susan was standing. “What did you find?”

“Look! Suspicious footsteps near these bushes. The murderer probably hid here, waiting for his victim!”

“I think you’re right! Any sign of the murder weapon?”

“Not yet. I’ll keep looking.”

Megan walked back over to the see-saw. “Well, Steven?”

“This person was killed by three stab wounds,” Steven said, poking at the body in three places and causing it to squirm a bit.

“What about identification?” Megan asked.

“I’m the coroner, that’s not my job.”

“Where’s my junior detective?”

“Right here!” Andy said, raising his hand.

“Andy, I need you to search the body for identification. I want to know who this person was. We need to figure out a motive for the murder.”

“It was jealousy!” Erin said. “The murderer was in love with me, but was jealous because I’m in love with the victim.”

“Ew!” the corpse said.

“Sh!” Megan said. “You’re supposed to be dead. Jealousy is a good motive. Erin, you’re the grieving widow.” Megan looked up at the sky. “We have to hurry. The sun will be setting soon.”

“I found it! I found it!” Susan called, running over to Megan. “Look!”

Megan examined the object in Susan's hand. "The knife! Now all we have to do is track down the killer."

"Children!" Mary called from the sidewalk. "Come along, it's time to go home!"

"Aw, mom!" Megan said. "We haven't finished solving our crime yet."

"It's getting late," Mary said. "We have to get home for dinner."

"I guess we'll never know who did it," Megan said with a sigh. "Come on, let's go."

Part II: FanStory

FanStory (<http://www.fanstory.com/>) is a website that holds many writing contests; some are hosted by the web site administrators and some are created by members. The annual subscription cost is relatively low. This allows you to post up to two pieces a day, enter as many contests as you like, and you get free feedback from a very active online community. They offer very interesting prompts and types. Prompts include a sentence to start the story with or a topic; types include flash fiction, horror, and a variety of poetic forms.

I found this website in December 2008 and created an account. Some of my entries into the contests became my second collection of short stories “Mad Queen’s Chess.” My account lapsed, and I created a new one in May 2011. The reviews have been helpful. I’ve found that the best strategy is to build a fan base and be an active reviewer.

The White Picket Fence

Flash Fiction Writing Contest

Subject: A white picket fence

Limit: 500-800 words

Deadline: May 4, 2011

John paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. He was tempted to rest against the white picket fence, but decided not to. Instead, he sagged first into one foot and then the other, taking turns to give each leg a rest.

Scratching his head, he took a moment to contemplate the white picket fence. It looked like the one around his front yard, except that it extended beyond the horizon in both directions. One long, straight fence that appeared to divide the world in half rather than enclosing a yard.

He was afraid to touch it for fear that it didn't really exist. An irrational fear, he realized, but there it was. He had no reason to believe it didn't exist. He could see it, plain as day. He could reach out and touch it, if he wanted to.

John looked over the fence. The other side was no different than his side. Green grass extending beyond the horizon. Perhaps it was his eyes playing tricks, but it seemed like the horizon was elevated all around him, as if he were at the bottom of a bowl-shaped valley. Along the horizon, the wind whipped dark clouds round and round.

John began walking again. The howling wind continued to push the clouds around, even though the air near him was still. If he listened carefully enough, he could hear the cries of others in the distance, carried along with the wind. People wailing and animals yelping; the faint sounds evoked sympathy and pity in his heart.

The wind roared, sounding closer. Filled with fear, John began to run along the white picket fence. Each picket blurred into the next, until all he could see was a

Part II: FanStory

solid wall of white. Faster and faster he ran until he felt like he was flying. John tried to stop, but couldn't. Something was pushing him, hard. He dug his feet into the ground to stop, and was whacked in the back of the head. He stumbled into the white picket fence, collapsing a section. As he lay there, consciousness slipping away, the fence continued to collapse like dominoes in both directions out to the horizon. The white of the fence and the green of the grass faded to black, blending in with the dark clouds until there was nothing to see.

* * *

“Ow, my head,” John said as he sat up in the make-shift bed.

“Easy,” Nancy said, pressing a fresh cold compress against the back of John's head.

“What happened?”

“You fell down the stairs and hit your head on the post.”

“The stairs?”

John looked over at the creaky old stairs.

“Please, John, don't,” Nancy begged. “I'm afraid. I don't want to see.”

Rising on unsteady legs, he climbed the steps to the top, where the storm cellar doors remained firmly closed. He unlatched them, heaved them open, and climbed a few more steps until his shoulders cleared the opening and he could look around.

Nancy gasped as they both surveyed the devastation. Their middle-class, suburban neighborhood had been replaced by rubble.

The Morla Attack

Horror Story Writing Contest

Subject: Horror or thriller

Limit: 700-7,000 words (2,000-3,500 recommended)

Deadline: May 26, 2011

Rez Aston checked once more on his two sleeping children before heading for his own bed. His wife, Darla, smiled as he walked in.

"Safely tucked in, are they?" she asked.

"Yeah," he smiled as he dropped into bed.

Darla pulled the covers up, tucked him in and kissed him on the cheek.

"Sweet dreams, sweetie," she said. A quick flip of her hand in the air put out the lights, and they settled in for a good nights' sleep.

* * *

Something tickled at the edge of his mind. Not enough to wake him. Just enough to cause him to roll from his side to his back.

The tickle became a mild itch. Rez's hand rose to his head; fingers combed once through his hair and remained entangled.

Fingers clenched a bit and gently tugged. The itch persisted. Rez frowned in his sleep, rolled his head and let out a long sigh.

In his dreams, dark colors swirled against a shimmering wall. Misty fingers probed, searching for entry. Talons formed, and the itching gave way to scratching.

Rez rolled onto his side, rubbed his head and squeezed his eyes tight against the images in his head. Clawing tendrils curled into fists, rising high and hurtling down...

Part II: FanStory

Boom! His mind rattled and his mental shield reverberated.

The fists rose and the mist twisted into an evil smile. Rez cringes at sinister eyes that scowl into his soul and the fists that begin another fall...

Boom! The sound cracks like thunder on the splintering shield. Tendrils slither through Rez's defenses, widening the fissures. He watches in horror as a third...

Boom! Rez gasps and his eyes pop open wide. He swings his legs from under the covers and he sits in one blinding motion.

"Honey?" Darla asked, reaching up in the dark to place her hand on Rez's shoulder. Feeling tense muscles, she flipped her hand to bring up the lights.

Rez was sitting elbows to knees and fingers to temples; a strained look on his face.

"Morla!" he hissed between tight lips.

"The children!" Fear caught her.

"The cellar. Quick!" Rez said in a weak voice. "I can't hold them back much longer."

Darla ran out of the room. Rez's fingers pushed harder, trying to ward off the attack by force of will. His brain felt like it had swollen and was about to burst out of his skull.

Boom! Rez tumbled to the floor in a heap. He scrambled back to his feet, reaching for the wand on his belt with one hand and his medicine bundle with the other.

Darla made it halfway down the stairs with the children. They stopped suddenly; a vacant look had replaced the fear in their faces. The Morla must have broken through and enchanted the children.

Swallowing hard, she took their hands, guided them to the bottom and sat them in chairs.

"I'll be back soon," she whispered, and kissed them on the forehead.

Drawing her wand with a shaking hand, she rushed back up the stairs in time to see her husband stagger from the bedroom.

"The children?" he gasped.

She shook her head. "Ensoxelled."

"Protect the doorway," he said, pointing to the cellar. He couldn't think about them right now.

She nodded, and Rez darted outside. The air was thick and the sky black; there wasn't a star to be seen on this cloudless night. The Morla enveloped heaven and earth like a dense gloom.

Rez muttered an incantation and dragged his foot as he ran around the house, inscribing a hasty circle of protection.

Vague shapes circled the house like loose papers in a cyclonic wind. Coal-gray cloaks with faces of death and hands of bone. They moaned and wailed, weaving their spell of destruction and depressing the life out of everything.

Rez knew his circle of protection was problematic at best. His children were ensoxelled, so there were Morla in the house already. He hadn't time to inscribe a proper circle, and the Morla force seemed to be growing in number and strength.

He brandished his wand in a desperate attempt to ward them off. Rez shouted a spell, projecting it for all he was worth against the descending mass.

Eyes in the sky flashed, and Rez was knocked off his feet. Dark became light as his flowerbed burst into flame. He dropped his wand and ran for the hose; a mistake only because it hastened the end. Without the meager defense of his wand, the Morla pressed their attack in an ever-tightening circle.

Bolts of fire rained from the heavens. The house burst into flames. Rez shut out the screaming of his family on fire; he was unable to help them. The force of the Morla around him squeezed the air from his struggling

Part II: FanStory

lungs. When he could catch a breath, it carried smoke and the smell of burning flesh.

He rose to hands and knees, and attempted to crawl back toward the falling house. At least let him be with his family in the end.

That would be denied him as he lost consciousness several yards from the fallen doorway.

Touched by Green

Written: May 26, 2011

Not written for a contest.

Tagline: Unexpected side-effects may occur.

It was a very small waiting room. The wall on the left was barely long enough to contain the love seat. The opposite wall had two chairs with a rack between them. Another door was on the wall opposite, and the path to it was blocked by a coffee table.

I edged around the table and sat on the couch. The rack had an assortment of magazines and a small, portable radio playing soft music. I found the clipboard on the coffee table amidst flyers and a scattered newspaper.

Picking up the clipboard and pulling the pen from the top, I began the tedious effort of filling out the forms, reading my patient rights and signing my consent. You think they'd find some way to automate paperwork. Three different forms, each with a place for my name, address, phone number and insurance information.

I finished the forms and sat waiting. A clock on the wall showed that I still had a few minutes before my appointment. It gave me a chance to notice the decor: Southwestern earth tones and Native American artifacts. The walls were sand colored and trimmed with sage edged with light rose.

The office door opened and the counselor stepped out.

"Jeff?" the person asked.

"Yes," I said, standing up and offering the clipboard. The counselor took it and extended a hand.

"Hi, I'm Denise"

"Hi, Dennis," I said, shaking hands.

"Denise. Won't you come in? First door on the left."

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I slipped passed the counselor and entered an office. The decor wasn't much different, but the room was larger. An intimate living room suite filled most of the front end of the room, and tucked away behind the love seat sat a desk with a computer on it.

The counselor sat in one of the chairs opposite from me and studied the forms. I was sitting on the love seat, at the end farthest from the door.

"Do you understand how this works? You have six sessions, paid for by your employer through the Employee Assistance Program. After that, I can recommend you to someone for further counseling."

"Yes," I said, nodding.

"So, what brings you in?" The counselor was a very soft-spoken person.

"I, uh, have a rather strange problem," I said with a nervous laugh.

"Yes?"

My eyes roamed the room. "I, I, uh, can see only men."

"Men?"

I nodded and examined my shoelaces.

"Tell me about the men you can see."

"Oh, well there's the men at my office. Daniel, the secretary. Marshall is the managing editor. Mark, Steve and Andrew are the other writers."

"All men?"

"Yeah."

"No women?"

"No."

"That's kind of interesting. Have there ever been any women in your office?"

I crossed my legs and shifted a bit in my seat.

"I, I think there used to be."

"Do you recall their names?"

"Hm," I frowned, thinking hard. "Uh, let's see. Danielle? Yeah, and Marsha. And Andrea, I think."

The counselor sat quietly as I contemplated.

"I, uh, think that's all."

"They no longer work in your office."

"No."

"Where did they go?"

"Uh," I said, staring at the painting on the wall behind the counselor and thinking I could await. The counselor kept looking at me with those patient and compassionate eyes, a faint smile on the lips.

"Well," I said with a shrug. "I really don't know."

"Mm."

"I, I mean, I can't really remember when I saw them last. It's like it's always been the men."

"I see," the counselor said, making a note on a pad of paper. "Do you think it's a little odd that three of the men in your office have names that are similar to the women that used to work there?"

"Huh. I guess I hadn't really thought about it."

"Did you notice that you called me Dennis when I first introduced myself?"

"Yes. That's your name, isn't it?"

"My name is Denise."

"Yes. Dennis. That's what I said."

The counselor made more notes.

"Can you do something for me?"

"Sure."

"Take a minute and think about how long you've been seeing only men. Just a rough estimate is fine, you don't have to be exact. Take your time."

I clasped my hands over my stomach and stared at the ceiling. I uncrossed and recrossed my legs. I sighed.

"I don't know."

"A wild guess is fine."

"Hm, oh, well I guess a few months."

"Okay."

Part II: FanStory

The counselor liked to sit in silence on occasion. This was another one of those occasions. I bounced my leg as I pondered what the counselor might be hinting at.

"Did anything particular happen a few months ago?" the counselor asked.

"Like what?"

"An incident that might have been stressful. A heated argument, an accident, anything along those lines."

I shook my head at the coffee table.

"I see that you're married?" the counselor asked after another moment of silence.

"Yes."

"How long have you been married?"

"Uh, about six months."

"And your wife's name is?"

"Stella."

"Hm." The counselor made another note. "How is your relationship?"

"Good."

"Is it?"

"Yeah."

"What is she like?"

"Nice. Attentive. See's me off to work in the morning. We talk at lunch. Has dinner waiting for me when I get home."

"You're a reporter?"

"Yeah."

"And your schedule is that fixed?"

"Yeah."

"Has it always been that way?"

"Uh, well, not always," I said, inspecting my fingernails.

"What was your schedule like before?"

"Oh, it varied quite a bit. Late nights, long trips, early mornings." I actually smiled at the memories.

"How long ago was that?"

"Ah, a little more than a year ago."

"Why do you think it changed?"

"Hm?"

"Your schedule. Why did it change?"

"Oh." I uncrossed my legs and shifted in my seat.

I decided I could wait out the counselor this time.

This was a non-issue. This had nothing to do with anything. I can out-wait the counselor.

"It's no big deal," I said. I don't like silences.

"Why did your schedule change?"

"Oh, well, my wife, you know."

"What about your wife?"

"Uh, she worried about me."

"How did she worry?"

"What?"

"How did she worry? What did she do to show you she was worried?"

"Oh, she'd ask a lot of questions about the people I was with."

"What kind of questions?"

Something caught in my throat. "I don't remember."

"What about her tone? How did she sound when she asked the questions?"

I crossed my arms and frowned at a potted plant sitting in a corner.

"How did she sound, Jeff?"

My lower lip trembled and I barely breathed out the word "Frantic."

"Frantic?"

"Yeah." I can't seem to speak above a whisper.

"And hysterical."

"About the people you were with?"

"Yeah."

"Men or women?"

I close my eyes tight to fight off the tears. I love my wife. I would never...

"Men or women, Jeff?"

Part II: FanStory

...even think of cheating on her. Why would she think that?

"Women." I grabbed a tissue and held it to my eyes. For a moment, it felt like an effective mask against despair and frustration. Against the helpless feeling.

"Jeff, we have only a few minutes left, but I'd like to make a suggestion."

"Okay."

"Some people are insecure in their relationships, and that insecurity often expresses itself as jealousy. The most important thing you can do is communicate with your wife. Reassure her."

"How do I do that?"

"Well, for example, if she gets upset because you are talking with a woman, you can tell her that you had to talk to the woman in order to get your job done but that you were wishing you could talk to your wife instead."

My hand drops from my face and I open my eyes.

"Huh. I never thought of that."

"It's only a temporary solution to start easing the tension. Do you think you could talk your wife into coming to counseling?"

"I don't know. You're a---"

"I'm a woman. There is a male counselor in this office. Do you think that would help?"

"Maybe."

"Okay." She writes down a name and number on a card and hands it to me. "Let's meet a few more times first so you can get comfortable communicating with your wife. Then, we'll see if we can't get her to come in with you."

Denise stands up and opens the door to her office.

"Thanks," I said as I got up from the couch and left her office.

"I'll see you next week."

Curse of the Were-Cat

Challenge: You Have Been Cursed

Deadline: July 5, 2011

Requirements: Someone you betray in a relationship curses you. You wake up as the opposite sex. By the full moon you turn into a cat-creature. You wreak havoc and are captured. The story must be in screenplay format, reference the song “Judas” by Lady Gaga, and include a picture that ties to the story



The image is in the public domain and was retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Weretiger.jpg>.

Part II: FanStory

FADE IN

INT. BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

TED BROWN is sleeping on his side under the covers. He rolls over onto his stomach and hides his face from the sun shining into the window.

After a few minutes, he crawls out of bed and shuffles to the bathroom, his eyes still half closed. He is wearing pajama bottoms, but no top.

He reaches through the fly and pulls out nothing. His eyes pop open in surprise. Stretching out the waist band with one hand, he looks down into his pants. His penis and testicles are missing. He reaches in again and feels around.

TED

What the...?

As he's looking down, he notices his chest. His breasts are about the size of small apples, and his nipples are erect in the chill of the room.

TED

Agh!

Ted steps over to the mirror and looks at himself. His mouth hangs open in disbelief. He drops his pants and steps back a bit so that his lower half appear in the mirror. He sees a vagina in his crotch.

TED

Oh, God.

Ted stares at himself in the mirror for several minutes.

Curse of the Were-Cat

The sound of his alarm jolts him back to reality. He sits down on the toilet and relieves himself. He walks back into the bedroom and turns off the alarm, and then returns to the bathroom for a shower.

Ted tries on several articles of clothing before finding something that fits. A baggy shirt that hides his breasts, and a pair of sweat pants that stretch enough to fit over his wider hips.

INT. OFFICE - AN HOUR LATER

JEFF BYRNES is standing with his fists on his hips and his lips set in a hard line. He is a large and imposing man. Ted shrinks back involuntarily.

TED

I told you! I am Ted! I, I got changed into a woman somehow, I don't know how. See, I've got my badge to prove it.

Jeff grabs the badge from Ted's hand.

JEFF

I don't know where you got this badge, and I don't know who you think you're fooling.

A small crowd has gathered. They stare at Ted, clearly not recognizing him. Two security officers show up behind Jeff.

JEFF

Now, you will leave quietly. Security will escort you out of the building.

TED

But--

Part II: FanStory

Jeff turns his back and walks away. The crowd gapes at him. The two security officers take him by the elbows and guide him out of the building.

EXT. ON THE STREETS - MID MORNING

Ted is wandering aimlessly. His head is down and he's not paying much attention to where he's going. He bumps several people and mutters vague apologies.

STEFANI ANGELO places herself directly into Ted's path. She has long, black hair and is dressed in Goth attire.

Ted bumps into her, backs up a little, and mindlessly begins to wander around her.

Stefani turns and grabs Ted by his shoulders, stopping him in his tracks.

STEFANI

Ted! There you are! I've been looking all over for you.

Ted looks up and sees Stefani smiling sickly sweet at him.

TED

St-Stefani?

STEFANI

My, my, my! Don't you look a little worse for the wear!

Ted looks down and spreads his arms wide.

TED

You would not believe--

STEFANI

Oh, but I would, Ted my dear!

Curse of the Were-Cat

TED

What? What do you mean?

STEFANI

Didn't I warn you, you bad little boy?

TED

But... What?

STEFANI

I warned you. Don't say I didn't.

TED

About what?

STEFANI

Tch, tch, tch. Don't play the innocent with me.

TED

I don't understand.

STEFANI

Huh. You know. My fantasy? The one that I told you about?

TED

That? I thought--

STEFANI

Oh, let's see. How did Lady Gaga put it?

*When he comes to me, I am ready
I wash his feet with my hair if he
needs
Forgive him when his tongue lies
through his brain
Even after three times he betrays me*

*I'll bring him down, bring him down,
down*

TED

But--

Part II: FanStory

Stefani grips Ted tighter and shakes him a little.

STEFANI

You were supposed to be my Judas, Ted.
You betrayed me.

TED

But--

STEFANI

I'll bring him down.

I have called upon the spirits and
cursed thee! You will roam this earth a
scorned woman by day, and by night...

Stefani skips away, laughing maniacally.

STEFANI

(o.s.)

You will see!

INT. BEDROOM - later that night

Ted is tossing and turning in his bed. The sheets are a tangled mess. The room is illuminated by the light of the full moon coming through his window.

He rolls over and looks at his clock on the bed stand. It is 11:59. He throws himself onto his back and clenches his teeth, letting out a heavy breath.

TED

Dear God, please end this nightmare.

The clock changes to 12:00.

Curse of the Were-Cat

Ted grunts, and then twitches. Fur begins to grow on his skin. His ears move towards the top of his head, and whiskers sprout from either side of his nose. His hands and feet turn paw-like. His finger and toe nails turn to claws, but he still retains fingers and toes.

He rolls onto his side and curls up into a fetal position. A tail begins growing from his tail bone.

Ted moves into a crouch. His arms are on the bed in front of him for balance. He stares out the window and yowls at the moon.

Ted leaps from the bed and through the window, twisting in the air and landing on all fours on the sidewalk.

EXT. ON THE STREETS - continuous

Ted listens to the sounds around him, head and ears turning incrementally.

The sound of laughter from down the street focuses his attention. Hunching down, he moves furtively down the street.

He stops in front of a well-lit house. Voices and laughter are coming from the back yard. Ted slinks around the side of the house. Remaining in the shadows, he cautiously moves as close as he can.

There are about a dozen people in the back yard, having a pool party. An open sliding glass door leads into the house, where there are more people. A floodlight attached to the roof of the house is lighting up the pool area.

Part II: FanStory

Ted notices TERI, a woman in a bright yellow bikini standing next to the pool. His hind legs move in a little dance as he prepares to pounce.

He jumps, falling into the water with Teri. People start yelling and screaming. Ted howls and hisses, fighting to get back out of the water. He manages to climb out of the pool and runs towards the house, knocking over a few chairs in the process.

JOHN

What the hell was that?

SARA

It looked like a big cat!

MARK

It looked like a cougar.

Sara turns and calls into the house.

SARA

Someone call 911!

Mark is helping Teri out of the pool. She is coughing up a small amount of water.

MARK

Are you okay?

TERI

Yeah, I think so.

Sounds of yelling and crashing come from the house. A few of the people walk hesitantly towards the house.

INT. THE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Inside, a table has been knocked over. Food and drink are everywhere. Several people are nursing cuts and bruises.

Curse of the Were-Cat

John picks up a chair and Mark picks up a vase. The two men stalk Ted through the house, and manage to back Ted into the bathroom. They close the door, trapping him in there.

The two men return to the living room just as paramedics Fred and Tina walk in the door. They are followed by Amy, an animal control officer walk in the front door.

TINA

Is there anyone hurt here?

John points to the back of the house.

JOHN

A few in the kitchen.

AMY

There was a report of a big cat?

MARK

Yeah, looked like a cougar or something. John and I trapped it in the bathroom.

AMY

Show me.

Mark leads Amy down the hall to the bathroom. John stays behind to help with the injured.

Mark reaches for the bathroom door.

AMY

Don't! Not yet. The door opens on the right. I want you to stand flat against the wall to the right side of the door frame. I'll be down the hall on the other side. When I give you the word, turn the knob and push the door open just a little.

Part II: FanStory

Amy pulls out a tranquilizer gun. They both get into position. Amy nods. Mark carefully reaches out for the knob, turns it. He pushes open the door and yanks his hand back quickly.

Ted flies through the air. Amy shoots and jumps out of the way. Ted hits the wall near where Amy had been crouching and falls to the floor.

Amy pulls out a walkie-talkie and speaks into it.

AMY

Got him.

Two men wheel in a large cage, load Ted into it and haul him away.

EXT. ZOO CAGE - LATER

Amy is standing in front of a cage with MALCOLM, an expert on big cats. Ted is inside the cage.

MALCOLM

I've not seen anything like it. Just look at those colors, for one!

AMY

Did you ever see paws like that?

Malcolm takes a closer look.

MALCOLM

Bloody hell! The toes look fully articulated!

Any idea where she came from?

Amy shakes her head.

Curse of the Were-Cat

AMY

She showed up at a party earlier. Did a lot of damage before two of the guys trapped her in the bathroom.

MALCOLM

Bloody fools, those two! You don't mess around with an animal like that.

EXT. ZOO CAGE - EARLY MORNING

Ted is back in human form and lying naked on his back on a rock in the cage. He is still female.

He awakens and looks up, eyes wide, at the bars over his head. He feels his chest and crotch.

Hearing voices, he sits up and looks around. Outside the cage, several people in lab coats are watching him. One man is openly leering at him.

Ted places a hand over his crotch and an arm across his breasts. Seeing a cave-like structure built into the rocks, he gets up and scuffles into it.

MALCOLM

Bloody hell!

AMY

A were-cat?

MALCOLM

The scientists are going to have a bloody field day with this one.

Amy turns to the others in the group.

AMY

Promise me that your tests will be humane!

Part II: FanStory

The leering scientist is craning his neck for a glimpse of Ted inside the cave. Amy slaps him soundly in the face.

AMY

Promise me!

The scientist looks at her and gulps. Casting his eyes down, he nods assent.

FADE OUT

Guardian of the Gate

Write a Story Based on this Picture

Limit: 700-7,000 words (2,000-3,500 recommended)

Deadline: July 6, 2011



Photo courtesy of Loyd Talyor

Part II: FanStory

Monolithic-looking, aren't they? They remind me a bit of that black thing from 2001: A Space Odyssey. Not that I was alive when the movie came out. Did you see it?

“Who are you?” John mumbled.

You can call me Carlos. I really don't use a name where I am.

“Where are you?” Simple questions were all John could manage in his trance state.

I'm in the negative space. In your photo, that happens to be between the front headstone and the other on the left in the background. If the photo is small enough and you glance at the spot sideways, you can see me sitting there in my white suit.

“H-how--?”

Are you a journalist or something, man? You got the who, where and how. All you need is the what, when and why. How? There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' I can't explain how, I just am.

John shifted a bit in his chair, murmuring under his breath.

Sure, thing, man. I'm little Anne Talbot's guardian angel. She's the one you really want to hear about. You came to find her and your fancy camera caught me, too. She...

Slumping in the chair, John let out a gasp.

“Are you okay?” Sandy asked, wiping the sweat from John's forehead with a damp cloth.

John reached for the glass on the end table. Sandy put it in his trembling hand, and he gulped the water. When the glass was empty, he placed it on the table and titled his head back, resting his neck on the top of the chair back and staring at the ceiling.

Taking a deep breath, John said: “Her name is Anne Talbot.” He brought his gaze down to look at Sandy. “The same as on the head stones.”

“Yes,” she said, bringing his gaze down to look at Sandy. “Frank and Martha Talbot.”

“Must be related.”

“That is a logical assumption. We need to discover the relationship. I’ll go over the birth and death records again, as well as obituaries and news clippings from that era.”

John stood up and stretched. Communicating with the spirit world took a lot out of him, and he needed a nap.

“Did you learn anything else from her?”

“Actually, no.” John bent to pick up the photo from the table. He tilted his head and the photo through several angles. “There he is.”

John handed Sandy the picture. “Without looking directly, notice the space between the two head stones on the left.”

Sandy squinted at the photo and rotated it for several moments.

“It appears as if there is a guy sitting on the head stone, wearing a white suit.”

“His calls himself Carlos, and he claims to be Anne Talbot’s guardian angel.”

“Carlos? Did he---”

John held up his hand to stem the tide of questions. “The connection broke before I could learn more. I need a nap. We can discuss it later this evening.”

* * *

A knock broke into his meditation. John had picked this apartment just for this corner in the living room. It had an unusually strong calming vibration that helped him to center. He decorated it sparsely with nothing more than a mat and two small stands for incense. He had even talked the landlord into allowing him to repaint the room to a more comforting color.

The knock sounded again. John rose from his lotus position, walking over and opening the door just as Sandy raised her hand to knock a third time.

Part II: FanStory

Gesturing her in, John closed the door behind her and they both sat down on the couch. Sandy set a folder on the coffee table.

“It’s all in there,” she said. “I had to scour the census records. Anne Talbot shows up in the 1910 census as the three year old daughter of Frank Talbot, age 27. Martha is listed as his wife, age 25. There are no other records of Anne.”

John picked up the folder and leafed through the contents: a print-out of the 1910 census record; the birth, death and marriage certificates, as well as immigration records, for Frank and Martha Talbot; passenger and crew lists; and pictures of the head stones.

“Frank and Martha immigrated to the United States from England in 1906,” John read. “They both died of natural causes in early 1960. No surviving family.”

“Yes,” Sandy said. “No record of any other children. Take a closer look at the inscriptions at the bottom of their head stones.”

John reached for the magnifying glass on the coffee table and peered at the picture of Frank Talbot’s head stone. The image had been cleaned up and enhanced. At the bottom in small script were the words “We love you AT. 4-15-1912.”

“The day *Titanic* sank,” John said.

“Yes. Take a look at the census record.”

“Frank worked as galley staff,” John said. He shuffled through the papers until he found the passenger and crew lists. “He’s not listed on the *Titanic* crew.”

“However, he is on the crew of a passenger ship to England just before Christmas, 1911.”

“Odd. The same ship returned to America two weeks later, but he was not on it. Maybe he stayed with family for the holidays?”

“No doubt.”

“But why would he visit without his wife and daughter?”

“It is not commonly known that a passenger ship would often allow the wife of a crew member to share his cabin, if he did not already have a bunk mate. Frank may well have brought his wife and daughter to England. They would not appear on crew or passenger list.”

“That still doesn’t explain how they got back.”

“We might infer, based on the head stone inscription, that Anne Talbot was on *Titanic*, and may well have died on that trip.”

“Okay, but she’s not listed as a passenger on *Titanic*.”

“I dislike conjecture. However, if we follow from the initial inference, we can assume the possibility that Frank replaced one of the galley crew on *Titanic*, and that he and his family returned on her maiden voyage.”

“How awful!”

“Indeed.” Sandy filed the papers back into the folder. “Can you tell me anything more about your contact with Carlos?”

“Not much. We were cut off before he could say anything else. Although...” John closed his eyes and furrowed his brows in thought. “He said something odd, the wording sounded off. It was about being in the negative space of the photo.”

“Are you able to recall his exact words?”

“Hold on, I think so. He said ‘I’m in the negative space.’ And then he said something about that currently being in my photo between the two head stones.”

“Is that significant?”

“I think so.” John scratched his head. “Some ancient texts have obscure references that hint at a certain kind of spirit that inhabits negative space.”

Sandy gave him a look.

“I know, it’s a bit vague.”

“Just a bit. What else about these spirits?”

“They are believed to be guardians who use negative space to observe unobtrusively.”

Part II: FanStory

“Though not unnoticeable.”

“No. They can be seen by those paying attention.”

“What do they guard?”

“They are known as Guardians of the Gate. We know them as guardian angels, those who watch over us and guide our spirits through the Gate of Heaven when we die.”

“We need more information from Carlos. Are you up to it?”

“Yeah.” John moved from the couch to the chair while Sandy went to the kitchen for a glass of water. She sets it on the end table next to John. His eyes are closed and his breathing has deepened, as if he’s in REM asleep.

“Carlos...” John said in a soft voice.

My friend, it is good to see you back!

“Anne...”

She visits her parents graves because they are trapped in your world. They could not forgive themselves for living when she had died.

“Titanic...”

Ab, I knew you’d fathom it! Fathom, get it? Hab!

Seriously, now, you must help them.

“How?”

You can be the bridge. Connect her to their spirits, trapped with their bones at the grave site. Can you do that, my friend?

“Yes.”

Slumping in the chair, John let out a gasp. Sandy knew that meant contact had been broken. She placed the glass in his hand and wiped the sweat off his brow.

“Can drive me to the cemetery?” John asked after he drank the water.

“Yes. Do you know what to do?”

John nodded as he stood up and grabbed his jacket.

“Are you up to it?”

“I can do it, but I’ll need you to help me home. I’ll be drained.”

John repeated what Carlos told him while Sandy drove. When they got to the cemetery, John sat cross-legged between the two graves. He closed his eyes and extended both arms out, one towards each grave, as if he was going to pull the spirits of the dead right out of the ground.

His breathing deepened and he whispered: "Anne Talbot."

The air shimmers, and a young girl begins to fade into being. She is dressed in a white gown and has blond hair. Sandy watches as the girl walks up to John. The girl moves her lips, and it sounded like she said "Mommy."

"Anne." John whispered again. "Frank. Martha."

A mist began to rise from each grave and formed into vaguely human shape. The girl looked up and smiled. The two forms approached, and all three merge into one. A light appeared from somewhere. Sandy could sense it at the end of a tunnel, but neither the light nor the tunnel seems real. It existed like a nagging image caught out of the corner of your eye that disappears when you turn to look at it.

The merged column of mist entered the tunnel and followed it the light. The light faded and the tunnel collapsed.

John gasped and fell back, flat on the ground. Sandy rushed to his side and pulled a bottle of water from her purse. Cradling his head in her lap, she carefully poured water into his mouth a little bit at a time.

After a moment, John took a deep breath and sat up.

"Are they gone?" Sandy asked.

"Yeah," John said, nodding. "They're gone."

Innocently Enough

Twenty Tweet Tale

Limit: 2,800 Characters

Deadline: July 5, 2011

It all started innocently enough. They always start that way, don't they? "Innocently enough."

I was strolling through the park on a fine sunny afternoon, minding only nature and my own business. I was enjoying my day off.

Perhaps I should have been paying more attention. If I had, I wouldn't have made such a grave mistake.

The sound of angry voices interrupted my reverie. I looked around and saw a man and a woman fighting over a purse.

The man was smartly dressed, which struck me as rather odd. Muggers don't usually dress up. The woman was wearing a jogging suit and shoes.

Ever so gallantly, I trotted over to help the poor damsel in distress. I was never one to shirk my moral obligations.

A quick left hook and the man fell flat on his back, releasing the purse. With a bow to the lady, I said: "Proud to be of service."

"Thank you so much, old man," she said in a deep voice. She grinned at me and then ran away. Actually ran. Puzzling behavior, I thought.

I turned to address the man, expecting more of a fight. He was in a sitting position and, to my surprise, had burst into tears.

Before I had a chance to speak, a young cop came running up. "What's going on here?" he asked, looking first at the man and then at me.

Part II: FanStory

The presence of authority always flustered me. "Well, uh, officer," I said. "I heard a commotion and saw this man mugging, uh--"

"I was not!" the man said with a snuffle. He had stood up. "That woman stole my purse, and this man helped! I want him arrested!"

"My God, young man!" I said. "Your purse?" What was a man doing with a purse? Was he...? Oh.

"Alright, I'll need your names," the officer said. The young man's name was Troy Allen. I gave him mine: Scott Madden.

"Okay, Mr. Allen. Tell me your side of this first." The officer had taken out a small notebook.

"Well, I was on my way to meet my boyfriend at the Willow Cafe on the other side of the park. We like to have lunch together."

I stood there feeling like a damn fool as he told his story.

"Anyway, I was walking across the park and this woman came out of nowhere and grabbed my purse, I yelled, and this man came along and--"

"Got it," the officer said. He turned to me and I filled him in with my side of the story, along with a complete description of the woman.

"Honest mistake," the officer said. "I'll file a report." He left. I apologized profusely to Mr. Allen; he turned his back and walked away.

The Cards Had Been Dealt

The Sentence Starts the Story

First Line: The cards had been dealt.

Limit: 700-7,000 words (2,000-3,500 recommended)

Deadline: July 6, 2011

The cards had been dealt. The young tarot reader impressed me with her practiced style. Her long, straight hair and small, taut features that gave her an air of age and wisdom.

I had decided to get a reading on a whim. Mainly, because I couldn't quite believe in myself as much as Jill believed in me. If I could prove to myself that this was fakery, then I'd feel justified in not doing anything about my life.

Slender fingers reached out and touched the first card...

* * *

We found an empty booth in a back corner of the fast-food restaurant, away from most of the other patrons. Sitting down on opposite sides of the table, we dumped all of our French fries into a large pile on the tray.

"Why must you hang on to that?" Jill asked, dipping a French fry in ketchup and biting it's end off. She wasn't going to let me off the hook. I was wishing I'd kept my complaining to myself.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging my shoulders and avoiding her eyes. My French fry wasn't so lucky, being relegated to drawing doodles with the ketchup.

"What you resist, persists," she said, double-dipping her half-eaten French fry and popping the rest of it into her mouth.

"But, Jill --"

"Don't 'but Jill' me, Dave."

Part II: FanStory

I sighed and dropped my French fry, deciding instead to take a sip from my chocolate shake. At least I could distract myself with the effort of sucking the thick liquid through the straw.

"Look, Dave, I know how you feel. But, really, it's time to grow up already."

"I know, but --"

"I know you know. The 'but' is that you haven't accepted it."

I picked up another French fry and drew more doodles. Jill slapped the French fry out of my hand and said:

"Listen to me, Dave. We've been friends for a long time, haven't we? Ever since we met at Al-Anon in high school."

"Yes." My eyes glanced over to the forlorn French fry hanging on to the edge of the table.

"And you trust me, don't you? Look at me."

"Of course I trust you," I said, barely meeting her eyes.

"Then believe me when I tell you: it's time move on. You are an adult. You can make your own choices. It's your life. Let go of the past!"

I sucked the last of chocolate shake with a loud slurp.

"Dave, I love you like a brother, but I swear to God if you don't grow up, I'll never speak to you again!"

I stared through my straw, trying to see if there was any chocolate shake left at the bottom of the cup. I looked up at the sound of a chair scraping on the floor. Jill was glaring down at me, and she looked serious. She picked up her purse and keys from the table, and turned to leave.

"Wait!" I said. She stopped, but did not turn back. I was beginning to feel that panicky, out-of-control feeling.

"Wait," I said again. "Please."

She turned slightly and said: "Do you have something to say to me?"

"Yes, I... please sit down."

She sat, but remained stiff. I guess I'd really pissed her off. I hadn't meant to. I stared at the pile of French fries, trying to sort out my feelings. Deep inside, I knew she was right. This childish behavior was getting me nowhere, but---

"Well?"

"I- I'm scared."

I felt her hand on mine, and I looked up into her eyes. I could see my pain reflected in them. She knew me, understood me. We had lived the same awful life, but with different families.

"We are all scared, David."

I swore to myself that I wouldn't cry. Men don't cry. Especially in a restaurant. I heard Jill's chair scraping again, and felt her arms around me. I cried.

I pulled myself together and glanced furtively around the restaurant. No one was paying us any attention; my manhood was safe.

"I don't know what to do," I sniffled, rescuing the dangling French fry from a fate worse than death.

She gave me that look. You know, the one that says "we've been through this before".

"I had my friend do a reading for you," she said. "You have to let go of the past and believe in yourself. Do what you do best."

I rolled my eyes at her. Fortune cookie advice.

"If you don't believe me," she said, "at least believe all those people on that website. They love your writing. You are reaching them."

Jill used her straw to swirl her shake and pull out a strawberry glob. She almost missed her mouth.

"That doesn't mean I can sell books," I said, stifling a snicker.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

Part II: FanStory

I didn't say anything to that; it felt too much like a reprimand. Jill could get bossy like that. Leaving the last French fry for Jill, I used my finger to scrape up some of the remaining ketchup. I don't know why we bothered to buy the French fries, except that I guess it was uncouth to eat ketchup with your finger.

Jill snorted. "You've got ketchup on your nose."

"Oh, yeah? It matches the strawberry shake on your chin!"

We both grabbed more napkins.

"I really do love writing," I said, hiding my feelings behind the napkin as I cleaned the ketchup off my nose.

"I know you do. That's why you're going to be successful at it."

"So maybe that's why I'm here. On this Earth."

My tone was sarcastic, but I was beginning to wonder.

Jill upended her cup and finished off her shake.

"What have I been telling you all along?" she gurgled around the last drops.

Like a broken record, I thought to myself.

"Think of all the people you've touched just on the website," she said. "Think of all the people you could help if you published your story."

"I don't know."

"Go see my friend and let her do a reading. You'll see I'm right."

* * *

The tarot reader said no more once she had interpreted the final card. Her reading had exposed me right to the core; it all made sense. Jill had been right about my life. These were the cards I'd been dealt, I might as well play them to win.

Hell Found Me

The Sentence Starts the Story

First Line: Hell found me.

Limit: 700-7,000 words (2,000-3,500 recommended)

Deadline: August 30, 2011

Hell found me. It all started when Charlie called me for a favor.

“Hey, Sam,” he said. “I need a favor.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “Make it quick, though, I’m heading out the door for the writers group.”

“Well, that’s what it’s about. There’s a new member, she needs a ride. You’ll pass right by her on the way.”

“Okay, give me the address.” I grabbed a pen and paper and wrote down the address.

I decided to take a few minutes to Google the address so I’d be sure of the location. It was an apartment complex just a block south of the main road – it wouldn’t take me much extra time to swing by and still make it to the meeting on time.

The numbered parking spot for the apartment was vacant, so I figured it would be safe to park there. The apartment was on the ground floor, and a sliding glass door exited to the lot. I didn’t see any sign of a doorbell, so I got out of my car and walked over to the door. As I got close, a large puppy pressed its nose excitedly against the glass, his tail wagging furiously.

A woman grabbed the dog by the collar and opened the door.

“Are you Sam?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Don’t worry, she won’t bite. Come on in.”

I entered the apartment, and the dog immediately began licking my toes. I was wearing open-toed sandals.

Part II: FanStory

“Oh, she loves toes!” the woman said as she closed the door. “I’m Margo.” She held out her hand and I shook it. “I just have to take her out to pee, then I’ll cage her and we can go.”

“Okay.”

Margo attached a harness to the dog. Eager to go out, the dog immediately began to jump around wildly.

“She’s not really trained. She’s really kind of spoiled. I should really take her to a dog trainer. I’ll be right back.”

Margo went outside with the dog, closing the door behind her. I stood in the living room and looked around. The furniture was a bit shabby, and the room was cluttered and dark. It appeared the Margo was not very well off.

I was standing there, minding my own business and enjoying the cool air from the vent when the front door on the other side of the room suddenly opened and a large man stormed in.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“I-“

Margo came back in through the sliding door with the dog just at that moment.

“Who is this guy?” the man demanded.

“He’s no one, Jack!” Margo answered. “He’s just here to give me a ride.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet he is.” Jack said walked up to me and grabbed my collar. He smelled of alcohol, sweat and marijuana. “You been seeing this guy, haven’t you?”

“No, Jack, I swear!”

Those were the last words I heard before passing out. Jack had pushed me up against the glass and slugged me. The shock of cold brought me to. Margo had ice wrapped in a towel and was pressing it against my jaw. The dog was happily licking my toes. The back of my head also hurt, it must have snapped back from the force of the blow and...

I sat up and looked back at the sliding door. The glass was shattered. My head must have broken the glass from the impact.

“I’m so sorry!” Margo said. “That’s my husband. Soon to be ex-husband. We split up a month ago. We’re still friends, though. He’s awfully jealous.”

I nodded and winced. It hurt to move my head.

“If it’s all right with you, I’m going to just go home,” I said.

I opened the sliding door and walked over to my car. It was in worse shape than I. The headlights were smashed, there was a deep scratch in the front quarter panel, and the driver’s door was ajar. From the way it was hanging, it looked like someone had tried to rip it off the hinges.

“He gets a little angry when he’s jealous,” Margo said.

“Huh.” I swung the door back and forth. It wouldn’t close. Driving home was going to be even more of a challenge.

A police car arrived and stopped behind my car. The officer got out and walked over to me.

“There’s a report of a disturbance at this address,” the officer said.

“It was my husband,” Margo said. “My soon to be ex-husband. He’s gone now. There won’t be any more trouble, officer.”

“What happened here?” he asked.

“My husband, soon to be ex-husband, got jealous because he thought I was sleeping with Sam here, but I wasn’t, Sam was just here to give me a ride to a meeting, but he beat him up anyway.”

“Your name is Sam?” he asked me.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to press charges against this woman’s husband?”

Part II: FanStory

“No,” I said. I had no desire to get any more involved than I already was. If I could just go home I could leave this all behind me as a bad memory.

“Is this your car?”

“Yes, officer.”

He reached in and pulled something off of the front seat and sniffed it.

“Is this yours?”

“No, officer. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Is this yours?” he asked Margo.

“No, sir! I don’t smoke that stuff. Not anymore.”

“Hm. Well, I’m afraid I’m going to have to cite you for possession, Sam. I’ll need this for evidence.”

My head swam. This could not be happening to me.

“Are you okay, sir?” the officer asked. “Do you need an ambulance?”

“I’ll be fine. I just want to go home.”

“Okay, sir.” The officer ripped off a ticket and handed it to me. “Drive safely, sir.”

After the officer left, I got into my car. I found a short piece of rope and tried to tie the door so that it wouldn’t fly open while I was driving.

“Oh, I am so sorry! I guess this means we’re gonna miss the meeting, huh? What about the next one? When is that? Can I get a ride with you for that one? I really, really wanted to go!”

“I don’t think so.”

Charlie called me later that evening.

“Hey, we missed you at the meeting!”

“Something came up.”

“I’ll bet something came up! Made it with the new girl, eh? I’d miss a meeting for that.”

“No, Charlie.” I related my story to him.

“Wow, man, who would have thought?” Charlie said. “Well, at least you got a good story out of it.”

Hell Found Me

Hell had, indeed, found me. My good intentions had led me astray. I only hoped that when I pled my case before the judge he would take mercy on me.

In Love, We Will Never Be Apart

Twisted Dialog

Limit: None

Deadline: September 7, 2011

Requirements: Dialog only, prose or poetry. No satire

“Oh, my God!! That was such a beautiful play! My eyes didn’t stay dry for a moment!”

“I don’t know how they did it. I don’t think I could have. I mean, to be so far apart for so long...”

“I know! And then to get back together again and still be so in love.”

“It must be true love, huh?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t really believe in true love.”

“Why not? What else could it have been?”

“Don’t you see it? That’s what was so magical about it! They created it!”

“Created it? How? I don’t get what you mean.”

“Well, it’s more than a story about a man and a woman who fall in love. First of all, there’s a real Jungian aspect to it all – the man and woman recognize each other as yin-yang counterparts. You can see that in the way they complement each other.”

“Oh, you mean like when she got really angry with him, and he just took it?”

“Yeah, that’s one way.”

“I still don’t quite get why he took it! I would have given her a piece of my mind!”

“He took it because he realized that he was wrong, and that no matter how angry she got he still loved her so much that even her anger was love to him.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Being in love doesn’t mean you always feeling good and happy. Life is always giving us opportunities to discover who we are, and we need a lot of different kinds

Part II: FanStory

of experiences to help us figure that out. He could have argued and yelled back, but he knew it would hurt more than it would help. He chose to respond with love.”

“I still don’t get.”

“Think about it. Anyway, that’s not all there was. They chose to create their life together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the man and the woman really represent different aspects of God. They imagined a world in which they lived together as one, and then they lived as if that imaginary world was real. So, they created the world they wanted.”

“How can imagination become reality?”

“Well, that’s the magic of it. The message in the story is that we have the power to turn our imagination into reality. We can make our dreams come true. With the power of their imagination, they created a world in which they would always be together. They used the power of love to energize that world – to hold all those pieces together. Love is like a universal super-glue that holds it all together.”

“So, you’re saying that the love they created kept them together, no matter how far apart they were?”

“Sort of. The love is always there. They simply used that love as a bond to keep them together, realizing that love and spirit transcend the physical world. Love is like the conduit that allows the spirit to communicate with others.”

“So, they were able to use love to communicate over the great distance between them?”

“Exactly!”

“I don’t know. They were awfully far apart for a long time. I mean, they were on opposite sides of the country! For months!!”

“Well, if you look closely at the story, you’ll see an underlying current of L-O-V-E, with capital letters. It’s a very clear presence throughout the story.”

In Love, We Will Never Be Apart

“Yeah, I kinda felt that.”

“Well, that ties in with love being a universal super-glue. Love is God. God is Love. With love, you can feel like you are always together. Love transcends the physical. Imagination is realty. The physical world is here only so that we can experience, and distance only exists in the physical world. The play is trying to show us that too often we get trapped in the illusion that only what we gather through our five senses is real. We forget that there is more than that.”

“Wow, that’s kinda hard to imagine.”

“I know! But the man and the woman in the play were able to separate themselves from the physical, and remember that the Love is all there really is.”

“So, they were really still together, even though they were far apart?”

“Yes, because they were only far apart in the physical sense. Through their Love for each other, they were still together. So, when they finally were together physically...”

“It was like they never apart!”

“Right!”

“Still, they were so happy to be physically together again.”

“Well, yeah, because the reason for physical existence is to experience. The man and woman experienced separate-ness by being physically apart.”

“But, why go through that?”

“Well, without the experience of being apart, you can’t really know what it means to be together. They chose the experience as an expression of their love for each other.”

“Seems kinda crazy to me.”

“Well, think again about the message in the play: they had the power to create and experience anything they wanted. Knowing they had that power, they felt safe physically separating themselves, knowing that they would

Part II: FanStory

experience the joy of reunion. If we think of them as being different aspects of God, then the reunion is like the joy of finding God.”

“Huh! I never thought of it that way.”

“And that’s what made it such a beautiful story!

We have so much we could learn from them! Imagine if we lived our lives by creating it from our imagination!”

“You sound so joyful when you say that!”

“Well, yeah!!”

“Is that why the songs and the dancing had such a joyful undertone?”

“Absolutely!! The man and the woman both knew that they were creating, even when they felt the loneliness of being apart. It’s a good feeling to know that you are the one creating the experience.”

“Boy, there’s a lot more to that play than I thought!”

“Let’s see it again tomorrow night!”

Missing

Flash Fiction Writing Contest

Subject: Missing

Limit: 500-800 words

Deadline: September 11, 2011

It's funny how you get so used to something that you don't even notice when it's missing. Take my wife, for example. We've been married for fourteen years. We have no children. We each have our own career and our own circle of friends. So, it was not uncommon for us to be unaware of each other, often for days at time.

"My wife?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

I titled my head in thought as I pondered the detective's question. She stood patiently at my door with two uniformed police officers standing behind her.

"You know, I can't recall the last time I saw her.

Why do you ask?"

"Ahem." The detective flipped through a few pages in her small notebook. "Well, sir, she's been reported missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Um. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Detective Mary Solomon with the Missing Persons Bureau. Badge number 09854636."

"Ah. Missing, huh? Who reported her missing?"

"A Mrs. Dorothy Pendleton."

Mrs. Pendleton was my wife's Scrabble partner. They played once a week. Let's see, their last game would have been...

"According to her employer, she has not been to work for three days."

"Really?" I scratched my chin. My mind was a total blank.

Part II: FanStory

"May we check inside?"

"Hm? Oh, sure. Come on in." I stepped aside and allowed the detective and two officers into the house. I closed the door and remained standing there as they began looking around.

"Detective, over here!" one of the officers called from the end of the hall.

I walked over to the hall and watched as the detective knelt down in front of the closed bedroom door. She was studying some white powder on the floor.

"Lime," she said, standing up and turning to face me. "What's in this room, sir?"

"That's my wife's office."

"May we look inside?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

The other officer came up behind me and watched as Detective Mary slowly opened the door. Her eyes widened a little as she looked inside. The room was coated with an inch of lime over everything. She scanned the room carefully, and noticed the figure slumped in the chair behind the desk. Caked, dried blood covered the face from a bullet hole in the forehead.

"Do you own a gun, sir?" the detective called over her shoulder.

"Sure," I said. "It's in my desk drawer, in the next room."

The officer who had first noticed the powder opened the door to the next room, coming back a few minutes later with a revolver in a plastic bag.

Detective Mary nodded to the officer behind me.

"We'll need to take you downtown for questioning," she said.

Next thing I know, he's placing handcuffs on me.

"You have the right to remain silent," he said.

"Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in the court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be

appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?

"Yes."

It's funny how you get so used to something that you don't even notice when it's missing. Or that it's still there.

The Long Fall into Hell

Horror Story Writing Contest

Subject: Horror or thriller

Limit: 7,000 words (2,000-3,500 recommended)

Deadline: October 1, 2011

Dave floats along easily, a few feet above the ground. He approaches the edge of a cliff and gradually travels beyond it until he is hovering over a deep ravine. Gravity asserts itself with a vengeance, and he plummets to the bottom...

“Agh!” Dave cried, his body jerking away from the edge of the bed. “That was too real.”

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Dave crawled out of bed and began his morning ritual: start the coffee, shower, dress, pour the coffee, leave for work.

After locking the front door behind him, Dave stumbled on the first porch step as his right foot lifts before his left foot has landed.

“That’s odd,” he muttered to himself. “I could swear these steps weren’t so tall.”

Dave dismissed the thought from his mind and continued to the curb. His car-pool was arriving. The car stopped and he climbed into the back seat.

“What’s up, Dave?” Mark nodded at him from the other side of the back seat.

“Hey, Dave. You okay?” Jon asked, craning his head to look back. “You look a little pale.”

“Nah, it’s nothing,” Dave said. “Just having an odd morning.”

“All in?” Terry asked, not waiting for an answer as he pulled away and accelerated.

The little car sped along, cresting the top of a hill and...

“Yee-ow!” Dave hollered. “Christ!”

“What?” Mark asked. Jon turned his head, but Terry focused on the drive.

Part II: FanStory

“For a moment, it felt like we were on a roller coaster. When the car came over the top of the hill, I thought for sure we were dropping.”

“What’s that you have in your coffee this morning, eh?” Jon asked.

“Just coffee,” Dave grumbled. “Don’t mind me.”

“Maybe I should take you home and tuck you into bed,” Terry suggested.

“Nah, I’m fine.”

The four men reach the office without further incident. They enter the building and spilt off in two directions: Jon and Terry to the left, Dave and Mark to the right. As they are walking down the hall, Dave slows down and stumbles slightly.

“Are you sure there’s nothing but coffee in there?” Mark asked.

“Did something happen to the floor?”

“No, not that I know of. Why?”

“It seems to be sloping downward.”

“It seems fine to me.”

Dave shakes his head and keeps walking. As he moves along, Dave noticed that the perspective looked off. The end of the hall naturally looks smaller, but it didn’t seem to be getting any larger as he progressed. In fact, it seemed to be getting smaller. The walls were getting darker and grimier, almost as if they were made of a dull metal and smeared with a thin layer of used oil. Dave tugged at his collar; his tie felt tight. Is it getting warm in here? Who turned on the heat in the middle of the God-damned summer?

“Dave!”

Mark’s call got Dave’s attention.

“What?” Dave demanded.

“Are you going to stand in the doorway all day, or are you going to go in?”

“Harrumph!”

The two men weaved their way through the maze of cubicles. They arrived at Mark's first. He clapped Dave on the shoulder and sat down. Dave continued on and entered his own cube.

"Ee-yah!!"

Mark stood up and looked over the four-foot cube wall. Dave was sitting in his chair, legs spread and hands gripping the edge of his desk. His face was ashen and his eyes were wide.

"What is it with you today?" Mark asked.

"My- my chair."

"What about your chair?"

Dave took a deep breath, and then smiled after a moment.

"You messed with my chair, didn't you?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

"Because you're jealous that I've collected on more accounts than you have."

"Whatever." Mark sat back down and started working.

Dave turned on his computer and checked his email. An alert popped up, reminding him of a 9:00 meeting with Jan in human resources. Mark studiously ignored him as Dave walked past and back to the main entrance where the elevators were located.

Dave got on the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. As the elevator begins to climb, Dave can feel a weight pulling him down. Each floor takes longer to reach than the last, and the weight becomes heavier and heavier. He grabbed the rail for support, but immediately pulled his hand back. The rail was glowing red and had scorched his fingers.

After what felt like an eternity, the elevator finally stopped at the fifth floor. The doors opened and Dave practically ran out, almost knocking over someone waiting to get on.

Part II: FanStory

Dave walked on shaky legs to Jan's office. She was on the phone, but waved him in. Dave lowered himself into a chair and heaved a sigh. Mike, the HR assistant, was sitting in another chair. It was not generally a good sign when a second person from HR was present.

Jan finished her conversation and hung up the phone.

"Do you need some water?" she asked as she picked up a folder.

"Uh, no, thanks," Dave said.

Jan nodded while she flipped through the pages in the folder.

"Dave, I've called you to my office to talk about your performance."

Dave said nothing.

"I have here the Annual Collection Statistics Report for the past year," she continued. "For every month, you have out-performed everyone else by a wide margin."

"That's a good thing," Dave said proudly. "I'm good at what I do."

"While the company's goal is to keep uncollected account balances below five percent, we also like our collection practices to be as humanitarian as possible. In these hard economic times, it's far better to find an equitable solution so that we can maintain a strong customer base."

Dave squirmed a bit in his chair and his expression became sullen.

Jan put down the report and picked up several other sheets of paper.

"I have here the Account Closing Reports for several of the accounts you've closed. The reasons for closing these accounts are marginal at best. We've contacted the customers and have heard some very disturbing reports about your methods and behavior."

Jan handed the papers over the desk to Dave, and then clasped her hands in front of her.

“Do you have anything you wish to say in regard to these cases?”

Dave looked them over with little enthusiasm and shrugged his shoulders. At Jan’s signal, he handed the pages to Mike.

Jan picked up a packet and handed it to him.

“Here is a copy of our Customer Interaction Policies. The page on top is a statement that you have received the copy and that you are on notice to comply with the policies. Failure to comply will result in further action. Please sign the top page.”

Dave signed the page and handed it to Mike.

“Do you have any questions?” Dave shook his head, and Jan continued, “Excellent.”

Her dismissive tone was clear. Dave got up and left the office, approaching the elevator with some trepidation. He raised his finger and almost pushed the call button.

“Bah! This is nonsense!” Dave pushed the button.

He tapped his foot anxiously as he waited for the elevator. The bell tolled and the door trundled open. Dave poked his head in - the elevator was empty. He walked in and ran his hand along the rail - cool as a cucumber. With satisfied sigh, Dave pushed the button for the first floor.

The elevator dropped. Fast. The floor numbers flashed so fast they were unreadable - the same five numbers going around and around and around. Dave fell to his knees, and then he scrambled on all fours to reach the stop button. Flames shot up walls. He recoiled and fell backward flat onto the floor. He could feel a pull on him - not his body, but from within. Something was trying to pull his inner self out.

“Dave!”

Part II: FanStory

Dave sat up. The elevator doors had opened onto the first floor and Mark was standing there with a look of concern on his face.

“Help,” Dave whispered, sitting up. The elevator creaked. Panicking, Dave put his hands under him and scrambled to get up. The doors slammed shut with a loud bang, followed by a *whoosh!* The building lights flickered.

When the doors opened again, Dave’s body lay lifeless on the floor.

Dilemma

Writing Prompt

Topic: Dilemma.

Limit: 700-3,000 words

Deadline: October 3, 2011

Plot: A couple breaks down on a lonely highway, and an approaching storm threatens their safety. A 'hells angel' type biker rides past, turns round and offers one of them a lift to the nearest town twenty miles away. They have no cell phone, why is up to you. Do they accept? If so who stays, who goes, and what happens to them?

Author's Note: It's estimated that only 1% of all bike gangs are malicious trouble makers. The other 99% are decent, hard-working folks who don't deserve the bad rap they get.

The engine simply stopped, without warning. Mark threw it into neutral and, with a struggle, managed to pull the car off the side of the road. Power steering and power brakes were now a luxury he didn't have.

"What happened?" Jill asked in a worried tone.

"I don't know," Mark said, frowning at the dashboard. "I didn't see any warning lights before it died."

"Those clouds are building up. There's been tornado warnings."

"I know!" Mark clenched his fists. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell. Do you have a signal on your cell phone?"

Jill took out her phone and flipped it open. "No," she said.

"Damn! Neither do I."

Mark turned on the flashers, got out of the car and looked along the lonely stretch of State Route 83. There wasn't another car, or soul, in sight. They had

Part II: FanStory

passed a sign a few minutes ago - they were about twenty miles from Scott City.

“Too far to walk,” he muttered as he popped open the hood. “We should have stayed in Oakley.”

Mark looked up from the engine at the sound of a motorcycle passing by. The driver slowed to a stop, turned his bike around and came back.

“Need a lift, man?” he asked. The bike looked like an old Harley, and the man had a bit of a wild look about him. He wore a beaten leather jacket with the emblem of a biker gang.

“We’re good,” Mark said, wiping a hand on his pants and wishing he had a weapon.

“Tornado’s coming,” the man said. “It ain’t safe for you and your lady out here. I can give one of you a ride into town.”

“Just-just a minute,” Mark said, edging around the car and getting back inside.

“What does he want?” Jill asked.

“He wants to give one of us a ride to town.”

“Mark, one of us needs to go. We can’t get caught out here.”

“Is it safe?”

Jill leaned across Mark and craned her neck out the window.

“He’s not one of the one percent. It’s safe; I’ll go.”

“One percent?”

“Most bikers are honest, hard-working people. Only one percent belongs to outlaw gangs. His patch is not one of those.”

“Oh. Still, I’ll go.”

“Mark, I don’t want to wait here in the car all by myself.”

“I’d feel better if I went.”

“No, Mark, I’ll be fine! Don’t leave me here, please!”

Mark bit his lip and looked again at the biker.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure!”

“Okay.”

Mark and Jill got out of the car and walked over to the biker. Jill took the offered helmet and mounted the bike.

“I’ll take care of your lady,” the biker said. “She’s safe with me. Lock your doors, though, there’s been some young hoodlums joyriding around here lately stirring up trouble.”

The biker turned around and took off towards Scott City. A few minutes later, another car pulled up behind Mark. He got out, grateful for some decent-looking help and hoping it wouldn’t be too late to catch up with Jill. He stopped cold in his tracks, though, when three young men got out of the car carrying a chain, a bat and a tire iron. Jumping back into his car, Mark pulled the door shut and locked the doors...

* * *

Jill looked anxiously out the windshield of the tow truck. Behind them, the biker followed at a safe distance. The clouds had obliterated the sun and the wind had kicked up to a small frenzy. Fat raindrops splattered occasionally, temporarily blocking her vision.

“There! That’s it!” she shouted, pointing to the car on the opposite side of the road. The driver passed the car, slowed, and turned. He then pulled up ahead of it and stopped on the road. Jill jumped out and ran back.

“Mark! Mark!” she called.

The car had been beaten. The open hood was bent out of shape and there was a crack in the windshield. Side view mirrors dangled, the headlights were smashed, and one tire was flat.

Part II: FanStory

“Mark!” Jill screamed, banging on the drivers’ door.

Something moved in the back seat. Mark uncovered his head and peered out the window. Seeing Jill, he unlocked and opened the back door, stumbling out of the vehicle.

“Oh, Mark! Are you okay? You’re hurt!”

He shook his head and held her tight. He was bleeding from a bruise on the side of his face, and his right eye was swollen shut.

“I’m okay.” Mark explained how a couple of young men showed up after Jill had left with the biker. “They hit me a couple of times and took my wallet.”

“I’m just happy you’re alive!”

“You’re lucky, dude,” the biker said.

“Craig insisted on coming back and making sure you were safe,” Jill said.

Mark’s jaw dropped. He stuck out a hand and said, “I’m sorry. I guess I misjudged you.”

The biker took Mark’s hand and shook it. “No problem. I get it all the time.”

“All set!” the tow man called. “There’s room for both of ya in the front seat.”

Mark and Jill climbed into the cab of the truck, grateful to be on their way again.

The Spirit of Hopes and Dreams

The Sentence Starts the Story

First Line: A light was on in the room.

Limit: 700-7,000 words (2,000-3,500 recommended)

Deadline: November 12, 2011

A light was on in the room.

This is odd, I thought. There is no light in that room.

It was my junk room – a place to put everything for which I couldn't find a place. The bulb had burnt out years ago and I'd never gotten around to replacing it; in fact, I can't even remember the last time I was in that room; yet, I could see light through the crack at the bottom of the door. It was bright – like someone had placed a halogen tube right there on the threshold.

I really didn't have time for this. It was close to midnight already and my presentation still required hours of work. Putting my laptop on the sofa beside me, I stood up and took a step towards the room. I stopped at the sound of a bell tolling. I looked around my living room, trying to pinpoint the source. The clock on the mantelpiece had struck midnight, but the second hand didn't appear to be moving.

I took another step and heard another toll of the bell. Twelve steps total brought me to the door; twelve tolls of the bell.

This is ridiculous, I thought. It's late. I'm over worked and over tired. My mind is playing tricks on me.

I turned the knob and pushed the door open. The light blinded me, and it took several moments before my eyes began to adjust. The glow softened and diffused, and I could see the silhouette of a person from whom the light emanated.

Soon the light had dimmed to the point that I could make out the details of the person. It was boyish

Part II: FanStory

looking, although I could not tell for sure if it was male or female.

“Who are you?” I asked with impatience, hoping it wasn’t a burglar with a weapon.

“I am the Spirit of Hopes and Dreams,” he replied in a musical voice.

I was a bit taken aback. That wasn’t quite the answer I had expected.

“Uh, whose, exactly?” I asked.

“Your hopes and dreams,” the spirit said.

“Behold!”

With a sweep of his arm he revealed a desk with a beat up typewriter on it. I took a step toward it, amazed at what I was seeing. My old typewriter! Boy, that took me back. I used to bang away at those keys for hours on end, filling page after page with fantastic stories. Well, at least I thought they were fantastic.

“Do you remember this person?” the spirit asked. I looked again, and saw a much younger version of myself, sitting at the desk and typing away with fervor.

I gulped and stared. Instantly, I was transported back to that time and place. I found myself in my old studio apartment where I lived while I was in college. I couldn’t have been more than twenty. In the mist surrounding the seated figure, I could see the visions that I once held - aspirations of a future that never materialized.

“Or, perhaps, this person?” the spirit asked.

I felt myself being drawn into one of the fantasies - my very being was subsumed into the story as it unfolded. I became the future vision of myself. In this particular vignette, I sat at a table signing books. Stacks of books littered the top, and in front of my a throng of people clamored for my signature. I was feeling proud, happy and on top of the world. All of these people wanted to see me and read my book!

Everything faded. I was left standing in my junk room, dimly lit by the light from the living room.

The Spirit of Hopes and Dreams

“Whatever happened to that person?” a dying whisper sounded in my ear.

I turned to look at my laptop, still sitting on the sofa, waiting patiently for my return. After a longing glance at the now-vacant corner, I left the room and closed the door behind me. I sat down on the sofa and pulled the laptop onto my lap. I stared at the screen.

My presentation was nothing but gibberish. Bereft of real meaning. This is not what I wanted for my life, but I did because it was expected of me. Be a man, pay your bills, and contribute to society in ways we think are appropriate. You are permitted creativity within the bounds we have proscribed.

Bullshit! I said to myself. Closing the laptop and turning out the living room lights, I retired to my bedroom and turned off my alarm.

I have seen the light, and tomorrow I will start my life anew.

Part III: Writers Store

The Writers Store (<http://www.writersstore.com/>) holds an annual contest called The Industry Insider Screenwriting Contest. They provide you with a logline and you have to write up to the first 15 pages of the script.

I receive email notifications about it because I own a copy of Final Draft, a software program for writing screenplays. The first one I entered was in 2010.

These stories are only the first 12-15 pages that I wrote for the contests. At some point in the future I will finish the stories and publish another book.

A Clandestine Affair

Deadline: November 30, 2011

Logline: A spy who has spent life wining and dining young women suddenly gets a major surprise when his daughter knocks on the door.

FADE IN

INT. a large MANSION - late evening

RICHARD KRAFT, a spry and energetic 70 year old, pauses in the short hallway leading from the kitchen into the dining room and smiles with satisfaction. About a dozen guests are conversing in small groups over hors d'ouvres.

He cocks his head slightly and listens to the buzz of conversation over the faint lounge music. Launching himself into the room, he nods and smiles as he works his way across.

Richard stops for a moment to talk with JOHNNY ZALES of Electropedia.com, who is conversing with MELINDA SAYER of QuickSearch.com.

JOHNNY ZALES

Richard!

RICHARD

Jim! I hope you are enjoying the party?

JOHNNY ZALES

I want to thank you for introducing me to Melinda.

RICHARD

I knew that QuickSearch and Electropedia would hit it off.

MELINDA SAYER

Well, we both are basically in the same business: information.

Part III: The Writer's Store

RICHARD

It sounds like a match made in heaven.

MELINDA SAYER

Well, I don't know about that.

RICHARD

I'll be looking for some great things
from you next year!

JOHNNY ZALES

Of that, you can be sure.

Richard pauses in the doorway to the adjoining sitting room where another dozen or so are scattered in conversation.

MELANIE BATES is standing by the doorway. She is the wife of software magnate PHIL BATES.

RICHARD

Melanie, enjoying the party?

MELANIE BATES

Oh, yes! And this dip is fantastic! Can I get the recipe?

RICHARD

I will speak to my chef. Where is that husband of yours?

Melinda gestures towards the fireplace, where PHIL BATES is in deep conversation with RANDOLPH CRANSTON of the Maiden Group.

MELANIE BATES

It's always about toys with those two.
Where would men be without their toys?

Richard shrugs his shoulders and smiles. Over by the foyer, he notices that his butler MARTIN is escorting SAMMY WILDMAN into the room. Sammy is a tall, handsome woman with a sedate bearing.

A Clandestine Affair

Richard pauses to stoke the fire on his way to greet his most recent guest.

RICHARD

Martin, would you please ask Charlotte to check the bathroom?

MARTIN

Yes, sir.

RICHARD

Hello, Sammy.

Sammy scans the crowd, recognizing many of them from a variety of technology related companies.

SAMMY

Only you could pull off something like this. Executives from competing companies in one room, talking about the weather.

RICHARD

I'm sure they have more interesting things to talk about.

SAMMY

You know what I mean.

RICHARD

I am so glad you could make it.

SAMMY

You did say it would be worth my while.

RICHARD

And so it will be.

SAMMY

Professionally.

RICHARD

Of course! What did you expect?
Richard looks about the room.

Part III: The Writer's Store

SAMMY

Human nature being what it is,
particularly yours--

RICHARD

Ah! There he is.

SANJAY CHANDRAKAR is standing near an upright grand piano in a corner of the wall shared by the dining room. Sanjay stands out like a sore thumb, clearly uncomfortable with social functions.

Richard and Sammy walk over and pause near the piano until Sanjay notices. Sanjay bows his head slightly in Richard's direction.

SANJAY

Namaste, Mr. Kraft.

RICHARD

Namaste, Mr. Chandrakar.

SANJAY

This is an impressive gathering. I did not realize your philanthropic activities were so diverse.

RICHARD

Thank you, Mr. Chandrakar. I would like you to meet Ms. Wildman.

SANJAY

Namaste, Ms. Wildman.

SAMMY

Namaste, Mr. Chandrakar.

RICHARD

Ms. Wildman is the person I was telling you about. She has extensive experience introducing new technologies and products into the US market.

SANJAY

A Clandestine Affair

I would be most interested hearing your thoughts, Ms. Wildman.

SAMMY

Thank you. I have taken the liberty of conducting some preliminary research on your company. It seems to me we can best approach--

RICHARD

If you will pardon me. I must check on the canapés.

SANJAY

I trust I will in good hands with Ms. Wildman. Namaste, Mr. Kraft.

Richard bows his head and leaves the two to talk.

HENRI, Richard's chef, is handing Martin a tray of canapés just as Richard arrives in the kitchen.

RICHARD

Martin, after you bring those out would you restock the bar?

MARTIN

Certainly, sir.

Martin leaves with the tray hors d'ouvres.

RICHARD

Henri, these are magnificent! The guests love them.

HENRI

Merci, monsieur. I will now prepare the sushi, breads and vegetables.

RICHARD

Excellent! Oh, have you seen Charlotte?

Part III: The Writer's Store

HENRI

No, monsieur.

RICHARD

No, matter! I will find her. Carry on.

HENRI

Oui, monsieur.

Richard steps out of the kitchen through a side exit into another hall. He glances in the bathroom as he passes it and enters the bedroom at the other end. He finds CHARLOTTE, his maid. She is carefully laying coats on the bed.

RICHARD

There you are, Charlotte!

CHARLOTTE

Yes, Mr. Kraft. There is not enough room in foyer coat room.

RICHARD

Ah! Well done. Carry on.

CHARLOTTE

Thank. you, sir.

Richard re-enters the hallway and sees ENRIQUE CARLISTA waiting for him by the French doors that lead into the sitting room.

ENRIQUE

Richard, my old friend! It's good to see you again!

Enrique shakes hands and claps Richard on the shoulder with his left hand. Enrique leans in close, turning his face away from the sitting room.

ENRIQUE (CONT.)

The Hindi, he is the one?

A Clandestine Affair

Richard nods as he follows Enrique's gaze and rests his on Sammy, who is still talking to Sanjay.

RICHARD

Enrique, tú perro viejo!

ENRIQUE

As usual, amigo, you're Spanish grammar leaves much to be desired.

RICHARD

You can't blame a man for trying.

ENRIQUE

One of these days, gringo, your "trying" will anger the wrong person.

She is a pretty one.

RICHARD

Yes, she is.

ENRIQUE

She is young enough. Did you and she ever--

RICHARD

No. Not for lack of trying, though.

ENRIQUE

You are incorrigible.

RICHARD

I think you should meet her.

Before they can move, Richard notices Martin escorting a young woman in from the foyer. He doesn't recognize her. He watches as she wanders towards the fireplace, fitting right in with the crowd.

Richard is mesmerized. Her eye catches his for a moment, and she smiles at him.

Part III: The Writer's Store

Enrique leans in and whispers into Richard's ear.

ENRIQUE

Careful, my friend. She is much too young even for you.

Richard shakes himself free of the spell and sighs.

RICHARD

If I were only twenty years younger.

ENRIQUE

Do you never weary of the chase?

RICHARD

Ah, it is the chase that keeps me alive.

ENRIQUE

It is because you are a, how do you say it? A thrill-seeker?

RICHARD

We've had this conversation many times.

ENRIQUE

I am obligated, as your friend.

RICHARD

Do you never weary of the debate?

ENRIQUE

Never, my friend.

RICHARD

And so we continue, for as long as we both shall live?

ENRIQUE

Sí, mi amigo.

A Clandestine Affair

Richard claps Enrique on the shoulder, and they make their way over to the piano where Sammy and Sanjay are still talking. The two men wait politely for a break in the conversation.

Sanjay pauses and nods to Richard.

SANJAY

Ms. Wildman has very intriguing ideas.

RICHARD

I knew she would. I'd like you to meet Mr. Enrique Carlista. If you are interested, he could help you into the South African markets. Enrique, this is Mr. Sanjay Chandrakar.

SANJAY

Namaste, Mr. Carlista.

Enrique pulls his hand back and returned the greeting.

ENRIQUE

Namaste, Mr. Chandrakar.

SANJAY

Carlista is an uncommon surname.

ENRIQUE

Yes, it is.

SANJAY

Forgive me if I am impolite, but I believe your given name is Spanish?

ENRIQUE

It is. I come from a mixed heritage. My father was born in Madrid, and my mother in Athens.

RICHARD

And this is Ms. Samantha Wildman. She markets technology in the US.

Part III: The Writer's Store

ENRIQUE

A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Wildman.

Sammy and Enrique shake hands.

Richard excuses himself and the three continue their discussion.

Richard works his way over to the fireplace where SONYA CARSON, the winsome young woman he noticed before, is talking with RACHEL MADISON.

Sonya is about 30 and a mixture of elegance and impishness. Rachel is a conservatively dressed middle-aged woman.

RICHARD

Rachel, how are you enjoying the party?

Richard and Rachel hug.

RACHEL

Richard! You have outdone yourself.

RICHARD

Thank you! How is life at ND-Tech?

RACHEL

We're still struggling in this economy, but it's looking up.

Richard turns his attention to Sonya.

RICHARD

I don't believe we've met. I'm Richard Kraft, sponsor of this little affair.

SONYA

Oh, so you are the famous philanthropist!

Richard bows over her hand.

A Clandestine Affair

RICHARD

At your service.

RACHEL

Sonya is our newest up-and-coming. I hope you don't mind that I invited her along?

Martin stops and whispers something in Richard's ear.

RICHARD

Sonya, I am delighted you could join us. If you'll pardon me, I have an emergency in the kitchen I must see to.

Richard arrives in the kitchen to see STEVE JENSEN finishing up the next few trays of hors d'oeuvres. Steve's quick motions and hawk-like appearance make him look like a bird pecking at the food.

STEVE

I thought Henri could use a break.

RICHARD

When did you get here? I didn't even see you come in.

STEVE

Sneaked in behind your back, old man. Your eye was on that lovely young flesh out there.

RICHARD

I wish you wouldn't do that. You attract more attention by sneaking around than you would if you were more obvious and natural. Have I taught you nothing?

STEVE

You take this way too seriously.

Part III: The Writer's Store

RICHARD

Hm. What do you have for me?

Steve picks up a manila envelope from the counter and hands it to Richard. Richard tucks it under his arm without a glance.

STEVE

I've completed the viability study on the East India Technology Group.

RICHARD

You could have brought this to me at my office tomorrow. There was no need for theatrics.

Steve shrugs his shoulders, unconcerned. He pops a carrot into his mouth and leaves just as Henri returns.

HENRI

Mr. Jensen--

RICHARD

It's okay, Henri.

Richard retreats to his bedroom and deposits the envelope into the safe hidden in his walk-in closet. He exits the closet to find Enrique standing in the bedroom doorway.

ENRIQUE

I saw Steve.

RICHARD

Yeah.

I know what you're going to say.

ENRIQUE

And I will keep saying it. You need to do something about that boy.

A Clandestine Affair

RICHARD

Yes, you are right. I will take care of it tomorrow.

ENRIQUE

Did he bring the East India Study?

RICHARD

Yes. I can't look at it right now. How are talks going with Mr. Chandrakar?

ENRIQUE

Very well. He is quite impressed with Sammy.

RICHARD

Good. How about with you?

ENRIQUE

I have the impression he would rather proceed with caution. He agrees with an expansion into the US first. He has no objection with me being a part of that process, in anticipation of a future in South America.

RICHARD

Good, good, good. Ah, perhaps we should get back before we are missed?

ENRIQUE

An excellent idea, my friend.

As Richard and Enrique enter the sitting room, Sonya hooks her arm into Richard's.

SONYA

There you are! You are not an easy man to keep up with.

RICHARD

I am sorry, It is not my habit to ignore such a beautiful woman.

Part III: The Writer's Store

SONYA

And such a charmer, too! How is it you've managed to stay single?

RICHARD

Oh, it hasn't been easy.

SONYA

I'm sure! Any children?

RICHARD

None that I know of.

SONYA

Who will carry on your magnificent legacy?

RICHARD

Just knowing I've done my share for the betterment of mankind is enough for me.

SONYA

Spoken like a true philanthropist. Very sexy.

RICHARD

Is it, now?

SONYA

Oh, yes. Can I tell you a secret?

RICHARD

Sure.

Sonya leans in and brings her lips to his ear.

SONYA

I'm your daughter.

Richard is frozen by her revelation. He stumbles and sits down quickly in the nearest chair.

Diary of a Dead Wife

Deadline: July 31, 2011

Logline: After waking to find his wife dead in their backyard, a man conducts his own investigation, and uncovers the hidden life of a woman he thought he knew.

FADE IN

INT. BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

STAN TUCKER is lying on his side clinging to the edge of the bed. He is a thin, geeky looking sort of man with unkempt, sandy colored hair.

The large bedroom is plainly furnished in shades of soft green. A queen size bed is centered on one wall. There are one-drawer night-stands with lamps on either side of the head board. The wall on Stan's side of the bed has a tall bureau, the other side has a low, wide bureau with a mirror.

Stan rolls onto his back and flops his arm over to the other side of the bed. He feels around, looking for something.

STAN

Hon?

Stan sits up and squints around the room.

STAN

Honey? You in the bathroom?

Throwing off the covers, Stan gets out of bed wearing just shorts. He puts on his slippers and a robe, and shuffles into the hallway. He peeks into the empty bathroom and continues on to the kitchen.

Part III: The Writer's Store

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Stan walks to the counter and starts a pot of coffee. He then picks up the wall phone and walks to the refrigerator to consult a sticky note. He dials the number on the note.

EXT. DOWN THE STREET - CONTINUOUS

SHIRLEY HANSON is sitting in the driver's seat of a parked car. She is a prim looking woman. Her cell phone rings.

SHIRLEY

Hello?

Intercut between Stan and Shirley

STAN

Shirley? It's Stan.

SHIRLEY

Hello, Stan.

STAN

Hey, have you seen Marla?

SHIRLEY

I saw her at the game last night.

STAN

Uh, yeah, she's not home yet.

SHIRLEY

She's not?

STAN

Did you see what time she left?

SHIRLEY

A little bit after ten, I think.

STAN

Did she head straight home?

Diary of a Dead Wife

SHIRLEY

That would be my guess.

STAN

The line is awfully noisy. Something going on over there?

SHIRLEY

It's the gardener mowing the lawn.

STAN

Hm. Well, if you hear from her, would you have her call me?

SHIRLEY

Sure. I'll do that, Stan.

END INTERCUT

Stan puts the phone down and plays with the handle on the partially full coffee carafe, nudging it back and forth.

He glances out the window and sees a small bit of brightly colored cloth under the bushes along the back fence. The bushes are overgrown and partially hide the fence behind it. There is a gap between the line of bushes, exposing a gate to the alley way.

He walks outside and over to the bushes, bends down and tugs at the cloth. It's the end of a sleeve, and a limp hand pops out from under a loose covering of dirt.

Stan drops it and jumps back.

STAN

Shit!!

He stares at the arm, which is visible up to the elbow.

Part III: The Writer's Store

Turning, Stan runs back into the house, picks up the phone and dials a number. He speaks into the phone as soon as the other end is picked up.

STAN

Jack!

EXT. DOWN THE STREET - CONTINUOUS

JACK REINER is sitting in the passenger seat of a parked car.

JACK

Stan the man! What's up?

INTERCUT BETWEEN STAN AND JACK

STAN

You're not going to believe this! I think someone's killed Marla! They stuffed her body under the bushes in our backyard.

JACK

Slow down there, boy! One thing at a time. You say Marla's been killed?

STAN

Yes! Yes, I think so--

JACK

Are you sure? I mean, did you see her face?

STAN

Uh, well, no.

JACK

Under the bushes? Near the gate?

STAN

Yeah.

Diary of a Dead Wife

JACK

Hah! Good one! Probably just the neighbor kids playing a prank.

STAN

But I saw her arm! The same blouse she was wearing last night! And she's not in bed! Or in the bathroom!

JACK

Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Wasn't she at her Scrabble game last night?

STAN

Yes! And I called Shirley and she said Marla had headed home after the game.

JACK

I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation.

STAN

Huh? Hey, that's my line.

What am I going to do? If I call the police, they're going to suspect me right off the bat. It's always the husband!

JACK

Actually, it's always the butler. Look. Get some coffee, take a shower. By then you'll wake up from whatever lucid dream it is you seem to be having.

STAN

Huh! A dream. That's got to be what it is. Thanks. Talk to you later.

END INTERCUT

Shirley has a pair of binoculars and is watching Stan's house.

Part III: The Writer's Store

JACK

Well?

SHIRLEY

He's still in the kitchen.

JACK

Damn! How did this happen?

SHIRLEY

How should I know? I kept her at the house until ten like I was supposed to.

JACK

Rick! I'll bet he screwed something up.

SHIRLEY

It doesn't matter what Rick did or didn't do! We have to fix it.

I never did trust that man, anyway.

JACK

I don't think you trust anyone.

SHIRLEY

All clear. He just passed through the living room and into the hall.

JACK

Okay. Let's do this.

Shirley hands the binoculars to Jack and starts the car. She drives around the end of the street and pulls into the alley, stopping so that the back of the car is near the gate.

They both put gloves on and get out of the car. Jack peeks through the gate and looks at the bathroom window. Seeing that it is fogged up, he opens the gate and starts pulling Marla's body out from under the bushes.

Shirley has opened the trunk of the car. She rearranges a few items to make room inside.

Diary of a Dead Wife

JACK

(whispering)

Help me with this! It's heavy!

Shirley walks into the back yard and grabs one of the arms. They get the body out of the yard and start lifting it into the trunk.

Shirley looks up to see Stan staring at them from the kitchen window. Stan is still dry.

SHIRLEY

Jack!

She nods at the house. Jack looks up to see Stan's face. Jack repositions himself to get a better grip on the body.

JACK

Start the car!

Shirley runs to the driver's side and gets into the car, starting it up and gunning the engine.

Jack heaves and dumps the body into the trunk. He slams it closed, and looks back to see Stan running out of the house.

STAN

Hey! Jack! What the hell?

Jack hurries around to the passenger side.

JACK

Go!

Jack jumps in and slams the door shut. Shirley floors it. The car takes off, spewing dirt and gravel.

Stan grabs the gate post to stop his momentum.

Part III: The Writer's Store

STAN

Jack! Shirley! What the hell is going on?

The car exits the alley. Stan starts to run after it, but stops after about ten feet.

STAN

What the hell is going on?

Stan closes his robe and reties it. He turns and walks back into the house.

INT. CAR - TRAVELING

SHIRLEY

What do we do now? He wasn't supposed to see us!

JACK

I'll have to call Rick.

Shirley grimaces. Jack pulls out his cell phone and dials a number.

RICK (V.O.)

Yes?

JACK

Broken arrow caused delay in removal. Target has been observed with bull's eye.

RICK (V.O.)

Proceed to locker room with equipment. Repairman will be dispatched.

The line goes dead. Jack puts away his cell phone.

JACK

We go on as planned.

Diary of a Dead Wife

SHIRLEY

I suppose Rick's going to fix it.

Jack stares out the passenger window.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Stan is standing at the counter in front of the coffee pot, staring at a cup of coffee. He is showered and dressed for work.

The door bell rings. Stan walks as if in a daze to the front door and opens it.

RICK JOHNSON is standing there. He is a blocky looking man with dark skin and hair.

RICK

Stan Tucker?

STAN

Yes.

Rick sticks out his hand. Stan shakes it.

RICK

I'm Randy Howser. My wife is one of your wife's Scrabble buddies. I was wondering if you'd seen or heard from them at all?

STAN

Well, I, uh--

RICK

It's so funny, you know? My wife, Cindy, she leaves me this message last night says she's leaving the game and she's going to hang out with Marla and Kendra a bit.

Rick steps into the house. Stan moves back to allow him in. Rick is discreetly looking around as he talks.

Part III: The Writer's Store

RICK

So, she calls again a couple hours later saying they been to a dance club and they had too much to drink to make it home, so they going to take a cab back to Kendra's place that's closest.

STAN

That doesn't sound like--

RICK

Yeah, it doesn't sound like my Cindy. But, hey, you know, girls just want to have fun.

Rick finishes his cursory inspection and is back at the door. He claps Stan on the back.

RICK

Anyway, I thought maybe they called and let you know where they at. I'll go check Kendra's and get back with you. Okay?

STAN

Uh, sure, uh, Randy...

RICK

Yeah, Randy Howser. Nice meeting you.

Rick leaves the house, waving back at Stan. Rick drives off. Stan remains at the open door, watching with a confused look on his face.

Stan closes the door. Walking back to the kitchen, he picks up his cup of coffee and returns to the bedroom.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Stan sits down on the edge of Marla's side of the bed. He sips his coffee and looks around the room at her bureau and bed-side stand.

Diary of a Dead Wife

In the cubby beneath the single drawer of the stand, he can see the edge of her diary sticking out. He studies it for a moment before putting his coffee on the stand and pulling out the diary.

STAN

Hm. She usually keeps this better hidden.

He turns it over in his hands several times, contemplating. Opening the drawer of the stand, he searches for and pulls out a bobby pin. Pulling it open with his teeth, he proceeds to chew off the plastic coating on one end and spits it onto the floor. Using the bared end, he picks the diary lock.

Starting at the back, he flips through the empty pages until he finds the last entry. There is a loose slip of paper marking the page.

STAN

(reading)

Dear Diary - I'm beginning to get a little worried. I'm thinking of skipping tonight's game. I know they think I lost the last game on purpose. I wouldn't do that! I'm loyal to my team! But I can see it in their eyes, hear it their voice. They don't trust me anymore. Damned if I do and damned if I don't. They'll get me either way. Might as well go and face the music. I might have a chance to convince them.
P/D.

Stan scratches his head.

STAN

P/D?

Part III: The Writer's Store

He reads the entry again, and then looks at the slip of paper. It contains a series of number pairs separated by a forward slash:

4/2 1/12 1/4 3/2
3/2 1/12
1/4 1/6 1/9 1/6

He looks back at the diary entry.

STAN

P/D? What could that mean? It has to do with Scrabble, she's always talking about that. Strategic use of the tiles... Ah! Points and distribution of the letters!

Stan drops the diary and runs with the slip of paper in his hand to the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Stan pulls down the Scrabble game from a shelf and opens the box. He turns to the page of the directions showing the points and distribution of the tiles. Sitting down on the couch, he pulls out a pencil and paper from the coffee table drawer and begins writing down the number pairs with the appropriate letters:

4/2 1/12 1/4 3/2
F E L B
H S C
V U M
W P Y

3/2 1/12
B E
C
M
P

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1/4 1/6 1/9 1/6
L N A N
S R I R
U T T

After several attempts at forming words from each group, he writes out the message: HELP ME STAN.

STAN

I'll be damned...

Dropping the pencil, Stan runs back to the bedroom.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Stan picks up the diary and leafs through the pages. He does not find any more slips of paper.

Stan pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and dials a number.

STAN

Yeah, Ed? It's Stan.

Listen, I won't be in today, I have a fever and a headache.

No, no, I don't think it's serious. I'll be back in tomorrow.

Sure thing. Okay. Bye.

Stan puts his phone back in his pocket.

STAN

Now, if I can just find her address book, that should give me some place to start to figure out what's really going on.

FADE OUT

Part IV: Writer's Digest

I enter these contests on occasion when I happen to have an unpublished story that hasn't been entered into any other contest. They do not provide prompts, but something had prompted the idea for the story.

The Immortality Conclusion

Annual Writing Competition

Deadline: May 20, 2011

My inspiration for this story came from the “Incarnations of Immortality” series by Piers Anthony.

Death lie sprawled out on the floor, writhing in silent agony. His gaunt features appeared male, but Ron could not tell for sure. He watched, transfixed, torn between kneeling to help and dialing 911. After a moment, he settled for a short, hysterical laugh. Ron dropped into his recliner as his empty revolver landed on the carpet.

Such a bizarre situation, he thought.

Ron picked up his book and stared at the page, his mind frantically chewing on what happened. He ticked off his day, point by point, but couldn't find anything out of order. Closing his book and placing it on the end table, Ron looked around his apartment. Everything was in order except for his living room. His revolver rested at his feet, a scythe was resting against the coffee table where it had fallen, and Death, now still, lay tangled in his robe in front of the gas fireplace. Ron was relieved to note there was no blood on the floor.

Nothing made sense. All his life he relied on his world making sense. Anything that didn't was changed to fit. Order helped him feel safe and quelled the turmoil. Death lying dead in his living room did not fit, and Ron was at a loss. The gun on the floor did not fit, but he could fix that. He picked it up, spun the chamber three times and put it back in its spot on the end table, as empty as the day he bought it.

A point of light from the balcony caught his attention. He fumbled for the gun and stood, attempting to follow the point with the muzzle as it passed through the glass door and stopped to hover over the prone figure.

Part IV: The Writer's Digest

The point began to grow and diffuse, transforming into a petite woman with a pair of wings.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," she said. "This is not good."

"I – "

"Sst! Let me think. And put that gun away. You're not scaring anyone."

"Who – "

"I appear exactly as you expect me to."

This was beyond comical. Ron's normally quiet living room was host to a fairy floating in mid-air poised like the Thinker over the still Death.

Ron checked the clock on the mantle with his watch. The second hands on both had stopped.

"What –?"

"Sst! I stopped time. We can't very well have this getting out, now, can we?"

"But –"

Her glare cut his objection short. She scratched her chin and looked thoughtfully into space.

"Ah!" she said, snapping her fingers. She closed her eyes and muttered what sounded like an incantation. As soon as she finished, another robed figure, bearing an hourglass, appeared in Ron's living room.

"That's a different look for you," he boomed.

"Hush. You can thank him for it." She nodded in Ron's direction.

"Mm." The sound reverberated in the air.

"The, uh –" Ron started.

"Relax. I stopped time, remember? No one can hear us."

"About that, Harmonee ..."

"Yes. Sorry about that, Chronos. It was an emergency."

"So it would seem." He studied Death. "Let's find out what happened to dear Thanatos."

Chronos passed his hourglass over the body a few times. He peered at the instrument, shook it next to his

The Immortality Conclusion

ear, and passed it over the body again. Shrugging his shoulders, he turned back to Harmonee.

“I don’t know. I’d say a little more than ten minutes ago. Well inside the safety margin.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Stand back!” Chronos waived his arms theatrically and drew an odd pattern in the air with his hourglass.

Ron found his voice and mustered his courage.

“What are you doing?”

He blinked, and blinked again. Death was standing before him, alive and well, exactly as he first appeared.

Ron checked the clock on the mantle with his watch. The second hands on both were still stopped, but the minute hands had been set back twelve minutes.

“How—”

“Does he always speak in incomplete sentences?”

“Ever since I got here.” Harmonee turned to Ron.

“No time for explanations now. We have an untimely death to prevent.”

Harmonee closed her eyes and started muttering a different incantation while Chronos and Thanatos waived their respective instruments in the air. Ron watched dumbstruck as the air in the room shimmered and thickened.

He checked the clock on the mantle with his watch. The second hands on both were in motion. Forward motion, he noted with relief.

Close to a minute passed when Ron felt a ping. More than one ping, there were now several and it seemed like the air in the room was undergoing a slow boil. He wondered how he could feel a ping yet see boiling without feeling heat. A ping was a sound, not a feeling. Water boiled, not air.

The pinging and boiling stopped. Ron checked the clock on the mantle with his watch. Less than a minute had passed.

Part IV: The Writer's Digest

"It was not Satan," Chronos said, making a conscious effort to keep his voice down now that time had resumed. Thanatos shook his head in agreement.

"Any ideas?" Chronos and Thanatos both shook their heads. Neither of them had any idea who the culprit was. "Well, how about introductions? Ron, meet Chronos, the Greater Immortal Time, and Thanatos, the Greater Immortal Death."

Ron was too distressed to do anything other than nod in acknowledgment.

"And you can call me Harmonee. I'm the Greater Immortal Unity, possessing the power of all immortals to a very minor degree."

"I think we'd best leave him in your capable hands," Chronos said. Thanatos nodded, and they both vanished.

"How about a drink?" Harmonee floated over to the bar. Ron followed and accepted the Scotch, neat, she handed him. He drank it in a single gulp and set the glass down. Taking a deep breath to clear his mind and give the alcohol a moment to work, he finally found his tongue.

"What in God's name happened?"

"Well, I don't know that God actually knows about this. She's been a bit busy lately."

"How can God not know? Doesn't God know everything?"

"That is a common misconception among humans. God is the incarnation of Good. Only the Collective Unconscious knows everything, but she tends to be unfocused and difficult to understand."

"What?" Ron was very confused.

Harmonee sighed. "I don't interact with mortals nearly enough. I keep forgetting how unaware you are."

"What are you talking about?"

"No time to explain right now. I've got to figure out what to do with you." She handed him another drink and resumed her Thinker pose.

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Ron wobbled back to his chair, drink in hand, and sat down. He held the glass to his lips, but didn't drink. Instead, he stared at the fireplace and struggled to make sense of the situation. Never in his rational life has he had such a bewildering experience.

A finger snap sprung him out of his reverie.

"I'm gonna have to bring you to Purgatory and let the Greater Immortals decide."

"I really don't think so."

"You have no choice." Harmonee transformed into a ball of diffuse light that expanded until it surrounded him. Once he was completely enveloped, the light began to contract again to a pinpoint, and he felt himself wither into nothingness.

* * *

"The way I see it," Harmonee said, "We have two questions that need answers. First, how could an immortal have been killed? Second, who killed Thanatos?"

"My questions are even more pressing than that," Ron said. "Where am I and who are you?"

Ron must have fainted because he awoke lying on a couch in a very large sitting room. Littered about the room were several other couches and chairs, as well as a number of people. Despite the active discussion going on among those people, the air was unnaturally still. He decided he'd had enough, and finally screwed up the courage to stand and confront them.

"Welcome back!" Harmonee said. "Introductions all around. You've already met Thanatos and Chronos, the Greater Immortals Death and Time. Over there is Mars, the Greater Immortal War."

Mars grunted, thumped his chest with a closed fist and nodded in Ron's direction.

"Gaea, the Greater Immortal Mother Nature."

Part IV: The Writer's Digest

Gaea smiled, put her hands together just above her stomach and inclined her head very slightly.

“Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, the Aspects of the Greater Immortal Fate.”

A young woman smiled at him, changed into a middle-aged woman and then into an old woman right before his eyes.

“Satan, the Greater Immortal Evil.”

Satan smiled warmly and said: “My pleasure.”

Ron was shocked. He never expected to meet the devil, and he did not expect him to be such a gentleman.

“And last but not least, God, the Greater Immortal Good.”

Ron nearly dropped to his knees. He didn't believe in God and never expected to meet Him. Her. Whoever.

“Relax,” Harmonee said. “She's not going to smite you or anything. That's a human conception. I swear I'd like to strangle the guys who wrote that book.”

Ron gulped and sat back down on the couch.

“We're in Chronos' home,” she continued. “He is able to halt time indefinitely here, which is why we choose this place to meet. It gives us plenty of time to work things out.” She giggled at her pun.

“But, what am I doing here?”

“Oh, that. Well, I figured you might be a piece in this puzzle.”

“But I have to work in the morning.”

“No, you don't. You're dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yep. That's why Thanatos was there.”

“What did I die of?”

“Heart attack. You really should have worried less, exercised more and watched your diet. Oh, and all that alcohol didn't help.”

“But –”

“Don't worry, we left a golem behind.”

“A golem?”

“Yep. The humans who find it will never know the difference.”

A small squeak escaped from his lips.

Harmonee smiled. “You only think you’re real. Your soul energy is manifesting itself in a form you are familiar with. That will resolve once you accept your physical death and coalesce with the All. Why don’t you take a nap?”

Ron allowed Harmonee to lead him into another room where she tucked him into bed. He curled up into a fetal position under the covers and resisted the urge to cry out for his mother.

* * *

Dead.

The word kept echoing through Ron’s mind as he tossed and turned under the covers.

How could he be dead?

It didn’t seem right. He was still in his early forties. Wasn’t that supposed to be the new thirties? He lived a calm, orderly life. No wife or kids to clutter his world. Quiet evenings at home with his Scotch and a good book. No friends or acquaintances with their personal problems calling him all hours of the night and day for advice.

Ron didn’t understand what Harmonee meant. How could he possibly worry less? What with all those crazy people in the world killing for five dollars, or blowing up buildings, or violating traffic laws – any sane person would be out of their mind with worry. At least he managed his worry and didn’t let it show.

Exercise? No one exercised except athletes and models, and everyone else still lived nice long lives. Diet? All the foods he bought were fortified with essential vitamins and minerals. What more could he need?

Part IV: The Writer's Digest

And you can't deny a man his drink. It was the one thing that kept him sane. It helped him forget about all the insanity outside his own four walls.

And what was it with these so-called immortals? Who did they think they were? Kidnappers, for one. As soon as he could get to a phone, he would notify the police.

* * *

Ron awoke to a shaking room. He nearly fell getting off the bed, and stumbled into the main room.

"What's going on?"

The Greater Immortals were scattered around the room. Each one appeared to be concentrating on performing a task, none of which made any sense to Ron.

Everyone shimmered slightly, and the shaking settled down a bit without going away entirely. Ron stared nervously at his hands as the shimmering stopped. He shook them to make sure they were still solid.

Harmonee took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and lowered herself slowly to the floor. Ron rushed over and sat down next to her.

"What is going on?" he asked again.

She looked at him with a long face, her eyes heaving with dark circles.

"We're under attack," she said.

"Attack? Attack? This is madness. I shouldn't even be here!"

Harmonee looked around the room at the others. Each of the Greater Immortals was absorbed in fighting the attack with his or her special skill. Ron had no clue what kind of attack it was, only that it felt like an earthquake.

"We take turns taking breaks when it lets up," she said.

"Well?"

The Immortality Conclusion

“It’s an Atheistic Wave Front.”

“A... a... what?”

“Atheistic Wave Front. People don’t believe in gods anymore. They’ve lost faith in God because of infidelity in the church. They’ve become power hungry and materialistic. The grip of the ruling class has stripped humanity of art and education. Money and possessions have become their gods.”

“How’s that causing this... wave front?”

Harmonee sighed.

“Reality is created in four steps.”

“I thought reality was reality.”

“It is, but it must be created.”

“I thought God created reality.”

“In a sense, yes, but not in the way you think. You see, on Earth the first step is when a human conceptualizes something and sets up a subconscious wave front.”

“Conceptualizes what?”

“Anything!” Harmonee rubbed her eyes. “It could be anything. The second step is when that person verbalizes the concept. Speaking of it gives it power. As more people speak of it, it grows in power.”

“You’re making this up,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“Eventually, people begin acting on it. That’s the third step. At every stage, a subconscious wave front grows. When enough people are acting on it, the wave front develops a synergistic component that harmonizes with more and more people.”

Ron made his strange squeak and rubbed his head.

“So, what does all this have to do with me?”

“Honestly? Nothing, as far as I can tell.”

“Nothing? Then what am I doing here?”

“Coincidence.”

“Coincidence?”

“Yes, coincidence. The wave front become strong enough to actively affect us at the same moment Thanatos

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stopped to collect your soul. He was the only one about at the time, so he was struck.”

“What does that have to do with what’s happening now?”

“The wave front has grown to the point where it’s going to alter our reality and replace it with a new one.”

“Alter reality? What does that mean?”

Harmonee stood up and walked over to the coffee table, on which there was a pitcher of water and several glasses. She poured herself a drink and gulped it down.

“Humanity’s belief in the Immortal Gods has been broken.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper, and Ron had to lean in to hear what she was saying.

“It’s only a matter of time. Reality is about to undergo a fundamental phase shift. We are going to be replaced by a new set of ‘gods.’”

The shaking intensified and Harmonee dropped her glass, and reality shattered.

About the Author

Joe Sweeney is an independent publisher and author. His most popular title, *Hands-On Design Patterns for Visual Basic*, is a culmination of nearly thirty years programming experience. He has three collections of short stories covering science fiction, fantasy, and general fiction.