

Prompted to Write

Volume 2

by Joe Sweeney

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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.

Spider Women

Short Screenplay Challenge

Challenge #1: Oct 29-31, 2011

Genre: Horror

Location: Counselor's Office

Object: Monster Mask

Limit: 5 pages

Authors' Note: I had two contests with deadlines days apart. I decided to combine the requirements for both into a single story and submit it to both contests. You'll find this in short story form in the FanStory section.

FADE IN

EXT. CITY STREET - LATE MORNING

ISAAC is driving faster than the posted speed limit. He is 35 years old, nervously skinny, with brown hair and blue eyes.

He hears a siren and looks up to see police lights flashing in his rear view mirror. He pulls off the road, stops the car and lays his hands in his lap.

The OFFICER stops behind Isaac's car, walks up to the passenger side and taps on the window.

Isaac reaches over and rolls down the window.

OFFICER

Do you know how fast you were going?

ISAAC

Ye-yes officer. Uh, 45.

OFFICER

And do you know what the speed limit is?

ISAAC

Um, 30?

OFFICER

Part I: NYC Midnight

Correct. Let me see your license, registration and proof of insurance, please.

Isaac pulls out his wallet, removes his drivers' license and hands it to the officer. Isaac then reaches for the glove compartment and opens it to retrieve his insurance and registration cards.

A monster mask falls out of the glove compartment and falls onto the floor of the car.

ISAAC

Oh!

OFFICER

Is there something wrong?

Isaac gulps and reaches into the glove compartment with a shaking hand, staring at the mask on the floor. He hands the officer the cards.

The officer is unaware of the mask. He finishes writing the ticket and hands it to Isaac, along with the cards and license.

OFFICER

Please obey the posted speed limits. Have a nice day.

ISAAC

Th-thank you, officer. I will. I'll try.

The officer returns to his car. Isaac pulls back into traffic. Glancing at the car floor, he sees that the mask has disappeared.

INT. OFFICE OF AILISE MSW - LATER

The therapist's office is simply furnished with a few chairs and a love seat situated around a coffee table. Behind the couch is a small area with a computer desk.

Ailise is sitting in a chair with a notepad and pencil in her hand. She is 44 years old, has brown hair and gray eyes, and is a bit chubby.

Spider Women

She smiles at Isaac, who is sitting across from her in a love seat.

AILISE

So, Isaac, you seem a bit agitated today.

Isaac is staring at the coffee table and fidgeting with the corner of a pillow.

ISAAC

I saw it again. I saw the mask.

AILISE

Where did you see it?

ISAAC

It dropped out of my glove compartment when I opened it. It's following me everywhere!

AILISE

Everywhere?

Isaac nods.

ISAAC

Everywhere! I'm afraid to open anything!

AILISE

You said before that this mask appears inside of things that you open at home.

ISAAC

Yes. But now it's following me in the car too!

Isaac crosses his legs, accidentally kicking a small basket filled with potpourri. The contents spill onto the table and floor, along with the monster's mask.

ISAAC

Part I: NYC Midnight

Oh! There it is!

Isaac gathers his feet up onto the couch and points at the mask sitting on the table.

AILISE

Can you describe it to me?

ISAAC

It, it's right there! On the coffee table!
Can't you see it?

AILISE

It doesn't matter whether I see it or not.
If you can describe it to me, that process
will help take away some of your fear.

Isaac, wide-eyed with fear, studies the mask.

ISAAC

It looks like a spider head.

AILISE

A spiders' head?

ISAAC

Yes. Kind of furry and light brown. Two large blue bulbs for eyes in front and two smaller ones on the side. Two long orange fangs.

Oh, no!

AILISE

What is it?

Spider Women

ISAAC

The mask! It's floating up into the air!
Don't bite me!

Isaac screams and covers his head with a pillow. He peeks out.

ISAAC

Watch out! It's going after you!

Isaac watches as the mask floats over to Ailise and covers her head. Four legs sprout from her body, two on each side. She gets out of her chair and begins crawling toward Isaac.

ISAAC

No! No! Stay away from me!

Isaac jumps up and falls over the back of the couch, landing hard on the floor.

EXT. OFFICE OF AILISE MSW - LATER

An ambulance is parked in front of the door into the office building. Two paramedics are wheeling Isaac on a stretcher out of the office and into the ambulance.

CHARLEENA, a 24 year old nurse with red hair and brown eyes, walks over from the doctor's office next door.

CHARLEENA

Hey, Lil. What happened? Isn't that Isaac?
Dr. Ramsey's got him on medication for his paranoia.

AILISE

The strangest thing. He was convinced that I had turned into a spider and was going to eat him alive. He passed out from the fear.

CHARLEENA

That poor man! I hope he'll be alright.

Part I: NYC Midnight

AILISE

Does Dr. Ramsey have some time today? I want to talk to him about having Isaac committed.

CHARLEENA

Sure thing. I'll check his schedule and give you a call.

AILISE

Thanks! What are you doing for lunch?

CHARLEENA

I was thinking of trying out that new soup kitchen across the street.

AILISE

I've heard about them! They grind up meats and vegetables and blend them into a special sauce.

CHARLEENA

That's the place!

AILISE

I'll see you at lunch!

The two women part and return to their respective offices.

FADE OUT

Right Under Your Nose

Short Screenplay Challenge

Challenge #2: Dec 4-6, 2011

Genre: Romantic Comedy

Location: An Eating Contest

Object: A Tripwire

Limit: 5 pages

FADE IN

EXT. PICNIC GROUNDS - LATE MORNING

JACK whomps slowly over to the row tables lined up. He is five foot six and close to three hundred pounds. He's carrying a clipboard. He compares the name cards on the tables to his checklist. He reaches the end of the tables and walks over to a food cart where several people are keeping large vats of pork and beans warm. He picks up a ladle, dips it into one of vats and brings it to his mouth. Opening wide and tilting his head back, he chews and swallows the ladle full in moments.

JACK
(nodding)

Good.

He starts to put the ladle back as he wipes his mouth with a sleeve. SARA, a nervously thin blond, takes the ladle out of his hand and wipes it clean.

JACK

Where's the contestants?

SARA

Steve and Sandy are at the check in table.
Mark, Rick and Elly are wandering around.

JACK

Round 'em up, will ya? Contest's gonna start soon.

SARA

Part I: NYC Midnight

Sure.

Sara wipes her hands on her apron, drapes it over the cart handle and walks over to where the amusement rides are. Jack helps himself to another ladle full and returns it to the vat. He turns and walks down the length of the tables again, comparing the name cards against his checklist. Sara walks over to the check in table.

SARA

Steve? Sandy?

STEVE
(turning)

Yeah?

SARA

Jack is getting antsy. Are you two checked in?

SANDY

When isn't he getting antsy?

SARA

Well, if you could head over to the contestant area--

STEVE

Sure thing. Don't want to upset the Grand Master of Ceremonies.

SARA

A Grand Master is--

STEVE

Yeah.

Steve turns and walks away. Sandy follows him. Sara sighs and begins to follow, but stops when a woman catches her attention.

Right Under Your Nose

ANNIE

Excuse me, are you Sara?

SARA

Yes, I am.

ANNIE

I'm Annie, from the Tribune. I was told to ask you about the contest?

SARA

Oh! Yes! Hi, it's nice to meet you.

Sara and Annie shake hands.

SARA

I'm surprised a big town paper like the Tribune is covering the AEC.

ANNIE

AEC?

SARA

Annual Eating Contest.

ANNIE

Ah.

Annie makes a note in her notebook.

ANNIE

Well, apparently you have a unique human interest angle.

Part I: NYC Midnight

SARA

You mean Jack.

ANNIE

Yes. Is it true that he...

Annie stops with an uncertain look on her face.

SARA

It's true. When the contest is over, he eats
as much as all of the contestants combined.

ANNIE

My, God. He must be--

Sara stops and gestures toward Jack, who has just
finished another ladle full of pork and beans.

ANNIE

(under her breath)

--huge.

Jack looks up as they approach and drops the ladle
onto the ground.

JACK

Annie! Is it really you?

ANNIE

J-Jack? From Valley High?

Jack grins and raises his arms to hug her. Annie
takes a step back and Jacks arms close on empty air.
Annie turns to Sara.

ANNIE

I'm sorry. Sara, the restroom?

SARA

(pointing)

Back over that way.

Right Under Your Nose

ANNIE

Thanks! I'll be right back.

Annie turns and hurries off.

Jack stares after her a moment with a sad, longing look on his face. He turns back to the food cart and scoops another ladle full of pork and beans.

JACK

Where's the trip wire?

Sara bends over and reaches into a box next to the food cart.

SARA

Right here.

JACK

Good. Can you get it over to Alan?

SARA

Sure.

Sara turns to go, but stops.

SARA

Jack?

JACK
(with a mouth full)

What?

SARA

What was that all about?

JACK

Nothing.

Part I: NYC Midnight

Sara stood watches Jack as he walks up and down the length of the tables, double-checking the name tags against his check list.

SARA

She's your Annie, isn't she? The one you dated in high school?

JACK

(shaking his head)

Don't want to talk about it.

He reaches for the ladle, but Sara stops him.

SARA

She's the one, isn't she?

Jack pulls his arm free and grabs a ladle.

JACK

I don't want to talk about it!

Jack's face flushes and his eyes puff as he raises the ladle to his mouth. He stifles a sob and opens his mouth. Another sob catches him as he swallows, and he begins to choke.

SARA

Jack!

Sara reaches up and tries to pound his back. Jack falls to his knees, coughing and hacking. His face turns redder and he gasps, trying to catch a breath. He topples face down onto the ground. Sara jumps onto his back and pounds as hard as she can.

Jack starts breathing normally. He rolls over. Sara falls off his back and one leg gets trapped underneath him.

SARA

Uh, Jack?

Right Under Your Nose

JACK
(breathing hard)

Yeah, I'm okay.

SARA

Could you just roll onto your side a bit?

JACK

Huh? Oh. Sorry.

Sara frees her leg and Jack rolls onto his back again. Sara straddles him and beats his chest a few times with her fist.

JACK

Stop! What are you doing?

Sara stops and lays her head on his chest, sobbing quietly.

SARA

Why don't you let her go?

Tears trickle from Jack's eyes. He reaches his arms around Sara.

FADE OUT

How Not To Save Money

Short Story Challenge

Round #1: Jan 20-28, 2012

Genre: Suspense

Subject: Saving Money

Character: A Lawyer

Limit: 2,500 Words

Detective Lanahan's fists landed hard on the table and his steely eyes fixed on David Hammond sitting on the opposite side. David nearly jumped out of his seat.

He looks like a gorilla, David thought, gulping and trying to return a defiant glare.

"Tell me who your collaborators are!"

"David," Detective O'Reilly said in a soft voice. "Tell Detective Lanahan what he wants to know and you can go free."

Good cop, bad cop, David thought. *You see it on television, but you never think it happens in real life. Or would happen to you.*

"I want to speak to my lawyer."

"Grr!" Lanahan threw a chair across the room.

"What's his name?" O'Reilly asked.

"Shelly Marcus."

O'Reilly glanced at Lanahan, who nodded assent. Lanahan paced the room, snorting, while David sat, staring at the table top and failing to control his trembling.

Eons seemed to pass before the door to the interrogation room opened once again to admit Shelly Marcus, Attorney at Law, followed by Detective O'Reilly. Shelly took up a supportive position standing to one side of David, while O'Reilly walked to the other side of the table to stand next to Lanahan.

Part I: NYC Midnight

“What are the charges against my client?”
Lanahan’s expression hardened. “Arizona Revised Statute 13-1805—”

“Shoplifting.” Shelly said.
“—subsection A—”
“Naturally.”

“—paragraph 3 paying less than the purchase price of goods valued at less than \$1,000 by substituting the price tag. Paragraph 4 transferring goods valued at less than \$1,000 from one container to another.”

“Both class 1 misdemeanors,” Shelly said in a bored tone. “Where's your evidence?”

Lanahan signaled to O'Reilly, who hastened out of the room. They waited in silence. Lanahan scowling with his hands clasped behind back and rocking on his heels. Shelly smiling benignly with her hands clasped in front and rocking the heels of her flat, sensible shoes.

O'Reilly returned within a few minutes and placed a large plastic container on the table. Shelly looked inside and picked at the bagged items inside, feigning disinterest. The items were mostly clothes: shoes, socks, briefs, and a shirt. There was also a loaf of bread and a package of lunch meat that was on the verge of spoiling.

“This is not his first offense,” Lanahan roared. “When I talk to the county attorney, I plan to push for prosecution under subsection H – shoplifting property during a continuing criminal episode.”

“Do you really think you can get this tried as a class 5 felony?”

Trial! Felony! Oh, my God, I'm going to jail!

Shelly rested her hand on David's shoulder and he stopped squirming. “Prior arrests aren't considered

to be part of a continuing criminal episode. The county attorney will throw it out.”

“At the very least he's a repeat offender,” Lanahan countered. “Even a Justice Court judge will see that and rule all the more harshly.”

“Detective Lanahan, look at my client.”

David sat still under Lanahan's scrutiny and attempted to appear respectable in his tattered clothes. He ran fingers self-consciously through his matted hair and puffed out his chest to appear proud and less emaciated.

“My client,” Shelly continued, “is homeless and destitute. Were a Justice Court judge to rule more harshly, jail would at least provide food and shelter. However, I believe the judge would take pity on my client and dismiss the case without prejudice.”

“What would be the point of that?” Lanahan argued. “We'll just arrest and arraign him again the next time we catch him shoplifting!”

“Do you really want to waste your time on such a petty effort when there are more serious crimes being committed?”

“Grr!” Lanahan raised his fists in frustration.
“Go! Get out of here!”

David stated at the big man with a dumbfounded look. Shelly reached under his arm and gently lifted him out of his seat. O'Reilly came around the table and opened the door as Shelly guided David out of the room and out of the police station.

“David!” Shelly said.

“Huh?” David turned a glazed expression in her direction. “I thought I was going to jail for sure that time.”

Part I: NYC Midnight

“David, I can’t keep coming down here and saving your ass. You have to promise me to stop shoplifting. I know you’re only trying to save money, but it’s going to get you into serious trouble.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Promise me!”

“I promise!”

A Gift for Father's Day

Screenwriter's Challenge

Round #1: May 4-12, 2012

Genre: Drama

Subject: Fatherhood

Character: A fast food restaurant employee

Limit: 12 pages

FADE IN

INT. FAST FOOD RESTAURANT - JUST AFTER LUNCH

The lobby is half full of patrons finishing their lunch. There is a general buzz of conversation.

Behind the counter, eight employees in uniform are cleaning up and restocking after the lunch rush.

In the grill area, TOMMY PARKER is placing condiments onto six bun crowns on the prep table. Tommy is thin and wiry. He could easily pass for a pimply-faced teenager, despite the fact he is twenty-four years old. His movements are fast and automatic. There is a look on his face of paying little attention to what he is doing.

Tommy moves the tray of bun crowns to the grill, hooking the edge of the tray under a lip on the grill. Picking up a spatula, he expertly removes hamburger patties from the grill two at a time, shakes the juice from them and slide them onto the crowns.

Replacing the spatula, he returns the tray to the prep table and grabs another large spatula to retrieve the bun heals from the toaster. He slides all six heals onto the patties in one quick motion, replaces the spatula, picks up the tray and places it onto the bin over the grill.

TOMMY

Six is up!

The bin is a twelve foot long structure that separates the front counter from the grill area. On the grill area side are three grills and the bin acts as a hood to draw the smoke from the cooking

Part I: NYC Midnight

meat into a vent. On the counter side, the bin contains a warming bin for the sandwiches and a counter area to hold the coffee maker and soda fountain.

On the other side of the bin, MEGAN ROLLINS puts away a package of napkins she had been using to fill the dispensers. She walks up to the warming bin, reaches for a hamburger and expertly wraps it in wax paper before placing it inside the warming bin.

Megan is an elderly and plump woman with her brown hair in a bun. Her eyes dart around as she wraps the burgers, taking note of what needs to be cleaned or restocked.

MEGAN

Tommy, check the lobby please.

Tommy finishes scraping the grill, pushing the grease and meat bits into the grease trap.

TOMMY

Checking the lobby!

Tommy picks up one towel to wipe his hands, and then picks up another and heads out to the lobby. He walks to the first table, picks up the trays and empty food containers and takes them to the trash can. He dumps the trash and places the tray on the counter over the trash can. Returning to the table, he wipes down the table and seats.

Moving on to the next table, he repeats the process. He doesn't notice a patron watching him closely from a booth in a corner.

MARK PARKER is an older version of Tommy. They could almost be twins, except Mark is more filled out and looks much older than his twenty seven years.

Tommy continues cleaning tables, oblivious to Mark.

MARK
(scowling)

Tomorrow is Father's Day, you know.

A Gift For Fathers' Day

Tommy is cleaning a table ten feet from Mark. Tommy pauses a moment, glances at Mark, and then resumes cleaning.

TOMMY

What of it?

MARK

If he dies before you make your peace with him, you'll regret it the rest of your life.

Tommy doesn't say anything as he moves on to an empty booth just vacated by two patrons.

Mark stands up and grabs Tommy by the arm.

MARK

For God's sake, Tommy! He's your father.

TOMMY

(pulling away)

Not much of a father, was he?

MARK

He regrets that. He really does.

TOMMY

If you say so.

Mark shakes his head and taps his fist on the table.

MARK

(begging)

Please, Tommy. Just five minutes is all I ask. Just listen to what I have to say.

Tommy moves on to the next booth and starts cleaning it.

MARK

Okay! Just five minutes, and I promise I'll never ask you again.

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TOMMY

You promise, huh?

Mark takes a deep breath and looks Tommy in the eye.

MARK

Yes. I promise.

Tommy shrugs and finishes the booth. He turns to head back behind the counter.

TOMMY
(over his shoulder)

Okay.

INT. TOMMY'S APARTMENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Tommy's apartment is a small studio without a separate bedroom. The living area is sparsely decorated with a futon and a coffee table. There is no other furniture.

Tommy is relaxing on the futon reading a mystery. The book has a catalog label on the binding imprinted with a Dewey Decimal Classification code on it.

The doorbell rings. Tommy puts down his book, stands up and walks over to the door. He opens it to find Mark standing in the hall.

Tommy steps aside and gestures Mark in. Mark shuffles over to the futon and sits down. Tommy closes the door and sits at the other end, looking at Mark expectantly.

MARK

Okay, so I know dad wasn't always there for us.

TOMMY

Not always there?

Tommy shakes his head and takes a deep breath.

A Gift For Fathers' Day

TOMMY

You are the master of understatement.

MARK

I understand that you're angry.

TOMMY

Angry? Mark, I am past angry!

Tommy stands up and begins to pace.

TOMMY

I can't believe you. After everything all
you can do is try to pacify me.

Mark stands up and spreads out his hands.

MARK

Okay! You're right! Dad wasn't there for us.

TOMMY

Except when he was drunk.

MARK
(nodding)

Yes. Except when he was drunk.

Tommy stops his pacing and leans back into a corner
with his arms folded.

TOMMY

Sitting on his couch and staring out the
window. Day after day. Not talking to us -
not one word!

Tommy pushes himself away from the wall.

Part I: NYC Midnight

TOMMY

It was like I didn't even have a father. But it was worse than that because he was there. On that couch!

Tommy drops to the floor and crosses his legs. He hangs his head down and stares angrily at the floor. Mark squats and cranes his neck, attempting to look Tommy in the eye.

MARK

Yes. But he never hit us.

Tommy looks up.

TOMMY

What?

MARK

He never hit us.

TOMMY

What does that have to do with anything?

MARK

Do you know anything about dad's childhood?

TOMMY

How would I know anything about that? He never talked to us!

Mark stands up, stretches his legs and sits down on the couch.

MARK

If you'd come visit him--

Tommy looks up at the ceiling and exhales heavily.

A Gift For Fathers' Day

MARK

Okay. Sorry.

Did you know his father was a drunk?

Tommy shakes his head while still staring at the ceiling.

MARK

Well, he was. In fact, he was a violent drunk.

TOMMY

Yeah?

MARK

Yeah. Dad's told me stories about all the times his dad beat him.

Tommy lowers his head and looks at Mark.

MARK

Dad has told me how scared he was to come home from school. And it got worse after his mother died.

TOMMY

I didn't know about that.

MARK

Dad was ten years old when she died. His dad lost his job because of his drinking. Our dad started staying at friend's houses. He dropped out of school when he was sixteen and left home.

TOMMY

Dad told you all this?

Part I: NYC Midnight

MARK

(shrugging)

In bits and pieces over the past few years.
You know how he loves to talk.

Tommy smiles at that.

MARK

He's actually been a little more talkative
since his illness.

Tommy stands up and walks over to the kitchenette.
He puts away the dishes and stands staring at the
empty drainer.

Mark stands up.

MARK

Will you come with me and see dad tomorrow?

TOMMY

(shrugging)

I'll think about it.

MARK

Okay.

Mark leaves the apartment.

EXT. JACK'S HOUSE - SUNDAY AFTER LUNCH

The house is in an attached, single story home
retirement community sandwiched between two other
houses. The colors are neutral and difficult to tell
apart. The grass is neatly trimmed and a few houses
have rows of flowers.

A navy blue compact pulls into the driveway behind a
powder blue town car. As Mark and Tommy get out of
the car, the front door opens and the screen door
lock clicks.

Mark and Tommy walk up the sidewalk. Mark is
carrying two bags of groceries. He opens the screen
door and enters. Tommy follows him in.

A Gift For Fathers' Day

INT. JACK'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

MARK

Hi, Dad!

JACK

Hi.

Mark passes through the living room to the kitchen.

MARK

Happy Father's Day.

JACK

Thanks.

MARK

Tommy's here, too.

TOMMY

Hello.

JACK

Hi.

Tommy wrinkles his nose as he walks across the living room to a chair.

The room is dingy despite the afternoon sun through the sliding glass door. The walls are stained from decades of cigarette smoke. The furniture is old, worn and drab. The room is furnished with a couch, an end table, a coffee table and two chairs. There is a dining area in the corner near the kitchen. The dining table has a computer on it.

JACK PARKER sits on one end of the couch. The rest of the couch is strewn with papers and other odds and ends.

He is in his early sixties, but looks closer to ninety. His skin is grayish and hangs loosely on his body. A nasal cannula supplies oxygen, and the

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rattling sound of the oxygenator can be heard from one of the two bedrooms.

Mark finishes in the kitchen returns to the living room. He sets a few boxes of snack cakes on the coffee table and then sits in the other chair.

MARK

I couldn't find any of the lemon-filled cakes you like, so I got the vanilla ones.

Jack picks up the boxes one at a time and stacks them by his feet.

JACK

Okay.

Jack picks through a few sticky notes sitting on the couch behind him. He shrugs.

JACK

No talking points today.

MARK

There's nothing at all of interest happening in the world?

JACK

No.

Jack glances at the clock on the wall over Mark and then looks out the glass door.

MARK

Have you seen your rabbit?

JACK

Oh, I don't know.

I saw him Friday.

Tommy shifts in his chair.

A Gift For Fathers' Day

MARK

So, they still haven't found that missing girl yet.

JACK
(scowling)

No. That's all there is on the news. You'd think there was nothing else going on in the world.

Tommy glances at the clock on the wall over Mark and then looks out the glass door. He stifles a yawn.

Jacks pulls the cannula out of his nostrils and rests it on the bridge of his nose. He picks up the closest handkerchief and blows his nose. He puts it back on the far side if the others and then fits the cannula back.

JACK

I think the oxygen is drying out my nose.

MARK

It probably is.

Jack looks out the room, frowns and lets out a small chuckle.

JACK
(pointing at the computer)

A news anchor farted during a newscast. I've got it bookmarked.

Mark gets up and sits at the computer. He clicks on Favorites in the browser and a very long list opens up.

MARK

God, how many favorites do you have?

Jack chuckles.

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JACK

It's a new one so it should be at the bottom.

Mark scrolls for a long time before finding the bookmark. He clicks on the link and the web page opens with the video. Mark turns on the speakers as it plays. Tommy cranes his head to watch.

The video plays through to the end. Mark turns off the speakers and turns in the chair.

MARK

Wow! That must have been embarrassing!

JACK
(laughing)

Yeah. He let out some powerful ones.

MARK

He almost took off!

Tommy listened to the conversation without commenting.

INT. MARK'S CAR - LATE SUNDAY AFTERNOON

TOMMY

News, weather and wildlife? Fart jokes?

MARK

At least he's talking.

Tommy rolls his eyes and stares out the window.

MARK

He was happy to see you.

TOMMY

He didn't say it.

A Gift For Fathers' Day

MARK

And he won't! Listen to me, Tommy. He knows he's dying. He's reaching out the best that he can. You have to accept him as he is.

Tommy grunts and continues watching the scenery go by.

TOMMY

How long does he have?

MARK

The doctors say a year, give or take. He'll remain stable for a while yet, but decline quickly in the end months.

TOMMY

(choking up)

I wish mom were here.

MARK

Me too. At least she and dad will be together again soon.

They ride in silence.

TOMMY

You visit every Sunday?

Mark nods.

TOMMY

I guess I can visit from time to time.

MARK

(grinning)

Okay.

FADE OUT

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.

Spider Women

Flash Fiction Contest

How Did That Get There?

Deadline: Nov 1, 2011

Topic: A person is pulled over for speeding. When they open the glove box to get their registration and insurance card, they find something unexpected.

Limit: 700-1,000 words

Authors' Note: I had two contests with deadlines days apart. I decided to combine the requirements for both into a single story and submit it to both contests. You'll find this in screenplay form in the NYC Midnight section.

Isaac was in a hurry and driving far faster than he should have been. A 35 year old, nervously skinny man with brown hair and blue eyes, he hurried so that he could keep ahead of...

The sound of sirens caused him to look up to see police lights flashing in his rear view mirror. Pulling onto the side of the road, Isaac stopped the car and laid his hands in his lap.

The officer stopped behind Isaac's car, walked up to the passenger side and tapped on the window. Isaac reached over and rolled down the window.

"Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Ye-yes officer. Uh, 45."

"And do you know what the speed limit is?"

"Um, 30?"

"Correct. Let me see your license, registration and proof of insurance, please."

Isaac pulled out his wallet, removed his drivers' license and handed it to the officer. Isaac then reached for the glove compartment and opened it to retrieve his insurance and registration cards.

A monster mask fell out of the glove compartment and onto the floor of the car.

"Oh!"

"Is there something wrong?"

Part II: FanStory

Isaac gulped and reached into the glove compartment with a shaking hand, staring at the mask on the floor. He handed the officer the cards.

The officer was unaware of the mask. He finished writing the ticket and handed it to Isaac, along with the cards and license.

“Please obey the posted speed limits. Have a nice day.”

“Th-thank you, officer. I will. I'll try.”

The officer returned to his car. Glancing at the car floor as he pulled back into traffic, he saw that the mask has disappeared.

The office of Ailise, Isaac's therapist, was simply furnished with a few chairs and a love seat situated around a coffee table. Behind the couch was a small area with a computer desk.

Ailise was sitting in a chair with a notepad and pencil in her hand. She was 44 years old, had brown hair and gray eyes, and was a bit chubby.

She smiled at Isaac, who was sitting across from her in a love seat.

“So, Isaac, you seem a bit agitated today.”

Isaac stared at the coffee table and fidgeted with the corner of a pillow.

“I saw it again. I saw the mask.”

“Where did you see it?”

“It dropped out of my glove compartment when I opened it. It's following me everywhere!”

“Everywhere?”

Isaac nodded. “Everywhere! I'm afraid to open anything!”

“You said before that this mask appears inside of things that you open at home.”

“Yes. But now it's following me in the car too!”

Isaac crossed his leg and accidentally kicked a small basket filled with potpourri. The contents spilled onto the table and floor, along with the monster's mask.

"Oh! There it is!"

Isaac gathered his feet up onto the couch and pointed at the mask sitting on the table.

"Can you describe it to me?"

"It, it's right there! On the coffee table! Can't you see it?"

"It doesn't matter whether I see it or not. If you can describe it to me, that process will help take away some of your fear."

Isaac, wide-eyed with fear, studied the mask.

"It looks like a spider head."

"A spiders' head?"

"Yes. Kind of furry and light brown. Two large blue bulbs for eyes in front and two smaller ones on the side. Two long orange fangs. Oh, no!"

"What is it?"

"The mask! It's floating up into the air! Don't bite me!" Isaac screamed and covered his head with a pillow. He peeked out. "Watch out! It's going after you!"

Isaac watched as the mask floated over to Ailise and covered her head. Four legs sprouted from her body, two on each side. She got out of her chair and began crawling toward Isaac.

"No! No! Stay away from me!"

Isaac jumped up, fell over the back of the couch and landed hard on the floor.

An ambulance was parked in front of the door into the office building. Two paramedics were wheeling Isaac on a stretcher out of the office and into the ambulance.

Charleena, a 24 year old nurse with red hair and brown eyes, walked over from the doctor's office next door.

Part II: FanStory

“Hey, Ail. What happened? Isn't that Isaac? Dr. Ramsey's got him on medication for his paranoia.”

“The strangest thing. He was convinced that I had turned into a spider and was going to eat him alive. He passed out from the fear.”

“That poor man! I hope he'll be alright.”

“Does Dr. Ramsey have some time today? I want to talk to him about having Isaac committed.”

“Sure thing. I'll check his schedule and give you a call.”

“Thanks! What are you doing for lunch?”

“I was thinking of trying out that new soup kitchen across the street.”

“I've heard about them! They grind up meats and vegetables and blend them into a special sauce.”

“That's the place!”

“I'll see you at lunch!”

The two women parted and returned to their respective offices.

The Reckoning

Writing Prompt Contest

The Door Slammed

Deadline: Nov 20, 2011

Topic: Write a story that starts with the sentence “The door slammed, echoing down the long hall.”

Limit: 100-1,000 words

The door slammed, echoing down the long hall. I couldn't believe it! I'd worked hard all my life. I prayed daily and confessed weekly, expunging my soul of the egregious transgressions I continually committed. I had thought it a free ticket to express my free will, even if it was at the expense of others. Could I have been wrong? Was I not repentant enough? Was I not sincere enough? It would seem I wasn't, because here I was, moments after exhaling my last breath, going toward the light, only to have it extinguished with a loud, echoing slam and find myself in this long hall that got progressively warmer with every step I took.

At the end of the hall was a cavernous precipice. I stood there, staring into the fiery pit, not wanting to move forward and unable to go back. The hall was getting shorter; the closed door bore down on me. The hall turned into a ledge, soon too narrow to stand on. I fell yelling, and as the flames licked my body a flash of insight passed through my mind: I should have followed the Golden Rule, rather than an eye for an eye.

Zombie Co-Addiction

This Sentence Starts the Story

Deadline: Mar 16, 2012

Topic: Write a story that starts with the sentence “The room was empty.”

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

Authors' Note: This story was inspired by an incident at the Tucson Festival of Books. I shared a booth with a few other authors, and we hadn't put any thought into setup. Late Saturday afternoon we were getting a little punchy and noticed that a book about zombies was standing next to one about co-addiction. We rearranged books, but the seed was planted. The result is this short story.

The room was empty. The orderly had just left with an armload of supplies, intent on carrying them to their destination, post-haste. Straightening her candy striper uniform, Kayla padded out of the vacant patient room and across the empty hallway. She slipped into the supply room and closed the door softly behind her.

Kayla unfolded the hospital bag she carried and, in quick movements, filled it with as much gauze, tape and antiseptic as she could. As soon as she finished, she tiptoed over to the door, opened it a crack, and peeked into the hallway. Once she ascertained that the coast was clear, she hastened along the hall to the stairway, down three flights, and from there out the back of hospital to where her car waited.

Her next stop was the liquor store. Tom's favorite was 151. And it had to be dark rum, not light. Kayla entered the store and walked straight to his favorite brand, just as she had hundreds of times before. Hefting the 1.75 liter bottle, she carried it with both hands and set it down on the counter.

“ID?” the salesperson asked as she pulled her wallet out of her purse. She placed her driver's license and credit card on the counter, avoiding his eyes. The salesperson picked up the license, glanced at it, and then

Part II: FanStory

stared at her hard for a moment. Dropping the license, he took the credit card and rang up the sale. As she put away her license and card, he bagged the bottle and dropped the receipt inside.

Parking the car in its spot in the apartment complex, she gathered the two bags in both arms, kicked the car door shut and walked as fast as she dared to the front door of her apartment. She juggled the bags and her purse to unlock and open the door. Wrinkling her nose and catching her breath at the smell in the house, she kicked the front door shut and headed straight for the bedroom.

“Tommy, dear,” she said, stifling her gag reflex. “I’m home.” She smiled in the direction of the bed as she set the bags down on the dresser. “Can I fix you a drink?”

Pulling a tissue out of a box on the dresser, she moistened it with a little spit and ran it across the lip of the two glasses, empty except for a sticky spot of dried rum at the bottom of each. Opening the bottle of rum, she filled both glasses and then took a gulp from one, scowling at the burn in her throat.

“Ew,” she said, exhaling hard and pounding her chest. She picked up the other glass and walked over to the bed with both, setting hers down on the bed table and bringing her hand to her nose.

Tom was sitting up, but leaning at an odd angle. His hair was disheveled and his rotting skin had an odd, gray pallor. Kayla brought the remaining glass in her hand to his lips and attempted to pour some of the liquor into his mouth. One of his teeth fell into the glass as liquid dribbled down his chin. Tom tried to lift his arm from where it lay on the bed, but he lacked the leverage to raise it – the arm was barely hanging on at the shoulder by a few frayed tendons.

Kayla put the glass down, walked back to the dresser and returned with the bag of first aid supplies. She spread them out across Tom’s lap. Taking the scissors out

the bed table drawer, she picked up a roll of gauze and measured out a length.

“Now, let me just fix up that arm for you,” she said, reaching across him and wrapping the length of gauze around his bicep and over the shoulder. Holding that in place, she picked up the tape, ripped off a piece with her teeth and fastened the gauze.

“Rth,” he mumbled, loosing another tooth in the process. Kayla picked up the tooth and stuffed it back into the gap in his gums, wedging it to stop it from falling out again. She reeled and almost passed out from the stench of his breath.

Kayla continued to tape his arm as she pondered the situation. She still hadn’t come to terms with what had happened two Saturdays ago. Tom was very well saturated when they left the bar, but that didn’t stop him from getting behind the wheel. Kayla never questioned his ability to drive. He misjudged the curve and the car rolled. Kayla was thrown clear but managed to land safely and with minor injuries. Tom wasn’t so lucky. The car stopped, upside-down and with the driver’s side against a tree.

He appeared to be aware but strangely absent. Kayla managed somehow to pull him out of the car and guide him home. They had crashed just a little over a mile from their house. She tucked him into bed and there he remained, slowly decaying. He neither ate nor drank, despite Kayla’s best efforts to push food past his lips. Mostly, the food fell back out as he moved his jaw in a feeble attempt at chewing. His tongue simply would not push the food in the down his throat.

Kayla finished the bandaging and dabbed some antiseptic on a jagged tear in the skin on the back of his wrist. She wrapped that with gauze and tape, and then packed up the supplies and put them back on the dresser. After washing up in the bathroom, she changed into her night gown, choked down another gulp of rum, and

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climbed into bed, her back to Tom and clinging to the edge. As usual, she passed another restless night.

* * *

Five o'clock seemed to come earlier and earlier these days. Kayla turned off the alarm and rolled off the edge of the bed. Tom grunted as she left the room to take her shower. Returning to the bedroom an hour later, affixing her left earring, she then poured another drink and carried it over to Tom's bed table.

"Here you are, honey," she said.

"Rth," he mumbled.

"Now, honey, please stay in bed," she said, tucking the covers around him. "I don't want you getting, uh, more, um, hurt. Okay? I'll be home soon." Her lips approached his forehead, and she kissed the air about a foot away before rushing off the room. She circled through the apartment making sure all the shades were drawn. It wouldn't do any good to have the neighbors seeing Tom in his current condition, especially if he continued to wander aimlessly around. Fortunately, he seemed unable to unlock the doors and get out.

Kayla had a hard time concentrating as she drove to work. She was exhausted for one thing; it had been a while since she'd had a decent nights' sleep. And she couldn't stop thinking about Tom. What happened to him? By all rights, he should have died in that accident. It's like he was not quite dead and not quite alive. Like a... zombie? Kayla shook her head violently and nearly plowed into a car in the next lane.

"Heya, Kayla!" Sandee called as Kayla came off the elevator. Sandee was standing at the nurses' station, giggling at the rhyme. Sandee's perkiness was getting on her nerves even more lately. She had plenty on her mind, what with Tom's illness and all. He needed her even more than ever now. She didn't need the distraction of Sandee's high school antics.

“So, what is it we have to do today?” Kayla asked, ignoring the greeting and picking up the assignment clipboard. “Hmm, nothing urgent. I guess I’ll begin my rounds in the west wing.” She handed the clipboard to Sandee, turned smartly and headed down the west hall before Sandee could say anything more.

Eventually, the day passed and it was time to go. Kayla had no stops to make today, so she drove directly home as fast as she could. As she pulled into the parking area, she was surprised to see a police car. Two policemen and the manager were standing in front of her door. Kayla was about to step on the gas and get away, but the manager noticed her and waved. She parked the car, got out and approached with great trepidation. She could see snoopy old Mrs. Garrity next door peeking from behind her curtain.

“Kayla,” Mr. Lafferty said. “There was a report of loud noises and an awful,” he wrinkled his nose, “smell. We were afraid something had happened to you or Tom. That’s why I called the police. I was just going to open up your apartment to investigate.

“Oh! Uh, no. Everything’s fine.” Kayla squeezed past the men and blocked the door.

“There is a terrible smell coming from your apartment,” Mr. Lafferty said.

“Really,” Kayla said with a nervous laugh. “It’s nothing. I’m just a little behind on cleaning. That’s all it is.”

Officer Patterson cleared his throat. “A vehicle identified as belonging to Mr. Tom Caulfield was found off the road not far from here. Do you know anything about that?”

“Oh, that! Yes! We swerved to miss a car coming the other way and lost control. Tom was supposed to have it towed. He’s been so busy at work he must have forgotten.”

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“We asked for him at his place of employment,” the officer replied. “He hasn’t reported for work in two weeks.”

“Ha, ha! That’s because he started a new job. He doesn’t work at the factory anymore.”

“Where is Mr. Caulfield working now?”

“At, uh, the garage over on First Avenue.”

The officer tapped his pad with the pencil and squinted at the sky a moment. “That garage closed a year ago.”

“It’s going to open again under new management.”

“I see. Ms. Hanson, we need to speak to Mr. Caulfield. May we enter?”

“Ah, I don’t think so.”

The officer glanced over at Mr. Lafferty.

“Kayla,” he said. “Under the lease agreement, I have the right to inspect the apartment at any time.”

“With a day’s notice.”

“Notice may be waived under certain circumstances if I feel it necessary. Now, please, either open the door or stand aside.”

Kayla slumped and stood aside. Mr. Lafferty unlocked the door and opened it. A stench assaulted their senses, and the three men fell back a step. Holding a hand up to his nose, Mr. Lafferty ventured across the threshold. The two police officers followed.

The apartment was in a shambles. Little bits of rotting flesh dotted the carpet. A tall stand had toppled, littering the floor around it with CD’s and DVD’s. Mr. Lafferty walked over to it and noticed an arm sticking out from underneath.

“Oh my God!” he cried. The two officers came over and lifted the stand.

“Rth,” Tom mumbled. He had been trapped under the stand when it fell. He rolled onto his side and attempted to sit up, but one of his arms had fallen off. It

still lay beside him on the floor. His skin looked and smelled like moldy cheese that had been in the sun far too long. Most of his teeth were missing, and his chin was covered in some kind of icky drool leaking out of his mouth, which hung partially open. Tom looked at the men with a vacant stare through eyes that looked like they were about to fall out of their sockets.

Mr. Lafferty gagged at the sight. Covering his mouth, he ran down the hall to the bathroom and threw up.

“Ms. Hanson...” Officer Patterson began. He turned and could see through the open door that she was taking off in her car. Turning to the other officer, he said, “Mendez, call the coroner. I’ll call in an APB on Ms. Hanson.”

* * *

The coroner put her knife down, crossed her arms, and watched as what remained of Tom’s body squirmed on the exam table. She turned as Detective Dave McNamara entered the room.

“So, Gail, have you figured it out yet?” Dave asked.

“It’s got me swinging,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“He’s a zombie, like I was saying all along.”

Gail snorted. “Get real. There’s no such thing.”

“Okay. You’re the expert.” He followed her out of the exam room and back to her office. Gail sat down heavily in her chair. He looked back out the door and down the hall to the exam room. “Aren’t you afraid he’s going to get loose and wander around?”

Gail shook her head. “He doesn’t have enough leverage to roll himself or sit up.”

Dave shrugged. “No zombie invasion, then, I guess.”

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“Only in your dreams. Did you ever catch the girlfriend?”

“Yah. She wasn’t much help. Just kept babbling about rum and trees and that he should be dead. Personally, I think she’s fallen off the deep end.”

“Hm. So she can’t help us.” Gail drummed her fingers on the desk for a moment. “Well, it’s out of my hands as of tomorrow. Specialists from Washington will be here to take the body for further study.”

“What do you say about getting out of here a bit early? We can try that new place on First Avenue and take in a movie.”

Gail looked up with a tired smile. “Great idea.”

The Silver Shoes

Legends of the Shoemaker

Deadline: Apr 16, 2012

Topic: Write a dramatic comedy about a legendary shoemaker. At some point, a broomstick must enter into the story.

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

Author's Note: This was a contest I created for FanStory that uses a prompt from my "Oddly Prompted" page at <http://writeraka.com/writingPrompts.aspx>

Colin straightened up, arched his back and heaved a deep sigh. Putting down his needle and the shoe he had been working on, he stretched the kinks out of his fingers and then rubbed his weary eyes with balled fists. The dim sunlight and fragrances wafting through his workshop window told him dinner would be on the table soon, and he'd best get to the house before Freyleen came after him. She liked it when he made the effort to be on time.

Pushing back his stool and standing, Colin shuffled out of the workshop and walked the ten paces to the adjoining house. He opened the door and paused, breathing in the aroma of lemon fried fish. He smiled with intense satisfaction; Freyleen sure knew how to cook! The grumble in his belly brought him out of his reverie. He stepped into the house, closed the door, and strode into the kitchen. Freyleen looked up from the stove and smiled. He kissed her on the back of the neck and then sat down at the table.

"Did you go to market today?" he asked.

"It's Friday," she said, setting the plate of fish in front of him. "You know that Friday is fish day in the market. Monday is beef, Wednesday is produce, and Friday is fish."

"Today is Friday?"

Freyleen grunted a response as she sat down across the table from him.

Colin fed forkfuls of fish into his mouth. "I've almost finished with the new shoes for the mayor."

Part II: FanStory

“They could name the days of the week after shoe tools, you’d keep better track.”

“I promised him I’d have them ready for the Beltane celebration.” Colin scraped his plate and scooped the last of the fish and broccoli into his mouth. “I’ll finish the stitching tonight and apply the colors tomorrow. Dry and stretch them on Sunday. Present them on Monday.”

“Don’t you dare lick that plate!”

Colin froze with the plate halfway to his lips; his tongue quivering in anticipation. She squinted at him and raised a finger, but he was spared from her tirade by a knock at the door.

Dropping the plate, Colin stood and hurried to the door. Opening the door and peering into the fading twilight, he was startled by a hooded figure standing close to the door. The figure pushed past Colin and into the house. Swinging around behind Colin, the figure pushed the door shut and then leaned against it heavily.

“Colin, who is at the door?” Freyleen called from the kitchen.

“I don’t know! Stay in the kitchen!” Turning back to the stranger, he said: “Who are you? What do you want?”

The figure reached for his hood, and Colin jumped back, looking around wildly for something he could use as a weapon. He was about to reach for the poker resting in the fireplace when the stranger dropped his hood. Colin stared for a moment before breaking into a huge grin.

“Menik!” Colin cried out grasping his old friend by the shoulders. “By the Wizard’s beard, it is you!”

Menik raised a finger to his lips and rested a hand on Colin’s chest. “Have you a bite to eat, my friend?” he whispered.

“Where are your manners?” Freyleen said, bustling over and taking Menik by the arm. “We have just finished our meal, but we have some left over. Come with me.”

"It is good to see you again, Freyleen," Menik said, allowing himself to be led to the kitchen.

Colin frowned. "I will be in the workshop," he said as he turned back to the door.

"No! Please!" Menik said. "I must speak with you."

"After you eat!" Freyleen said, pushing him into a chair and began to prepare a plate for him. Colin followed them into the kitchen, pulled the spare chair from against the wall and sat down at the table.

Between mouthfuls, Menik answered Freyleen's questions as best he could, filling her in on almost everything that's happened since they last saw each other. Despite her best efforts, Menik skillfully avoided certain topics, promising to explain everything soon.

With a loud belch, Menik pushed away his plate and leaned back in his chair, patting his belly. Freyleen cleared away the dishes, placing them unceremoniously in the sink, and sat back down.

"So, tell us," she said, "what you have not been telling us."

Menik looked about uncertainly. Leaning forward onto his elbows, he signaled for them to come closer. "Do you remember Checho?" he whispered.

"The Good Witch's apprentice?" Freyleen said.

"The very same."

"It's been said he was killed after the Good Witch became ill," Colin said.

"He went into hiding – with this..." Menik pulled a roll of parchment from inside his robe and handed it to Colin.

Colin unrolled the parchment and looked it over. He whistled softly. "I thought these were a myth!"

"What is it?" Freyleen asked, barely able to restrain her desire to know.

"The Silver Shoes," Colin said.

"No!" Freyleen said.

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Menik nodded. “The Good Witch is dying because of a subtle and powerful spell cast upon her by a Wicked Witch who has designs to take over. She has destroyed her pair and entrusted Checho with the spell – the very spell you now hold in your hands.”

“How did you come to have this?” Colin asked.

“Checho hid himself in the hills south of here.”

“Quadling Country?”

“Yes. As you know, I had settled down in just north of those hills. I woke up one morning to find a message from him on my table. I went into the hills that night and met with him. Somehow, the Wicked Witch has spelled him, and he is dying the same as the Good Witch. He needed to pass on the Spell of the Silver Shoes and I was close. We both thought it was best if I didn’t hang onto it, just in case.”

“You brought it to me!” Colin was studying the parchment with excitement. The mythical Silver Shoes were legendary for their powers.

“Colin, in all of Munchkinland there is no one else I could trust with this.” Menik pulled his hood back over his head and stood up. “I must leave while it is dark.”

“Please, don’t go!” Freyleen pleaded, standing and reaching for his arm.

Menik slipped around the table to the back door.
“Colin, please find a safe place for that.”

The mayor of Munchkinland looked up from a stack of papers on his desk.

“Well, come in, come in, I haven’t all day you know.”

Colin gulped and tripped across the threshold, nearly dropping the box he carried.

“Y-your m-majesty,” he said.

“I’m the mayor, Colin, not the Wizard of Oz. Are those my shoes?”

“Y-yes m-mayor, they are.” Colin took a few steps forward, bent down on one knee, bowed his head and raised the box as an offering.

“Tsk! Tsk! Stand up, for Oz’s sake! Bring the shoes here.”

Colin rose to his feet and walked to the desk. He handed the box to the mayor, who stood up and eagerly set it on the desk and opened it. Taking the shows out of the box, he looked them over with glee.

The shoes had bright yellow laces tied in sparkling bows. The inner side and insteps were striped shades of green and blue, while the outer sides were striped orange and red. The sole curved up sensually into a four inch heel, in which the mayor would stand almost five feet tall.

“Oh, very nice! Well done!”

“Th-thank—“

“Yes, yes! Splendid. My secretary will see that you are paid.” The mayor sat down with the shoes in his lap, grinning at them.

Colin was staring at the ground as he walked, so he missed the puff of smoke and nearly ran into the figure who appeared before him, blocking his path. He looked up and into the hard, wide, bulging eyes of a woman with burgundy skin. She wore a plain black frock with a burgundy sheen and a black pointed hat. In her right hand was a broomstick which she brandished, halting him in his tracks.

“Well, well, my handsome,” she said in a screechy voice.

“Ulp!” he said. “You... are... uh...” He’d never met a Wicked Witch before.

“I know who I am, my dear. And I know who you are, as well. You are in possession of something I want, but first you must do something for me.” She waved the

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broomstick over his head and muttered an incantation before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Colin stood for several minutes, confused about what he was doing and where he was going. He scratched his neck and looked back down the path.

“That’s Munchkin City, that direction,” he said. “I must be heading home. From seeing the mayor. I have something very important to do.” Colin took off at a jog.

Colin headed straight for his workshop, heedless of the fading sunlight or the smell of vegetable stew coming from the kitchen. Climbing under his bench, he opened the hidden compartment and pulled out the parchment with the spell for the Silver Shoes. He studied it in the waning light long enough to fix in his mind the supplies required, and then returned the scroll to its hiding place.

Muttering to himself and scavenging around his workshop, Colin didn’t notice Freyleen standing in the doorway.

“Colin!” she said in a voice mixed with anger and disappointment. “And when did you return? Did you notice the sunlight, or that dinner is almost ready?”

“Dinner? A soft suede would be good. That should take up the silver. I’ll have to use the lacquered last, though.”

“Come along, then,” she said, taking him by the arm and leading him out of the workshop and into the kitchen, where she sat him down. Turning to the stove, she ladled out a bowl of potato and vegetable stew and placed it in front of him.

Colin was examining the spoon. “No silver here. This won’t do.” He put the spoon down and examined the bowl of soup. “Nothing here I can use.” He began to stand up, but Freyleen pushed him back in his chair and handed him the spoon.

“Eat!” she said.

Colin shrugged his shoulders and began to eat, all the while looking around the kitchen for ingredients to complete the spell. Finishing his meal, he nearly made it to the front door before Freyleen grabbed his arm.

“No, you don’t!” she said, and dragged him to bed. “You will get some rest!”

Colin passes a restless night. He dreamt he was being chased by burgundy colored broomsticks wearing silver shoes and laughing manically at him. He woke up several times in the night, but every time he laid his head down to sleep, the same dream haunted him.

At the crack of dawn, Colin was dressed and on the road. He needed to stop at the smithy’s shop. The workshop was still closed up, so he rapped on the door of the house.

“Colin!” Gregor said when he opened the door.
“Early day! The wife and I are just sitting down to breakfast. Care to join us?”

“Silver?” Colin asked.

“Um, no. Bacon, eggs, biscuits. Join us!”

“Mm, not hungry. I need some silver. About a pound.”

“A pound! I don’t know that I have that much on hand.”

“A pound. Yes, yes. A pound will do it.”

Gregor noticed the wild look in Colin’s eyes and stepped out of the house, closing the door behind him. Colin turned and walked toward the workshop. Gregor followed helplessly.

“About a pound of silver should do it,” Colin said, standing and staring at the workshop door.

Gregor shook his head and walked around Colin, opening the door to the workshop. Colin followed him in and walked directly to Gregor’s supply of silver. Hefting a couple of pieces, he nodded.

“About a pound should do it.”

Part II: FanStory

“Now wait!” Gregor said, putting a hand on Colin’s arm to stop him from leaving. “I need that silver for a job.”

“This is perfect. The soft suede will take it up nicely.” He took a few steps forward, but Gregor gripped his arm and held him back.

“Colin!”

“It’s a very important job. Very important. About a pound of silver should do it.”

Gregor stared at Colin for a moment. Colin appeared a bit crazed.

“If it’s that important, Colin, I suppose I can spare it.”

“This is perfect. The soft suede will take it up nicely.”

Gregor allowed Colin to leave with the silver, and stood watching him walk down the path home.

“Is that Colin?” Maya called from the house.

“Yes.” Gregor scratched his head and walked over to stand by his wife. “He’s acting very strangely.”

“What is it he wanted?”

“A pound of silver.”

“Whatever for?”

“A pair of shoes, I’d guess. He said it was very important.”

“Come in for breakfast. Later you can walk over and check on him.”

“Yeah.”

Gregor and Freyleen watched Colin through the window of his workshop. The late afternoon sun cast an eerie light on the shoemaker as he hunched over his work, painstakingly painting the shoes with the melted silver.

“He’s been at it all day,” Freyleen said. “Not even to stop for lunch.”

"He had a crazed look about him, almost as if he'd been—"

"Spelled. The thought had crossed my mind."

"I'm betting we can break it!" Gregor reached for the door, but Freyleen stopped him.

"No," she said, showing her bruised arm. "He's the strength of the madman if you try to stop him."

Colin suddenly straightened up on his stool.
"Done!" he whispered.

A puff of smoke appeared in the workshop. When it cleared Gregor and Freyleen saw a woman with burgundy skin, wearing a black frock and pointed hat. She brandished her broomstick and addressed Colin.

"Excellent, my handsome!" she cackled.

Colin picked the shoes up from the table, knelt down and placed them on the floor in front of her. The Wicked Witch upended her broomstick, pointing it at the shoes and tracing a pentagram around them, all the while muttering an incantation. When she was finished, the shoes sparkled, and she cackled with glee. She waved her broomstick across her feet and her boots unlaced themselves. Stepping out of the boots, she daintily stepped into the Silver Shoes.

Raising her broom over her head, the Wicked Witch repeated a phrase to herself three times as she clicked her heals together, and disappeared from the room. Without the puff of smoke.

The following day, Munchkinland resounded with the news: the Good Witch of the East was dead, and the Wicked Witch had taken her place. Tradesmen and farmers alike were immediately notified of her needs, to be paid at far less than market rate.

The Michael Treadwell Mystery

Flash Fiction Writing Contest

Deadline: May 9, 2012

Topic: Lost Love

Limit: 500 – 800 words

Detective Hanlon stood with arms crossed as she watched two officers lower the body. A young male in his early twenties had hung himself. His face had an odd, forlorn look that Hanlon couldn't shake.

"This looks like the suicide note," Officer McManus handed Hanlon a slip of paper.

"I should never have placed that bet," Hanlon read the note aloud.

"What do you think it means?" McManus asked. "Maybe some kind of wager with his friends. A dare or something."

"No," Hanlon said, biting her lip. "If that were so, he would have said 'made that bet.' Placed that bet suggests he was gambling."

"I also found these." McManus handed her two plane ticket stubs.

"Round trip tickets to the Poconos for Michael Treadwell and Janet Cochrane. Well, there are only two reasons to go to the Poconos – skiing or a romantic getaway. Track down Cochrane; I'd like to speak to her next."

Janet Cochrane was a slim, nervous brunette. She flitted around her apartment with a large mug of coffee, frequently setting it down and forgetting where.

"We broke up last week," she said. "I haven't seen him."

"Does this mean anything to you?"

Janet took the note and mouthed the sentence.

Part II: FanStory

“Oh!” she laughed. “That probably has something to do with his poker buddies. They play every Friday night.”

“Who would they be?”

“Oh, well, there’s Jack Wagner. He’s his best friend. I don’t know about the others.”

“Where I can find Mr. Wagner?”

“Hm. Oh, dear.” Janet looked around frantically. Spotting her coffee mug on a bookshelf, she walked over and took a gulp. “Today’s Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“Mike and Jack always met at the gym before lunch on Saturdays.”

“Thank you, Ms. Cochrane. We may have more questions.”

The manager pointed out Wagner. Detective Hanlon walked over to the bench press and waited patiently for Jack to notice her and put down the barbell.

“Wow,” Jack said, looking down at the floor. “I wondered why he wasn’t here today.”

“Did he appear upset or distraught at your poker game last night?”

“Oh, well,” Jack said, avoiding her eyes. “He was.”

Hanlon noticed his nervousness and decided not to pursue it yet. Best to sneak up on whatever Mr. Wagner was hiding.

“I understand he broke up with his girlfriend last week – Janet Cochrane.”

“Yeah.”

“Was he upset enough to take his life?”

“Oh, no, not because of that,” Jack replied. “He goes through, uh, went through, a couple girls a year. He’d sulk for a couple weeks then find another one.”

“Does this mean anything to you?”

The Michael Treadwell Mystery

Jack took the note and frowned as he read it. His face paled.

"Perhaps you should tell me about the poker game."

Jack gulped. "You're not going to believe it."

Hanlon's calm gaze never wavered. She waited for him to continue.

"Uh, well, Mike was wilder than usual. I guess his break-up with Janet was really hurting him. He started making really weird bets. Like things he pulled out of his pockets. Then it was things in his apartment. Mostly having to do with Janet."

"Such as?"

"Oh, mostly gifts she'd given him. Then," Jack licked his lips and shifted his feet, "he bet his heart."

"His heart."

"Yeah. Weird, huh? So then Cal says 'I'd bet you'd wager your soul.' And Mike says, 'You know, I just might.'" Jack coughed and looked around the room, nervous about being overheard.

"What happened next?"

"You got to realize we'd been drinking. A lot." Jack twitched. "Well, it was midnight when Mike said that, and he said 'might' really hard just as the last chime sounded. Cal has a cuckoo clock."

Hanlon looked at him with an expectant expression. Jack continued; his voice dropping to a whisper. "There was a puff of smoke and the devil appeared!"

"The devil." Hanlon sounded skeptical.

"Yeah!" Jack's voice cracked and almost rose to a hysterical note.

"What happened next?"

"The devil sits down and deals himself a hand. 'So, Mike,' he says, 'I hear you'd be willing to wager your soul.' Mike just stares at him, so then the devil says, 'Well, maybe that's a bit much at first. I see you bet your heart.'

Part II: FanStory

Would you be willing to bet love?" Mike grins and says 'You're on.' We played out the hand, and Mike lost to the devil. The devil stood up, said "Thank you very much" and disappeared. Mike seemed kind of lost after that.

"You believe me, don't you?" Jack asked, his voice pleading.

"Thank you, Mr. Wagner. We may have more questions." Hanlon left the gym, breathing deep to contain her laughter.

Michael Treadwell's case was closed as a simple suicide.

Intersection Point

Write About This

Deadline: May 23, 2012

Topic: Write a story about the image pictured.

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

Author's Note: I have not been able to get a response from the artist who created the image to use it in the book.

There it sits, innocuous enough under the light of the lamp on the vacant cobblestone footpath. The conditions are right – the fog is rolling in and will soon be “a cubic mile of cotton” as Niven would say. The moonless night adds to the macabre feeling that plays with my nerves. Goosebumps crawl along my skin like ants.

Mark said this would be the best way to change my life for the better. As opposed to accidental death.

I shift uncomfortably on the sofa. Mark, my therapist, watches me in that quiet way he has. He’s like a cat, waiting for me to say something that he can pounce on. He doesn’t waste energy.

“I can’t help the way I feel,” I say.

Mark says nothing. I know what he’s thinking. What he’s told me a million times already.

“I’m too old and tired to change.” A cop-out. I know that. He wants me to dig deeper. I look around the room and smile at everything except him. The office is pleasantly decorated in soothing colors – light blues and greens mostly, with a splash of yellow for accent. Sometimes I imagine I’m sitting in a field of grass under the sun.

The rest of the hour ticks away in silence. I walk out with all the nonchalance I can muster and eventually find myself wandering the subway platform. Standing on the edge of the platform helps to settle my thoughts, even though it makes the waiting passengers nervous. I love to

Part II: FanStory

gaze down the tunnel. There is something about the way reality fades away into darkness that draws me. I hear a train coming, so I turn to face the tracks and stand with my toes at the edge. The train swooshes to a stop in front of me, and I can feel the power of the machine thrumming in my veins. It's very exhilarating! I stand there grinning through the window like a fool. The passengers inside the car look at me and move away. What is it they think I'm going to do, anyway? I'm not an axe murderer or anything.

The train starts up and I feel the pull on me, inviting me down the tunnel and into the nothing. I stare after it with a deep longing. Without even thinking, I hop off the platform and land beside the closest rail. I know better than to touch the middle rail. I gaze down the tunnel and think about following it to see where it goes. Maybe it will lead me away from this world. I can only hope!

Six inches from my foot I can feel a vibration coming from the rail. The power of it is electrifying! I put my foot on the rail and let it flow through me. I feel myself being pulled and my head cracks against something very hard.

I wake up in a hospital bed.

“Good morning, sunshine!” A nurse is standing beside me, adjusting the IV.

“What happened?”

“You got lucky,” the nurse says. “You almost got hit by a train. Good thing those fella’s were able to pull you out in time.”

“My head hurts.”

“Concussion. You hit your head on the sidewalk and passed out.” The nurse finishes with the IV and glances at my chart. “The doctor will be along to see you soon.”

She leaves the room. I hate hospitals. So sterile. And I can’t do anything but lay here and stare at the ceiling. I can see the clock on the wall by the nurses’

station if I crane my neck. It's almost noon. Mark walks past my line of vision and stops at the station. The nurse points behind him to my room.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Oh, you know."

Mark blinks slowly at me, just the way a cat does when he wants you to know you've failed to engage his interest. I'm spared an awkward silence when the doctor walks in.

"Good morning!" she says. "I'm Dr. Flores. How are we feeling today?"

I try to blink at her the way Mark does. By the look on her face, I would guess I didn't pull it off.

Reading my chart, she says, "Mild concussion. No sign of a hematoma. The light doesn't seem to be bothering you. Follow my pen?" She moves her pen from side to side. "Headache? Dizziness? Ringing in the ears?" I shake my head.

"Well," she says. "There doesn't appear to be anything physically wrong. Can you tell me what you were doing on the track?"

I proffer my most idiotic smile. It's bad enough I have to sit with Mark for an hour a week; I care even less about answering her questions.

"Okay. You can either tell me or you can spend the next ten days in the psych ward telling them."

Mark's expression doesn't change. I sigh.

"It's the tunnel."

"What about the tunnel?"

"It... draws me."

"What do you mean it draws you?"

"Uh," I look helplessly at Mark. "It draws me."

"I'm Mark, his therapist." He shakes hands with her. "He suffers from a dissociative disorder. I've been treating him for several years."

"In what manner does it manifest?"

"Depersonalization triggered by tunnels."

Part II: FanStory

“Tunnels?”

“Yes.”

“Any history of suicidal tendencies or thoughts?”

“None.”

She turns back to me. “Okay. You’re free to go. The nurse will be by with your discharge papers.”

“I have an opening at ten tomorrow,” Mark says, and follows the doctor out.

I get dressed, sign my discharge papers and wander home. This has been too much excitement for one week, and on top of it all I have to see Mark again tomorrow. I decide to spend the rest of the day in my favorite chair and stare out the window.

It’s with a heavy heart that I return to Marks’ office the next morning. He surprises me though.

“I’ve been your therapist since you were fifteen,” he says. “Almost two decades. I’m worried you’re going to get yourself killed.”

I practice my cat blink, but he’s not paying attention.

“Do you know what an Intersection Point is?” he asks. I shake my head. “Do you remember that Larry Niven story you told me about? ‘For a Foggy Night?’”

Okay, now he’s got my interest.

“What if I told you it was a true story?”

“True?”

“Yes. San Francisco is one hot spot. There are many all over the world. In fact, there’s one in our town.” He hands me a three by five card. “Here’s the location. Take the card with you. This is probably the best way to change your life for the better.”

And there it sits, innocuous enough under the light of the lamp on the vacant cobblestone footpath. Just like the card says. A wooden bench on a lonely stretch of

Intersection Point

path. Leafless trees line both sides of the path like silent guardians. This is the Intersection Point. The Point where all the myriad universes intersect on rare occasions. If you're not careful, you might find yourself in a different universe.

I sit down on the bench and watch the fog slowly roll in. I look up and down the path and feel a chill of excitement; it's like being in the tunnel but more intense. I think it's the fog and the dark that does it. Before long I can't even make out the lamp; all I can see is a hint of a glow.

I must have dozed off because I feel like I'm falling and my head jerks back up. It takes me a moment to get my bearings. I hadn't expected this. Did Mark know? As I stand up I can feel it fading with the fog. My memories are reforming. I look up and down the dark tree-lined path. It reminds me vaguely of a tunnel for some reason. I shrug my shoulders, pull my jacket close and walk home.

Confessions in an Elevator

Writing Prompt Contest

Stuck in an Elevator

Deadline: Jun 6, 2012

Topic: Write a short story in which the following characters are stuck in an elevator:

1. A very rich, very greedy woman who was just told she has less than a year to live.
2. A child (boy or girl) who is in a wheelchair.
3. A man who just embezzled thousands of dollars from his job.
4. A woman who is a private escort.
5. A priest.
6. A teenager (male or female) who is planning to commit suicide.

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

Father John Reynolds paused after passing through the entrance to The Queen Victoria Suites. The lobby, indeed the entire building itself, was carefully decorated to reflect the era of its namesake. Father Reynolds pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the brow below his balding head. It was humid today, and the cool of the air conditioner felt good. His short, stout frame was not equipped to handle it. A stern expression affixed itself on his round and chubby face as he scanned the lobby.

“Pardon me,” a voice called from behind him.

Father Reynolds stepped aside and turned to see a tall man dressed in a pinstripe Armani suit and sporting a black Fedora. Mark Waverly looked like a 1920’s gangster. On his arm was an even taller and very attractive young woman acting like his gun moll. By the way she carried herself, Father Reynolds suspected her to be a “lady” of the evening.

“Pardon me,” Father Reynolds replied, bowing his head slightly and scowling in the woman’s direction. Marlena let out a quiet scoff as she sashayed past, while

Part II: FanStory

Mark ignored the priest and continued to strut across the lobby to the elevator.

Glancing around the lobby again, Father Reynolds spied Ms. Brock-Hampton. She sat primly in a high-backed Victorian chair, staring down her nose at everyone and everything. He hurried over to where she was sitting.

“Ms. Brock-Hampton, it is so kind of you to—“

“We can discuss this in my rooms,” she replied.

Casting a disdainful look in the other direction, she raised a limp hand towards the priest. Father Reynolds grasped it, intending to bend over and kiss it. He was surprised when he felt a pull on his hand and she stood up. Walking with the grace of a debutante, she led him to the bank of elevators stopped expectantly. The call button was lit, but Father Reynolds pressed it anyway. She was accustomed to being waited on hand and foot; he would not risk her ire.

Mark and Marlena were also waiting at the elevator. He whistled an absentminded tune and tapped one foot out of time. She winked and favored the priest with a lascivious smile. Father Reynolds turned away, grasped the cross hanging around his neck and whispered a prayer.

“God forgives you,” he said, looking back at the woman. The elevator dinged in reply, and the doors opened.

“Come on!” a voice yelled. “Will you move it? The elevator’s here.”

Father Reynolds turned to see a young boy, about eleven or twelve years old, in a wheel chair being pushed by a teenaged girl. They were both pale and scrawny, but it was clear that for the boy it was due to illness. He looked sickly despite his agitated state. The girl appeared to have lost her will. It was as if the life had been sucked out of her body and all that remained was a shell. Her expression was vacant and her eyes were dark.

With a surge of energy, Jimmy broke free from his sister Christy and wheeled his chair with as much speed as

Confessions in an Elevator

he could muster past the waiting group and into the empty elevator. He spun the chair on its hind wheels and landed the front wheels with a thump, coming to rest in the middle of the elevator. His eyelids fluttered and he slumped from the effort, but a sly smile played on his lips.

Ms. Brock-Hampton stalked onto the left side of the elevator, followed by the gangster and his moll on the opposite side. Father Reynolds held a hand on one of the elevator doors to hold them open and waited for the girl to board. She stepped on and reached for the panel, pushing the button for her floor without even looking, and then squeezed past to stand behind her brothers' wheel chair and attempted to disappear into the wall. The young man in the suit looked startled, and quickly pushed the button for his floor. Father Reynolds boarded the elevator and pushed the button for the penthouse.

The doors closed and the elevator began to rise. Just past the third floor, the elevator began to shudder and the lights began to flicker. Everyone looked up at the ceiling lights, but no one said anything. The elevator ground to a halt and the main lights went out, leaving them in the glow of emergency lights.

Jimmy wheeled forward and jabbed at the button for his floor.

"Come on!" he said.

Mark cast an anxious glance at Father Reynolds' collar, noticing it for the first time. The priest had picked up the emergency phone and was nodding in response to the person on the other end of the conversation.

"Thank you," Father Reynolds said, and hung up the phone.

"Wh-what happened?" he asked, fumbling to remove his hat and resting it over his heart.

"The elevator has stalled," Father Reynolds replied. "Everything is fine. They will have a crew to rescue us soon enough."

"I want out of here!" Jimmy said.

Part II: FanStory

“Patience, young man.”

"Why?" Jimmy sneered. "Is God going to save us?"

“If that is His will.”

"Huh!" The boy jabbed at the panel a few more times, and then rolled backwards and hit the wall with his chair. He folded his arms across his chest and started to pout.

The room felt smaller and heavier as the passing minutes accumulated in the silence.

"Well," Father Reynolds said in a jovial tone. "We may be together for a while. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves?"

"Uh," Mark fidgeted under the priests' gaze.
"Mark Waverly. Just here for pleasure. This is my, uh,
girlfriend. Marlena."

Marlena smiled and winked.

"May God be with you both." Father Reynolds turned to the children. "And who may you be?"

"I might be Jimmy Marx," the boy said. "And this might be my sister Christy. Or maybe we're gangsters, like him! D-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d!" Jimmy pretended to hold a gun and swung it around the elevator, as if gunning everyone down.

Father Reynolds patted Jimmy on the head.
“Perhaps we don’t need the gun today?”

Jimmy crossed his arms and glared up at the priest.

"I am Father Reynolds from the First Catholic Church. And this," he gestured, "is Ms. Brock-Hampton."

"You're that rich lady in the penthouse, aren't you?" Jimmy said.

"Respectfully, please," Father Reynolds said. "Ms. Brock-Hampton is a lady."

"Huh!" Jimmy extended a hand and did his best mock bow, just as he'd seen common folks on TV do for

royalty. "Ms. Brock-Hampton." He giggled and sat back up.

The minutes ticked by. Mark tried to pace, but was stopped short. He was in a back corner of the elevator. Jimmy was next to him with his chair against the wall and Marlena stood in front of him. There was nowhere to go.

"Are you alright, my son?"

"I, uh, fine. Fine."

"Well, I am not fine," snapped Ms. Brock-Hampton. "The situation is quite unacceptable."

"Ye-yes," stammered Mark. "I have a flight this afternoon. I can't be stuck in this elevator."

"I concur with the young man," Ms. Brock-Hampton said. "I do not wish to spend the remainder of my life in this elevator with these... people."

"We all die," mumbled Christy.

"What was that, dear?" Father Reynolds asked. Christy ignored him. "There is no need to panic. Our fate is in God's hands. We must have faith in Him."

"Trust in Him?" Mark asked in a strangled voice. "I don't think I'll be going to heaven."

"God forgives all sins of a repentant man."

Mark gulped. "All sins?"

"Yes, my son. Our Lord is forgiving because He loves us so."

Marlena and Jimmy both scoffed.

"Even your sins, my dear," Father Reynolds said to Marlena.

Mark tried to pace again. "How do I do that?"

"Repent? You begin with a confession of your sins. Beg for forgiveness of your transgressions. After you complete your penance and you are forgiven, vow to never repeat your sins."

"I confess, already!" A note of panic entered Marks' voice.

Part II: FanStory

“A confession is a private matter. This is not an appropriate place.”

“I can’t...” Mark squeezed himself into the corner. A look of guilt crossed his face. “I must...”

“Of course, my son,” Father Reynolds said in a soothing tone. “If you must, but let’s keep it to only the most urgent and least offensive, out of respect for the rest of us.” He looked meaningfully at Marlena.

“I have nothing to repent,” Marlena said with a seductive smile.

“Is she a whore?” Jimmy asked.

“For heaven’s sake!” cried Ms. Brock-Hampton.
“Must we?”

“Please continue, my son.”

“Ah!” Mark raised his hands and clenched his fist. There was no room in this elevator to release his pent-up energy. “These... aren’t rightfully my clothes.”

“Did you steal them?” Jimmy’s eyes lit up.

“No, I didn’t steal them! I--” Mark sighed. “I... I embezzled a couple grand from my company.”

Ms. Brock-Hampton eyed him with a sharp, suspicious look.

“What does ‘embezzled’ mean?” Jimmy asked.

“I stole it!”

“Cool!”

“It doesn’t matter to me where you get your money, honey,” Marlena said.

“Thou shalt not steal. You must return the money and accept the consequences of your actions.”

“I don’t want to spend my life in jail.”

“Life is a jail,” mumbled Christy.

“Did you say something, dear?” Father Reynolds asked her. She looked at the floor and ignored him, pretending she hadn’t said anything. Turning back to Mark, he said, “You have broken the laws of God and man. You must humbly submit to His judgment, and to that of a court of law. If you are a first offender, perhaps I

could speak on your behalf and arrange for community service. There is much work to be done at my church.”

“Pshaw!” Ms. Brock-Hampton exclaimed. “Mr. Waverly’s sentence should most certainly not be commuted! We all pay for our sins.” She turned her head away and clenched her jaw. “All of us.”

“Ms. Brock-Hampton, I understand you are angry,” Father Reynolds said.

“Angry?” she said. “You don’t understand angry! Greed is one of the seven deadly sins, isn’t it? Your God has apparently chosen to punish me for it with an early death! Not even a quick one – I have almost a year to ponder the error of my ways.” She glared down her nose at Mark. “At least I obtained my wealth legally.”

“It is a time to repent and to assure your place in heaven by His side.”

“And why would I want that, Father? I am perfectly content with my life as it is.”

“Gah!” Christy yelled. “You guys just don’t get it, do you?”

There was stunned silence for a few moments. Christy had been so successful at making herself invisible that they forgot she was there.

“I’m sorry, dear,” Father Reynolds said. “What do you mean by that?”

“Life is a bitch, okay? And then you die.”

“Young lady!” Ms. Brock-Hampton exclaimed.

“The lucky ones die young,” Christy ranted. A dark look crossed her face. “Some of us, though, some of us have to make our own luck.”

Father Reynolds choked. “I’m sorry, dear, but what do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Christy said. She crossed her arms and stared at the floor, trying to shut out everyone around her.

“Surely, you don’t mean to kill yourself, my dear?” Father Reynolds asked.

Part II: FanStory

“Why shouldn’t she?” Jimmy snickered. “And her name’s not Shirley.”

With a violent heave, Christy shoved the wheelchair. It struck the elevator doors and Jimmy pitched forward, hitting his head.

“Ouch! You deserve to die!”

“I do deserve it!” Christy retorted. “I’ve earned it!”

The lights flickered on and the elevator lurched into motion.

“Please,” Father Reynolds begged, “give me your room numbers and promise not to do anything until I can talk to you.”

“612,” Mark said.

“Christy?” She ignored his plea. “Jimmy?”

“Are you gonna save me from that maniac?”

“I can’t save you, but I can help you.”

The elevator doors opened on the fifth floor.

“Forget you,” Jimmy said as he wheeled himself out. Christy followed him.

The elevator doors closed and reopened on the sixth floor.

“I will stop by as soon as I can,” Father Reynolds said.

Mark ducked his head in acknowledgment and escorted Marlena off the elevator.

The elevator doors closed again and it rose to the penthouse floor. Father Reynolds followed Ms. Brock-Hampton through the narrow foyer to the suite door. She walked across the main room and sat down in a chair by the bay window. Father Reynolds sat down in the chair next to her.

“Tea will arrive shortly. Would you care to join me?”

“If I may, Ms. Brock-Hampton, I don’t wish to minimize your concerns, but I fear for the young girls’ life.”

She smiled and nodded. "I will be here for some time yet."

"God bless you!"

Father Reynolds hurried to the elevator and waited for it to arrive. Once inside, he pushed the button for the fifth floor.

"Lord, help me find this girl," he prayed as he exited the elevator. Walking up to the nearest door, he raised his hand to knock and stopped. He couldn't go door-to-door, could he?

Father Reynolds stepped away from the door and looked up and down the hallway. Taking a closer look at the floor, he noticed indentations in the carpeting that might be from a wheelchair. He followed the tracks around the corner, but they were already fading. He continued around the next corner and nearly fell over the maids cleaning cart.

Discouraged, he retraced his steps back to the elevators in time to see Christy stepping into one. Father Reynolds made a dash for it and squeezed between the doors, which opened again when they detected the intrusion. Father Reynolds leaned against one wall and held another hand to his chest as he gasped for breath.

"You... promised...you'd...wait," he said, panting heavily. He finally caught his breath and managed to slow it to a more reasonable rate.

"Please, dear," he said. "Let me to a least take you to the convent. You can find respite there and stay as long as you like. Please. What do you say?"

Christy sighed and nodded.

"Bless you, child."

Father Reynolds hailed a cab and arrived at the convent within twenty minutes. He walked Christy to the door and conferred with the nuns. Leaving her safely with them, he walked back to the waiting cab and returned to the hotel.

Part II: FanStory

Once inside the elevator, he pushed the button for the sixth floor. One last stop to make. The doors opened and he stepped into the hallway. After inspecting a few door numbers, he turned down the hallway and found room 612.

He raised his hand and knocked. Receiving no answer, he knocked again, harder. Still no answer. This time, he made a fist and knocked even harder.

Father Reynolds took a step back from the door and pondered. After a moment, he took the elevator back to the first floor and approached the concierge desk.

“May I help you, sir?” the woman behind the desk asked.

“Yes, my name is Father John Reynolds with the First Catholic Church. It is very important that I speak to Mark Waverly. He was staying in suite 612, but he’s not answering the door.”

“Suite 612? I believe the gentleman has checked out.” She consulted her computer. “Yes, Mr. Waverly checked out fifteen minutes ago. You just missed him. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, anyway,” Father Reynolds said. “I guess I can’t save everyone.”

Quandary

Twenty Tweet Tale

Deadline: Jun 17, 2012

Topic: Write a story that consists of twenty tweets or less.

Limit: 2,800 characters in lines of 140 characters or less.

I'm in a terrible quandary.

What's the problem?

I entered a writing contest but I don't want to win it.

Why did you enter it then?

Because it was dragging on. Not enough entries to call a vote.

You entered a contest so that there would be enough entries to call a vote?

Yes.

Why?

The one person with a legitimate entry to the contest has been waiting patiently for a long time.

So? Why is that your problem?

I don't know. It's just bothering me, hanging out there in limbo.

Huh. So you entered the contest but don't want to win.

Yep.

What's wrong with winning?

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Well, I organized the contest. It would look bad.

How much did it cost to enter?

Two dollars.

You paid two dollars to enter a contest you don't want to win?

Yes. It's that Monk on my back.

Man, you are nuts. Monk's got nothing on you.

Planeta Colussorum

This Sentence Starts the Story

Deadline: Jul 1, 2012

Topic: Write a story that starts with the sentence “The cell was eight feet wide.”

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

The cell was eight feet wide. At least, it looked like a cell phone. Captain Samantha Reilly eyed it with idle curiosity. At the moment, she had more important matters requiring her attention.

“Barnes!” she called, turning to scan the wreckage of her bridge. “Porter! Anybody?”

A barrel-shaped figure stirred under a console. Reilly hurried over and pulled the equipment off of the man.

“Barnes!” She helped him to his feet. “Are you okay?”

Warren Barnes, her tactical officer, was a large man. He dwarfed the short, thin frame of his captain.

“I’m alright.” He got to his feet and brushed debris from his uniform.

A low moan caught their attention. The two ran around a large section of damaged wall from the bridge and found Donald Porter, her first officer. He was tall and stocky, but lacked the girth of Barnes.

“I believe he has a concussion,” Barnes said. “We have to find the doctor.”

“Stay with him. I’ll scout around for more survivors.”

“Captain, it would make more sense for me to ‘scout around’.”

“I’ll keep an open communications line.”

Reilly walked back towards the large cell phone as she studied the surroundings more closely. The ground had the texture of a large weave which made it hard to

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walk. It was multi-colored in reds, oranges and yellows, but she could not make out a pattern.

The cell phone came up to mid-thigh. The keys were about six inches by three and were about a quarter inch high. On the other side of the phone she saw Dr. Lisbeth Garcia bent over two other forms. That would be her pilot and her navigator, Carlisle Mac and Karen Osborne. Beyond them was a large outcropping of rock, and farther to the right was a rather odd looking object. It looked like a sphere about three stories tall and covered with short lengths of densely packed rope jutting out of the surface.

There didn't appear to be plant life anywhere. She could smell salt in the air and hear what sounded like water hitting a beach. That would be their next order of business – water and food, in that order. The sky was clear and the sun low. She had no way of knowing whether it was morning or afternoon. Either way, they'd need to find shelter from either the heat or the night soon.

Reilly jogged around the close end of the phone.
“Dr. Garcia!”

“Oh, Captain!” Garcia stood and turned. Her uniform was missing sleeves and legs; she looked as if she were wearing a tank top and shorts. “Thank God!”

“How are Mac and Osborne?”

“Mac cracked a rib and Osborne broke a leg,” she answered.

“Can they walk?”

“Not far. I was able to find a piece of metal in the wreckage to use as a splint for Mac’s leg. I used most of my uniform to bandage Osborne. They’re both sedated at the moment, but will be coming around shortly.”

“Are they stable?”

Garcia nodded.

“Fine. I’ll wait with them until they regain consciousness.” Reilly half-turned and pointed to the two men on the other side of the phone. “Porter and Barnes

are on the other side of this object. Porter needs medical aid.”

“I see them,” Garcia said, nodding. “You’re bleeding. Your head is cut. Let me bandage that first.”

“I’m fine. Go take care of Porter.”

Garcia made as if to protest, but a stern look from Reilly changed her mind. Gathering the few medical supplies she had, Garcia hastened to check up on Porter.

* * *

Porter was up and about quickly. He, Garcia and Barnes joined Captain Reilly. Garcia immediately knelt down to check on Mac and Osborne.

“How are you?” Reilly asked Porter.

“I have a massive headache,” he replied, touching the side of his head.

Reilly nodded and turned to Barnes. “What do you make of that sphere?”

Barnes turned and aimed his scanner. “The doctor might be better able to comment. My scans indicate it is organic.”

“Organic?”

“Yes.”

Reilly frowned. “What about those rocks? We’re going to need shelter.”

Barnes turned again and scanned the rocks. “They appear to be safe. There is no sign of life.”

“How far?”

“Roughly three miles.”

“Roughly?” Reilly scratched her chin as she did a quick mental calculation. “About an hour for a healthy person.” She looked at the two on the ground. “Doctor, how are they?”

“Oh, they’ll be fine. They should be coming around any moment now.”

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“We need to make it to those rocks.”

Garcia looked toward the rocks. “They’ll need help. That’s a bit far for their condition. I’d rather not move them, but if we can get them some water –”

“Barnes, see if you can find the emergency rations.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Osborne stirred and tried to sit up. Garcia reached around her back for support. Osborne’s dark eyes drooped and she let out a snort.

“That must have been a hell of a party,” she whispered in a hoarse voice.

“Deep breaths,” Garcia said. “Captain, can you hold her up?”

Reilly knelt down and took over supporting Osborne. Garcia reached into the medical kit attached to her waist and pulled out a hypospray. Making a selection and setting a dosage, she injected Osborne’s shoulder. The response was immediate; Osborne’s eyes widened and she straightened up.

“Hair of the dog?” she asked, smiling. Her voice was clearing up. Taking a deep breath, she looked down at Mac lying beside her. “Is he okay?”

Garcia changed the dosage for the larger Carlisle Mac and injected his arm. He blinked his eyes a few times and frowned.

“I’m seeing stars in a sunlight sky,” he said with a slur.

“Take deep breaths,” Garcia said. “Your brain isn’t getting enough oxygen.”

“Oh, so is that his problem?” Osborne asked.

Mac grinned, coughing as he tried to breathe deeply. Bringing a hand up to his mouth, he coughed again. When he pulled his hand away, there were few drops of blood on his fingers. Pressing his hand against his chest, he let out a moan of pain as his breathing became short and rapid.

"Oh my God!" Osborne shouted in alarm.

Garcia put away her hypospray and pulled out her scanner again. She ran it the length of his body.

"What is it, Doctor?" Reilly asked.

"It's a pulmonary embolism. It wasn't there a few minutes ago." She put down her scanner, grabbed her hypospray and injected Mac with a dose of another medication. "It seems to have come from the deep vein in his right leg. It didn't show up on the scanner earlier."

A pained look crossed Mac's face, and he fell back to the ground.

"Mac!" Osborne cried out.

"Oh, I am so sorry," Garcia whispered. "I swear it wasn't there on the first scan."

"It's not your fault, Doctor," Reilly said, placing a hand on the doctor's shoulder. "You did everything you could."

"Mac..." Osborne said with tears forming in her eyes.

Reilly reached down and passed a hand over Mac's lifeless eyes, closing them.

* * *

Warren Barnes returned, his arms laden with equipment. He laid it out on the ground a short distance from the group as he glanced over at Osborne mourning over Mac.

"I was able to retrieve another medical kit, several ration packs, some blankets and a few hand weapons."

"Good work," Reilly replied. "Any sign of other survivors?"

"No, sir. The wreckage appears to be from the bridge only."

"Damn." Reilly turned away and stared into the distance. "Half a dozen crew and more than fifty passengers."

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Barnes waited quietly, giving his captain time to resolve her inner turmoil. Presently she turned back to address him.

“Can you carry...” She pointed to the body.

“Mac?” She couldn’t bring herself to say ‘the body of Mac.’ He was tangible evidence of the probable fate suffered by the crew and passengers as a result of the inexplicable accident that destroyed her ship.

“Yes,” Barnes replied.

Reilly strode back to what remained of her crew. “Porter, Osborne. Can you both walk unassisted to that outcropping? It’s about three miles.” Both nodded.

“Barnes has found some supplies. Osborne, you have some first aid training, so I want you to take the other med kit. Everyone take a weapon. Barnes will carry Mac and I’ll carry the ration packs. Garcia, you stick close to Porter and Osborne.” She looked up into the sky. “The sun appears to be setting. We need to get to the shelter of those rocks and find a source of water before it gets dark. Let’s move out!”

Barnes knelt down, pulled Mac into a sitting position, and in one smooth motion stood and slung the body over his shoulders. Everyone else picked up their assigned equipment. Reilly led the group. Barnes followed with Osborne keeping close. Porter and Garcia took up the rear.

Reilly came to a halt after a few minutes and raised her hand.

“What do you make of this, Barnes?” she asked.

Barnes ran an eye over the ground ahead. The surface they were on ended abruptly in a curb-like manner. The ground beyond was about a half foot lower and consisted of rough-edged beige rocks about an inch in diameter.

“I don’t know.”

“Doctor?”

Garcia came forward and ran her medical scanner of the rocks.

“They aren’t organic. They seem to be mostly silicates.”

“Sand?”

Garcia nodded. “These are really large for grains of sand.”

“I will not be able to carry Mac over this terrain,” Barnes said.

“We’ll need to fashion a sling out of the blankets and pull him along the ground,” Reilly said. She unpacked one of the blankets and laid it out on the sand. Barnes placed Mac on it and Reilly unpacked a second one to cover him. Together, she and Barnes made a cocoon and secured Mac inside.

Reilly again took the lead, and the group fell in behind. She paused after a few minutes to look back. The group was struggling to walk through the rocks. Porter slipped and fell to his knees. Garcia rushed over and helped him up.

“Swivel your leg out as you push back!” Reilly called. “Like this...” She walked with exaggerated slowness, swaying slowly from side to side as she took each step. “You need to disperse the force; these rocks give way under direct pressure.”

The crew continued on with mixed success. Porter was unsteady due to his concussion, and Garcia had to support him. Barnes struggled pulling the blankets carrying Mac because he had to push harder against the ground in order to pull the weight.

After an hour, Reilly halted the group.

“Five minutes!” she called. “Barnes!”

“Yes, Captain?” He let the blanket rest on the ground and he walked over to Reilly.

“What does that look like to you?”

She was pointing to the large sphere on their right. There was a vertical line where the densely packed rope

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ended and a smooth, tan colored surface began. The surface was broken by a stream of red liquid dripping out from a point midway up.

“I will investigate,” Barnes said.

“What is it?” Garcia asked, approaching the captain as Barnes jogged towards the sphere.

“I don’t know,” Reilly replied. “But I think you should join him.”

The doctor nodded and followed after Barnes. She watched as he came to a stop and stooped to touch the ground. He stood up, wiped a hand on his pants, and started to circle the sphere. After a few dozen yards, he turned back and met Garcia. She had stopped at the point where Barnes had first stopped. The rocks were covered in the red liquid coming from the sphere.

“Would you mind scanning it with your medical equipment?” Barnes asked.

Garcia pulled out her scanner and ran it over the liquid. Her face turned ashen, and she gulped.

“I... I think it’s... it’s blood,” she said. Her hands were shaking and she nearly dropped her scanner.

Barnes nodded. Putting a hand on her elbow, he turned her and guided her back to the captain.

“Well?” Reilly asked. “What did you find out?”

“Captain,” Barnes said. “I believe that sphere is the head of a humanoid.”

“What?”

“When I circled the sphere, I saw features that were clearly eyes, nose and mouth. The rest of the body is also visible from that angle. The red liquid is blood from a head wound.”

Reilly turned brusquely to face her crew. “We have to keep moving!”

* * *

Another hour and a half passed before they reached the rocks. It looked more like a pile of boulders. Barnes examined them while Reilly waited impatiently. After several minutes, he approached the captain with his report.

“There is a gap between the boulders thirty feet from here that is large enough for us to squeeze through. There is a spacious cavern inside that can contain and protect us to some extent.”

“How stable is it?”

“It appears to be structurally sound, barring the unforeseeable.”

“It’s the unforeseeable that worries me.” Reilly sighed and cocked her head. “Very well. It’s all we’ve got for now. Let’s get everyone inside.”

The interior was more than spacious. The cavern was about twenty feet in diameter and ceiling about ten feet high. A cool breeze passed through the gaps between the boulders forming the cavern; they would need to build a fire before too long.

“Osborne,” Reilly called to the navigator after everyone was settled. “Any ideas what happened? What were the navigational readings just before the ship was damaged.”

Osborne looked up from Mac’s body. Her eyes were red and puffy, still welled up with tears.

“Osborne,” Reilly said in a softer voice. “I know you and Mac were close friends. You worked side by side for a very long time. But right now I need you to focus. We must figure out where we are and how to get home.”

Osborne nodded and wiped her tear-stained face with the palm of her hand.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “The readings went haywire. I couldn’t get a fix on our location. It was like...” She hesitated, searching for words. “It was like we were nearing the event horizon of a black hole, or the opening of a wormhole.”

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“Hm. EarthSpace doesn’t have the technology to create either. What about a natural phenomenon? Barnes, do you recall anything at tactical that would explain what happened?”

“Tactical readings were confused as well. Sensors briefly detected a shearing force approaching the ship.”

“That would explain what happened to the ship.” Reilly was thoughtful. “A shearing force could have buckled the ship. The emergency routings took over, isolating and ejecting the bridge.”

“That is a plausible hypothesis.”

“Well,” Reilly said as she stood up. “We need water to drink and wood for a fire. Doctor, will you be alright for a while alone with Porter and Osborne?”

“I think so, Captain.”

“Barnes,” she called over her shoulder as she crawled out of the cavern.

Once outside, they circled the entire stack of boulders to get their bearings. Reilly stopped after partially completed and second circuit. Looking away from the boulders she pointed toward the horizon.

“I believe there is water in that direction,” she said. “The breeze is coming from the same direction and it smells like salt water.”

“I would advise caution, Captain.”

Reilly’s response was interrupted by a shrill siren piercing through the air. She and Barnes ran around to the other side of the mound and stopped dead in their tracks.

The scene that unfolded was a familiar one, despite it being about fifty times taller and twenty-five hundred times more massive. A titanic vehicle on giant tires rolled into view about a dozen miles away. Massive feet landed on the ground, and their owners tended to the stricken humanoid. Eventually, the humanoid was lifted up and the vehicle rolled away.

Reilly found her voice. “Either we are extremely small or the world has become extremely large.”

“The evidence appears irrefutable.”

“It looks like they’ve left something behind.

Maybe it’s something we can use.”

“Doubtful. Additionally, we cannot make the trip before nightfall. I suggest we return to the shelter and get an early start.”

Reilly sighed. “Sensible.”

They returned to the cavern, where Reilly relayed in detail the events that had occurred.

“Barnes and I are hopeful we can salvage something of use from what these humanoids left behind,” she finished.

Garcia shifted uneasily.

“Is there a problem, Doctor?”

“Well, I’m, um, sure you’ve already thought of it,” she answered.

Reilly nodded. “I have. But we have no choice except to try.”

“Thought of what?” Osborne asked.

“It’s the size differential,” Garcia said. “Food and water molecules will probably be too large for our bodies to process. We could starve to death.”

“Oh.”

“Also, if this is not Earth, then the food might not have the protein sequences we need to survive.”

“No need to dwell on the negatives, Doctor,” Reilly said. “Let’s get some rest, and we’ll worry about it in the morning.”

* * *

“EarthSpace authorities have called off the search for the missing TransMars passenger ship *Linoben*. The ship, carrying sixty-five passengers and crew, mysteriously disappeared without a trace two weeks ago during its final approach to MoonPort. Martin Ashburn, founder of TransMars Cruises, is believed to have been on the ship,

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celebrating the 25 years of luxury cruises to Mars Colony and back. TransMars expects to continue the cruises, despite this tragic loss.”

Altered Motive

Murder Mystery Contest

Deadline: Aug 8, 2012

Topic: Funny how death sneaks up on you.

Limit: None

Detective Roberts stood in front of the recliner and pondered the dead body in it. Albert Tenamin was a plump man in his late twenties with fine, blonde hair who wore spectacles. His lips were swollen to three times their usual size, and his pasty-white neck and arms were covered with a rash. Two paramedics stood just outside the doorway, waiting patiently while Roberts studied the scene.

The recliner sat in one corner of a large study. A floor lamp stood behind it, and a small end table stood beside it. There was a tape recorder on the table with a cord leading to a microphone in Albert's hand. In another corner was a small desk with a computer. All available wall space was covered with book-laden shelves. The room was dark except for the floor lamp and a desk lamp.

"Ah, there you are, Detective!"

Robert turned to see Doctor Evans, the coroner, standing in the doorway. She was a small, wiry woman sagging slightly from age, and always spoke in a cheerful, British accent. In comparison, Roberts was nearly twice her size and adopted a more stoic attitude.

"Come in, Doctor. I've finished examining the victim."

Evans entered the room, set her medical bag on the floor beside the recliner, and knelt to examine the body. While she was busy with that, Roberts walked around the room for the umpteenth time looking for clues. The books and shelves were coated with undisturbed dust, the mouse and keyboard looked as if they could use a cleaning, and there was cat fur on the computer chair.

"Well, well, well," Evans exclaimed.

"It was an allergic reaction?" Roberts asked.

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“Oh, yes. An anaphylactic reaction as near as I can tell. He’s been dead about an hour.”

“What caused it?”

“I can’t say for sure until I do an autopsy. I don’t see any signs of sting or that he’s eaten recently. It may have been a medication. You’ll want to look for prescriptions or common trigger foods.”

“What kind of foods?”

“Oh, peanuts, wheat, fish, milk, eggs.”

“Alright. I’d like you to listen to something. I could use your opinion.”

Roberts picked up the tape recorder with a gloved hand and pressed the play button with a short, telescoping rod.

“Meow,” sounded from the speaker.

“Kitty, kitty, what is it you want?” a male voice said. “You’re such a pretty kitty, yes you are.”

“Meow.”

“Oh, no.” A cough sounded. The voice continued, labored and wheezing amid a coughing fit. “Oh... my not so silent... kitten. Funny how... death sneaks up on you. Surprise! Thank... Hugh.”

Roberts turned off the recorder.

“Did it sound like he said ‘thank you’ at the end?”

“Hum. Play it again, would you?”

Roberts rewound the tape and played the last part again.

“Well, it does sound like ‘thank you’,” Evans said.

Roberts sighed. “Hm. Why would he thank someone? And who did he thank?”

Evans shrugged her shoulders.

“Alright. I’m done here for now. You can take the body to the morgue.”

Evans signaled to the paramedics, who wheeled in a gurney. They lifted the body onto it and brought it out to the ambulance.

Altered Motive

Roberts crossed the foyer to the sitting room. This room was about the same size as the study, but was well lit, and was furnished with a coffee table, davenport and two chairs placed around a fireplace. The room was occupied by two people. Barry, sitting in one of the chairs, was a thin and fidgety man in his early twenties with the same thin, blonde hair as the victim. Stevie, lying prostrate on the davenport, appeared to be in her late teens and had shoulder-length hair that was also thin and blonde. The hair was clearly a strong trait in this family.

“Barry,” Detective Roberts said, “I would like to speak with you first. Follow me to the dining room.”

Barry followed Detective Roberts through the foyer, turning left just before the wide staircase. Exiting through a door at the rear of the foyer brought them to the dining room. Roberts sat down at one end of the long table and indicated that Barry should sit in the seat across from him.

“Would you please tell me the name and age of everyone living in the house, including the deceased?”

“Uh, there’s um, Albert, who’s, eh, dead now, he’s 28. His girlfriend Vonda Reardon, 27. There’s me, I’m 21, and my girlfriend Tina Farnsworth, also 21. And Stevie, she’s 17.”

“Are your parents still alive?”

“N-no, uh, no. Mom died in childbirth, with Stevie. Dad died a few months ago. Albert inherited the house and the estate.”

“Did you or Stevie inherit anything?”

Barry looked away and whispered, “No.”

“Where are Vonda and Tina?”

Barry scowled and clenched his fists. “Vonda took Tina to the hospital.”

“What happened to Tina?”

“It’s a private matter.”

“Barry, I’m investigating a death, possibly a murder. I need to know everything.”

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“She fell down the stairs,” Barry said between gritted teeth.

“To which hospital was she taken?”

“Um, Mercy Hospital.”

“Do you know if Albert had any food allergies?”

“Food allergies?” Barry looked startled at the subject change.

“Yes. Or if he was allergic to, say, bee stings.”

“Oh, um, peanuts. He’s deathly allergic to peanuts.”

“Are there any peanut products in the house?”

Barry shook his head.

“Peanuts, peanut butter?”

“No. Anything with peanuts is strictly forbidden in this house. Mom and Dad made that very clear.”

“Your mom and dad are dead. And now, so is your brother. Possibly from an allergic reaction to peanuts.”

Barry set his mouth. “There are no peanuts in this house.”

“Do you know of any reason why someone would want Albert dead?”

“I, I can’t think of any.”

“Where were you about an hour and half ago?”

“At the hospital! Stevie and I followed Vonda in her car. We came home and found him dead.”

“Alright. I’ll need you to remain available in case I have more questions. Would you send in your sister Stevie?”

Barry left and, moments later, Stevie dropped into the chair, sitting slouched and with crossed arms.

“Would you please tell me the name and age of everyone living in the house, including the deceased?”

“Dead Albert, who’s 28. He has a girlfriend Vonda who’s 27. Barry and his girlfriend Tina, both 21. And me, I’m 17.”

“Are your parents still alive?”

“Nope. Mom died giving birth to me. Dad died in January.”

“I understand Albert inherited the entire estate. Did you or Barry inherit anything?”

“Not one damn thing.”

“Where are Vonda and Tina?”

Stevie’s eyes blazed. “Tina’s at Mercy Hospital. Vonda had to take her.”

“What happened to Tina?”

“You’re a man. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Stevie, I’m investigating a death, possibly a murder. I need to know everything.”

“She fell down the stairs,” Stevie said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Do you know if Albert had any food allergies?”

“Are you kidding me? We could not have peanuts in the house. I bet I was the only kid in kindergarten who didn’t have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

“Are there any peanut products in the house?”

“What did I just tell you?”

“Do you know of any reason why someone would want Albert dead?”

“Yeah, just about anyone who knew him. He hated people and people hated him. Especially women!”

“Why especially women?”

“That creep just had it in for women!” Stevie’s nostrils flared and she swallowed hard.

Roberts took a closer look at Stevie’s throat. “Do you have an Adam’s Apple?”

Stevie’s hand flew to her throat. “So what if I do?”

“Where were you about an hour and half ago?”

“I was with everyone else at the hospital.”

“Alright. I’ll need you to remain available in case I have more questions.”

Stevie stormed out of the dining room. Detective Roberts stood and walked into the kitchen. After putting on a fresh pair of gloves, he began sorting through the

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trash. He looked up at the sound of a garbage truck. Through the kitchen window he could see the truck moving down the alley. Roberts hurried out the rear kitchen door, crossed the backyard and stepped into the alley. He pulled off the top of the closest trash can and began digging through the contents.

He didn't have to dig far before hitting pay dirt – a jar of dry roasted peanuts. He pulled it out of the can, holding it gingerly so as not to disturb any fingerprints that might be on it. The jar appeared to be full. He unscrewed the top and discovered that the inner seal had been removed.

By this time, the smell of garbage decomposing in the heat of the day began to overwhelm him. Rotten bananas, soured milk, spoiled poultry; it was an assault on the senses. Roberts backed away and replaced the lid on the peanut jar.

“Meow.” A white Persian cat greeted Roberts as he passed through the kitchen. The cat meowed again, and then walked over to a saucer of milk by the refrigerator.

Roberts stopped in the dining room long enough to bag the jar.

* * *

Vonda sat in the waiting area of Mercy's emergency room. The nurse at the intake desk pointed her out to Detective Roberts. Vonda looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine. Her long, chestnut hair had just the right amount of red highlights, her makeup and nails were perfect, and her clothes seemed out of place in such a working-class location as an emergency room.

“Vonda Reardon?” Detective Roberts asked, sitting next to her and pulling out his notebook. “I'm Detective Roberts.”

Altered Motive

"I did not do anything wrong," Vonda said. "I simply brought this poor girl to the emergency room. That's not a crime, is it?"

"No, but I am investigating a crime."

"I don't know anything about it."

"You don't know that Albert was found dead in his study?"

"Oh my God! Are you for real?"

"I understand you and Albert were seeing each other."

"Yes," she hissed. "We were seeing each other."

"You aren't seeing Albert anymore?"

Vonda looked taken aback. "Well, he's like, dead, you know?"

"How long were you and Albert together?"

"Tomorrow would have been our three month anniversary."

"How long have you lived with him?"

"Oh, I moved in after his father passed away."

"Did you know his father?"

"That old geezer? Puh-lease! I knew he was dying the moment we met. Besides, Albert's a lot cuter."

"Albert inherited the entire estate, is that correct?"

"I guess so."

"How well did you get along with the others in the house?"

"You mean his brother and sister? I got along okay."

"Were they jealous that Albert inherited the full estate?"

"I don't think so."

"How well did you get along with Tina?"

"We hung out together."

"Why did you bring her to the hospital?"

"Oh, well, you know, she was in a bad way."

"What kind of bad way?"

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Vonda leaned close and talked out of the side of her mouth. "She acted like she'd been, you know..."

"No, I don't know."

"Well, she kinda acted like someone, some guy, had..."

"I think I get the picture. Do you know who it might have been?"

Vonda looked away. "I'm sure I don't know."

"Does Albert or Barry have a history of abusive behavior?"

"How could you ask me such a thing?"

"Stevie mentioned that people hated Albert, especially women."

"Oh, now she would say something like that. Her mind is as mixed up as her body, poor thing. Why, I wouldn't put it past her."

"Put what past her?"

"Why, killing poor Albert, of course! With those hormones raging and not knowing whether she's a he or a she."

"Do you know of any reason why someone other than Stevie would want Albert dead?"

"Well, Barry, maybe. He may look like the meek type, but he was not happy with the will, I can tell you. Maybe he killed Albert to keep me from getting any money."

"Why would you get any of the money?"

Vonda beamed. "Albert and I were engaged to be married."

"I see." Detective Roberts closed his notebook. "That will be all for now. I'll need you to remain available in case I have more questions."

Roberts walked to the intake desk and showed his badge.

"Is Tina Farnsworth well enough to answer a few questions?"

The nurse consulted the computer. "Yes, Detective. You can find her in room 104. Take a right here," he pointed, "and then the next right. It's the second door on the left."

"Thank you."

Tina seemed very small lying in the hospital bed. She was pale and disconsolate; not even looking up when Roberts entered the room. A host of wires and tubes connected her to monitors and an IV drip.

"Tina?"

"Yeah."

"My name is Detective Roberts."

"I already told the police everything."

"I'm here about another matter. Albert is dead."

Tina burst into tears, her reaction causing a monitor alarm to sound. "Serves the bastard right!" she sobbed.

A nurse rushed in and scanned the readings. She turned off the alarm and said, "Tina needs to rest. You'll have to come back later to ask your questions."

* * *

Dr. Evans was removing her gloves and gown when Roberts entered the autopsy room.

"Ah, there you are, Detective! You will be very interested in my findings."

"What did you find?"

"Peanut oil on his lips."

Roberts scratched his chin. "How did it get there?"

"Now that is the interesting part. The peanut oil would have caused an immediate reaction, and there is no sign that he'd eaten recently."

"He wouldn't have eaten it anyway. Unless the oil were on something he normally ate." Roberts paced across

Part II: FanStory

the room. “But there was no sign of food in the study. No snack tray, no glass of milk.”

“Did you find anything with peanuts at the house?”

“Yes. I just dropped off a jar of peanuts at the lab. I found it buried in the trash can. It appeared to be full, but the seal had been removed. Could the perpetrator have gotten enough oil from the peanuts?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“But how?” He paced again to one side of the room and back again. “Someone could gone into the room when he was sleeping and rubbed it onto his lips.”

“Brilliant!”

“Detective?” An officer stepped part-way into the autopsy room. “I have the transcripts from the tape recorder and the 9-1-1 call.”

“Thank you.” Roberts took the folder and read through the transcripts. “Well, they all seem to have an alibi. Tina was taken to the hospital four hours before the 9-1-1 call. Everyone claims to have gone with her. Vonda stays at the hospital while Barry and Stevie return home and find Albert dead.”

“One of them could be lying.”

“Yes. Hm, this is interesting.”

“What is it?”

“The transcript of the recording. He didn’t say ‘thank you’ at the end. He said ‘thank Hugh.’”

“Who is Hugh?”

Roberts sighed. “Another suspect.”

* * *

Barry opened the door. “Wh-what can I do for you, Detective?”

Roberts pushed past Barry and walked into the foyer.

“Did your brother know anyone named Hugh?”

“Hugh?” Barry shook his head. “I, I don’t think so.”

“Do you mind if I have a look in the study again?”
“Go ahead.”

There were no papers lying around; no filing cabinet. The dust on the books was undisturbed, so there would not likely be anything found in them. Roberts sat at the computer desk and moved the mouse. The screen lit.

“Hm. You should really password-protect your screen saver,” he said to himself.

Roberts double-clicked on the “My Computer” icon and then opened the “My Documents” folder. He found a list of folders: Letters, Presentations, Quotes, Stories, and more. Roberts opened each folder one at a time and glanced at the file names, opening any file that had “Hugh” in the name.

“Ah, here it is!” Roberts had opened a file named “Hugh Elliot” in the Quotes folder. There was one quote in the file that read:

“Death can sneak up on you like a silent kitten, surprising you with its touch and you have a right to act surprised. Other times death stomps in the front door, unwanted and unannounced, and makes its noisy way to your seat on the sofa.”

“Kitten – cat,” Roberts said, talking to himself. “Death surprising you with its touch. He must have picked up his cat, and then he died. Unexpectedly.”

Roberts stood up and headed for the kitchen. The saucer of milk was still sitting by the refrigerator. He searched the cupboards for plastic wrap, covered the saucer, and drove back to the station.

“Doctor Evans,” he said as he entered the doctor’s office. “Would you check this for traces of peanut oil?”

“Happily,” Evans replied.

They walked to the lab together, where Evans ran a few tests.

Part II: FanStory

“How ever did you know?” Evans asked when she finished the tests.

“A hunch,” Roberts said. He noticed a report sitting on the counter. “This looks like the results of the peanut jar analysis. Hm. Milk residue inside. I think I know what happened. Let’s run these fingerprints and see if there’s a match.”

Evans followed Roberts back to his office, where he scanned the prints into the computer and then logged into the Automated Fingerprint Identification System.

“Well, don’t keep it a secret.”

“The perpetrator must have poured milk into the peanut jar. They shook it enough to mix some peanut oil in with the milk, and then poured the milk into the cat’s dish. The cat drank from the dish, and Albert must have brought the cat close to his face. The cat licked him, exposing Albert to the peanut oil.”

“Oh, brilliant!”

“Brilliant but risky. The perpetrator was counting on a series of uncertain events. They had no guarantee if and when Albert would die.”

Several minutes passed before a match appeared on the screen.

“You got lucky,” Evans said.

“I’ll say. Not everyone has their fingerprints on file, unless they’ve been arrested.”

Roberts rode back to the house in a squad car. Barry answered the door again.

“Oh, when will this ever end?” he asked.

“It ends now. Have Vonda and Tina returned from the hospital?”

“Uh, oh, um, yes. They’re in the sitting room.”

Roberts and Officer Peterson crossed the foyer and into the room.

“Peterson, place that woman under arrest for the murder of Albert Tenamin.”

“What is going on here?” Vonda screeched as Peterson cuffed her.

“Ma’am,” Peterson said. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights I have just read to you?”

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Ma’am, do you understand these rights I have just read to you?”

“Of course I do! I’m not an idiot! I demand to see my lawyer.”

“You can call your lawyer from the police station,” Roberts said.

“D-detective,” Barry said, “W-would you mind explaining what’s going on?”

“Vonda is what we call a ‘black widow.’ She marries rich men and then kills them off to inherit their fortune.”

“B-but she hadn’t married Albert yet. Why would she kill him now?”

“Because of what that bastard did to Tina!” Vonda said.

Barry’s face turned white. “But, but, I thought...”

“You thought what? You men are all alike. You treat women like they’re play toys. You have your way with them and then discard them like used condoms.” She turned to Detective Roberts. “Those men got no more than they gave.”

“Take her away, Peterson.”

“What happens now?” Barry asked.

“She’ll stand trial. There’s a good chance you will be called as witnesses. Good day.”

Detective Roberts left the house and got into the squad car. Barry watched from the doorway as the car drove off.

Emotionally Insane

Flash Fiction Writing Contest

Deadline: Aug 26, 2012

Topic: Insanity

Limit: 500 – 800 words

Marty slumped into the chair the minute he arrived at Frank's apartment. Frank closed the door and walked to kitchenette.

"That is really bad for your posture," Frank said as he opened the refrigerator and grabbed two bottles of beer.

"I don't care anymore," Marty said. He accepted a beer and took a gulp. "I can't believe I'm divorced again."

Frank sat down opposite Marty. "Someone once said 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results'?"

"I must be insane." Marty took another gulp of beer. "I thought this one would be different. I thought the one before that would be different. Can I have another beer?"

Frank nodded and went to the refrigerator.

"I wish I could just forget it all," Marty said, tipping his second beer to the halfway point.

"Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it," Frank recited.

"Okay, Mr. Cliché." Marty giggled at his unintentional rhyme.

"Hey, maybe that's what's been happening."

Marty snorted beer through his nose. "What? That I'm forgetting about the marriage after it's over?"

"No, not the marriage. The particulars about the girl."

"I'm not following."

"Okay, so you meet someone and you fall in love because she's pretty or she's smart or she's funny. But you forgot that underlying x-factor that attracts you to these

Part II: FanStory

girls in the first place, and that causes the ultimate demise of the relationship.” Frank leaned back in his chair, impressed with his analysis.

“I think I need another beer.”

“Sure thing, but you’re sleeping on the couch tonight.”

“Fine.” Marty pushed himself out of the chair to get the third beer himself. He stood at the counter, lost in thought, poised to twist the cap off the bottle.

“I know that look,” Frank said.

“Do you remember—“

“I knew it.”

“—in Avatar when Jake said ‘Sometimes your whole life boils down to one insane move?’”

“I do,” Frank said, nodding.

“Maybe it’s time for me to make an insane move.”

“Maybe it’s time for you to sleep it off.”

“Maybe I should bat for the other team. You know, go for the sausage instead of the taco. What do you think?” Marty upended his beer and finished it in one go.

“Dude, you’re not gay. I would know.”

“Come on! You could teach me the tricks of the trade.”

Frank frowned. “There are no tricks and it’s not a trade.”

“Hey, I gotta idea,” Marty said, slurring his words. “Let’s go to that bar you like so much.”

Marty put down his half-finished fourth beer and started to stagger toward the door. Frank put down his beer and stood up to intercept him.

“You are lucky I love you,” Frank said as he steered Marty onto the couch. “In a platonic way, of course.”

“But I like my idea.”

“Of course you do. You always like your ideas when you’re drunk, you silly little light-weight. They just don’t hold up so well in the cold and sober light of day.”

Emotionally Insane

Frank walked to a closet and pulled out a pillow and blanket.

“I can’t believe I’m divorced again.”

“I know,” Frank said in a soothing tone. He placed the pillow under Marty’s head and draped the blanket over him. “We’ll talk about it some more over breakfast.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Good night.” Frank turned out the lights and retired to his bedroom.

The Legend of the Ancients

Write About This

Deadline: Sep 6, 2012

Topic: Write a story about the image picture.

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



FanArtReview

“Rivers of Blood”

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<http://www.fanartreview.com/displaystory.jsp?id=285030>

Part II: FanStory



The FanStory Contest Committee selected this story as the 1st place winner in the contest, and also awarded it Seven Star Recognition (reviewers can rank from 1 to 6).



Grul dragged himself out from under the wreckage and got unsteadily to his feet. He'd been lucky on two counts. First, he'd been thrown far enough not to be trapped completely under the rolling wagon. Second, the ribs of the wagon top had straddled him when it struck the ground. Ten meters away he could see that poor Stahl hadn't been so lucky. Grul stumbled through the hot sand to where he lay under the canvas of the wagon top. The canvas was ripped and fluttering in the breeze. Stahl's lifeless eyes stared up from under one of the cracked wagon ribs. It must have struck him pretty hard. Grul knelt down and felt the sticky neck for a pulse, but could not find one. He closed Stahl's eyes and then wiped blood-stained fingers on his pants.

A low moan sounded from the other side of the wagon. Grul pushed himself back to his feet. Shading his eyes from the blinding sun he worked his way around and found Derk lying spread-eagled on his back. Grul fell, and decided to crawl the remaining few meters. Derk moaned again.

"Lie still," Grul whispered. He checked Derk carefully, but could find no sign of injury. "Can you move your fingers and toes?"

"I think so." Derk winced as he lifted his hands and wiggled his fingers.

"Looks good, I guess. Can you move your toes?"

"Yeah."

"I can't tell; your boots are on."

Derk scowled and propped himself onto his elbows. "Oh, have I got a headache." He licked his dry lips and said. "I need water."

Grul helped Derk to his feet and the two men walked to the back end of the wagon. While Grul lifted the

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canvas in search of the barrel, Derk shaded his eyes to scan the wreckage and the terrain. The right front wheel of the wagon had caught the edge of a low depression and toppled into it, scattering people and supplies over a small area of the desert. He had no idea how the depression had gotten here; he'd never seen it before in all his years traversing the Great Desert.

"There!" Derk called, pointing to the barrel resting on its side in a pool of water.

They trudged as fast as they could over to the barrel.

"All our water is gone!" Grul wailed.

"Not all of it," Derk said as he walked around the barrel and examined it. He stooped down and reached into the opening to check the water level.

"The barrel is not cracked," Derk said. "The cap has popped off and most of the water has poured out, but a good amount still remains."

"How is that possible?"

"The barrel is designed for just such a thing. That's why the opening is in the middle. If the barrel topples onto its side, no more than half the water will spill out."

"Huh. That's pretty smart."

"We've been at this for a very long time." Derk cupped his hand and drew some water out to drink. After two or three swallows, he stood up and examined the horizon.

"What are you looking for?" Grul asked, helping himself to some water.

"The hemels," Derk said. "They must have run off."

"How are we going to pull the wagon?"

"We're not, especially without the animals," Derk said, frowning. "The wagon is in no shape to travel. We'll need to gather what supplies we can carry and walk to the next shelter. Help me with this."

Part II: FanStory

Derk pulled on the canvas to remove it from the wagon.

“Grul!” Derk called. “Help me with this canvas.”

He turned to see Grul standing with his mouth open and staring into the distance. He walked over and slapped Grul on the back.

“What’s with you?”

“Do you know where we are?”

Derk looked up and down the depression they were in. “No.”

“It’s the Ancient River of Blood!”

Derk snorted. “I really don’t think so. You’re hallucinating.”

“It is a sign! We must follow it.”

“No. We must reach a shelter. We will continue along the route, the next one is about ten kilometers.”

“There’s a moonrise tonight. A full moon, I think? Yes! Which direction?” Grul turned back and forth, looking first to the west along the depression and then to the east.

“The sun has baked your brain.” Derk pulled off his bandana, scooped some water out of the barrel to wet it, and handed it to Grul. “Put this on your head and let me get you into the shade.”

Grul ignored Derk. Instead, he looked into the sky and squinted at the late afternoon sun. “We were heading north. Moonrise will be in the east.” Grul turned and started walking along the depression.

“Grul!” Derk stared after Grul’s retreating back. Derk shook his head and muttered, “Seekers! I need to find a different line of work.”

As a Porter, Derk was a practical man. People needed to get from point A to point B, and it was his job to see that they got there. He knew most of the routes of the Southern Continent like the back of his hand. He prided himself on his ability to get from here to there

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without mishap. There was nothing mystical about travel, and he liked it that way.

Seekers were another breed altogether. Half of the time they didn't even have a destination. They'd hire a Porter to carry them with nothing more than a "head north" or "head east." They were the bane of a Porter's existence.

Grul and Stahl were just such a pair of Seekers. In fact, they were famous for their quest to find the River of Blood. Derk had spoken to many Porters who had been hired to take them north and back again in search of the Ancient River in the Great Desert. It's been said that more than once Grul or Stahl, or both, would jump from the wagon and wander off. Most Porters refused their fare. Derk had accepted only because he needed the money.

Well, he was stuck for it now. He'd be better off dead than leave a passenger behind; his reputation would be tainted and he'd never be offered another fare.

Derk turned and started tugging again on the canvas. He noticed Stahl's body. After pulling the body out from underneath, he laid it flat and spoke a quick blessing:

"May your Spirit find its way Home, and may your Body provide sustenance in this Life."

Porters had a simple belief: the body was nothing more than a vessel to carry the spirit on a journey. Once the spirit was done, it left the body and returned home. Derk, like many other Porters, had no idea what the purpose or destination of that journey was, but the belief had been passed on for generations. Seekers claimed there was no destination and the purpose was to experience life.

Derk filled a large backpack with food and supplies. He then grabbed two canteens and filled them from the barrel. With the pack, a bedroll and canteens secured to his back, he wet his bandana again and tied it around his head. After one last drink from the barrel, he set off after Grul.

Part II: FanStory

The sun was setting before Derk finally caught up with Grul. Fortunately, Grul had stopped and was sitting in a lotus position on the sand. His eyes were closed and his face was turned to the sky.

Derk put his load on the ground and scouted for dry wood to make a fire. He prepared a small fire pit, but decided not to light it yet. The food could be eaten unheated, and they might need the wood to keep them warm tonight. Derk spread out the bedroll and decided to get some rest while Grul meditated.

Grul stirred after a few hours. Derk rolled and opened one eye. The sun had set and the air was finally cooling.

“See!” Grul said, pointing to the east with his hand and smiling vacantly. “It rises.”

The edge of the moon had broken over the horizon; a bright and jagged crescent that somehow seemed to span a quarter of the distant mountain range. The glare of it in the night sky was almost as bright as the sun.

Derk opened the backpack and pulled out a food bag. This one had dried beef strips. He took one out and stuck it into his mouth.

“Do you want a beef strip?” Derk asked, offering one to Grul.

“Hm? Oh, no, I can’t eat.”

Derk put away the strip, pulled out a cup and poured some water.

“At least have something to drink.”

Grul took the cup and swallowed the contents in one gulp, never taking his eyes away from the moon. It was inching its way up. Derk had never seen the moon so large before.

“Do you know the Legend of the Ancients?” Grul asked

“No.”

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Grul dropped the cup and raised his arms as if to embrace the moon.

“It is said that the Ancients could peer into the heavens, into the gates of the Celestial Temple.”

“What is the Celestial Temple?”

“It is where our Spirits live when they are not on a Journey. It is what you call ‘Home’.”

“How did they see it?”

“The Ancients had technology that allowed them to see great distances.”

“Did they ever travel to the Celestial Temple?”

“It is said they built powerful wagons that could travel the heavens. The Spirits did not wish the sanctity of their Temple defiled, so the Ancients were punished. The Spirits called upon the Sun to scorch the Earth. The Ancients melted into a River of Blood that flowed out of their great cities, leaving them empty and abandoned. In the wake of the River lay the Great Desert.”

Derk scratched his chin. It sounded pretty far-fetched to him.

By this time, the moon had risen fully above the horizon. Derk stared at the sight. The moon seemed to fill half the sky.

Derk stared harder. What was that shimmering on the horizon? Grul let out a gasp and rose out of the lotus and onto his knees.

“Do you see it?” Grul whispered.

The shimmering began to coalesce. Two cylinder shaped towers; both appeared to be daubed in blood. The shorter one had a dish on top that opened to the sky, with a stick protruding from the center and pointing to the heavens. Along the horizon Derk thought he could make out a blurred line of trees. The depression they were in became a deepening river bed. A panicky feeling took over as the streaming water rose above his ankles. He reached out to a red ribbon in the water and touched blood.

Part II: FanStory

Derk yelped and turned to run. He tripped over the backpack and fell face first into the knee deep water.

Someone was calling his name. Derk stirred.

“Derk, are you okay?” a female voice asked.

A wet cloth passed along his forehead, followed by drops of water on his lips.

“Beit?” He tried to sit up, but firm hands pushed him down again.

“You’ve been exposed to the sun too long,” Beit said. “Lie still until you regain your strength.”

He heard other voices and the sound of hammering. A tent was raised over him, blocking the morning sun. A piece of food was put into his mouth; he chewed it automatically and swallowed. A little more water and he could feel his strength returning.

A worried face with a nervous smile blocked his view.

“We came looking for you as soon as the sun was up. You always signal from each shelter on your route. I figured something was wrong when I didn’t hear from you last night. Boy, it was a long night!”

Derk sat up and reached an arm around her. “It’s good to see you.”

“We found the wagon on the route about a kilometer from here. Kedd thinks the axle can be repaired and the wheel replaced. What happened? What are you doing so far off the route?”

“Long story. Seekers.”

“Humph! I told you not to take that fare!”

“We needed the money.” Derk turned onto his hands and knees and crawled to the tent opening, gazing out. “Huh?”

“What is it, Derk? You should be resting.” Beit followed him out as he left the tent. He was standing there looking around in confusion.

“Where’s the river bed?” he asked.

“What river bed?”

“The river bed.” He gestured vaguely with both hands. “It was here.”

“Derk, there is no river bed here.”

“That’s how the wagon broke. The wheel caught on the edge of the bank.”

“Derk, listen to me. There is no river bed here.”

Derk placed a hand on his mouth and stared at the eastern horizon. Beit walked over and put a hand on his arm.

“Derk,” she said. “One of your passengers has died, your wagon is broken, and you’re talking about non-existent river beds. You could be banned from the Porters.”

“Where is Grul?”

“He’s in that other tent,” Beit pointed.

Derk walked over just as Grul was coming out. Grul grinned and hugged Derk.

“Wasn’t that magnificent?” Grul asked.

“It was real?”

“It was a vision!” Grul had his hands on Derk’s shoulders and was grinning at him. “You have the gift.”

“Gift? What gift? I don’t want any gift!” Derk backed away.

“Derk, honey,” Beit said, taking his hand and stroking it gently. “Let’s go home. Take some time off. You’ve had a terrible experience.”

Derk sighed. “Yes. Okay. Some time off.”

Beit led Derk to the wagon while others in the rescue party tore down the tents. Derk watched the workers fade into the horizon as the wagon pulled away to take him home.

The Vampire Clause

Vampire Contest

Deadline: Oct 1, 2012

Topic: A new neighbor in your apartment appears to be a vampire. Is he or she really a creature of the night? What does your character do, and what happens next?

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

Colleen watched the sugar and cream dissolve in her coffee. She was a spindly wisp of a girl who managed to look scared all the time. Her waist-length brown hair was streaked with blond and had earned her a rather unflattering nickname.

“Hey, Collie,” Malcolm said as he walked into the kitchen and dropped his backpack onto the table. He was nerdy looking in a cute way; his chubby cheeks had a way of dimpling when he smiled, and he smiled a lot.

At the kitchen sink, Malcolm pulled a cup out of the pile of dirty dishes, wiped it carefully with a sponge and rinsed it out.

“How’s the coffee?” he asked as he poured himself a cup and then sat down at the table. “Boy, you look like crap.”

“Thanks,” Colleen mumbled. Her face was thin and drawn more than usual. Dark circles adorned puffy eyes.

“Sleep well?”

Colleen shifted in her chair, added another teaspoon of powdered cream to her coffee and stirred it. The granules swirled around and dissolved into the dark liquid.

“Ugh!” Malcolm exclaimed. Getting up and walking over to the sink, he dumped the coffee and rinsed the cup, and then placed it upside down in the drainer.

“Gotta run,” he said and grabbed his backpack off the table. “Early class today.”

“Hey, Malc?”

Part II: FanStory

“Yeah?” Malcolm paused in the doorway between the living room and the dining area of the kitchen.

“Did you hear anything... strange last night?”

Malcolm scratched his chin. “Nope. Slept like a rock. Why?”

“I thought I heard something.”

“Gotta run,” he said, and hitched the falling backpack higher onto his shoulder. He was out of the apartment in a flash.

Colleen downed her lukewarm coffee in one gulp. She carried it over to the sink and pondered washing a stack of dishes. There was hardly a clean dish left and the kitchen was beginning to smell.

“It’s not my week to do the dishes,” she said.

Colleen left the kitchen through the back, which led into the main hall. The hallway nearly split the apartment in half and was anchored by the front and back doors. On one side of the hall were three bedrooms, and on the other were the living room, bathroom and kitchen. The kitchen was an “L” shape around the bathroom with doorways to both the living room and the hall. Her bedroom was the back room and its door was directly opposite the bathroom. Malcolm’s room was in the middle and their new tenant had taken the front room two weekends ago.

After checking her makeup one last time in the bathroom mirror, Colleen retrieved her backpack from her bed and rushed down the hallway. She didn’t spare the closed front bedroom a glance. The new guy gave her the creeps.

Malcolm was sitting on the couch watching television when Colleen got home. She tossed her backpack onto her bed as she walked passed her room and into the kitchen. Looking at the pile of dishes, she took a deep breath and counted silently to ten.

The Vampire Clause

Colleen returned to the living room, picked up the remote control from the coffee table and turned off the TV.

“Hey!”

“You were supposed to do the dishes!”

“Oh, yeah.” Malcolm grabbed the remote from Colleen’s hands and turned the TV back on. “After this show.”

“I’m hungry and there’s not a clean dish in this apartment!”

“Don’t be such a cranky ape.”

Colleen huffed and walked back into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator, wrinkled her nose, and pulled out some deli meat, cheese, lettuce, mayonnaise and the loaf of bread. After putting those on the table she opened a drawer in search of a knife. None were to be found; at least, none that were clean. She stood at the table and prepared a dry sandwich. Colleen returned the unused portions to the refrigerator, took a can of soda, and carried her dinner to the living room. She sat in the chair as far away from Malcolm as she could.

He barely noticed Colleen. His eyes remained glued to the TV set.

“This one was just on two days ago,” Colleen said around a mouthful of food. She swallowed. “How can you watch this show over and over again?”

“It’s a funny show!”

“I don’t get what’s so funny about a bunch of geeks and a blond waitress.”

“It just is.” Malcolm laughed at one of the jokes on the show. He pointed to the screen. “See?”

Colleen shook her head and took another bite of her sandwich. She decided to stare out the window rather than watch the antics being played out on the television.

The last of the waning crescent sun had just dipped below the horizon.

Part II: FanStory

Colleen turned at the sound of a door opening, and nearly choked on her sandwich. Brett stood in the doorway to his bedroom and looked about the living room. He had a ghastly pallor about him that made Colleen want to throw up. She grabbed her cola and took a hasty sip, trying to force the food down her throat.

He filled the doorway with his presence alone. Impeccably dressed and immaculately groomed, Colleen figured he must have used the bathroom just before she got home.

Brett nodded at her, and then turned down the hall and walked to the kitchen. Colleen could hear the sound of water and the clinking of dishes.

Another episode of Malcolm's show had nearly run its course when Brett came back down the hallway, nodded at them again, and left the apartment.

Colleen put down her plate, jumped out the chair and rushed to look out the front door window. Their first floor apartment sat in the middle of a large residential neighborhood. She watched as Brett, without looking up for traffic or pedestrians, crossed the street and moved swiftly up the sidewalk. He disappeared from sight in moments.

Colleen walked to the bathroom and eyed every detail for several minutes.

"When was Brett in the bathroom?" she asked. Colleen sat down in her chair and picked up her sandwich.

"Huh?"

"It doesn't look like it's been used in a while."

"I don't know."

"I don't think I've ever seen him eat. And I've certainly never seen him out of his room in the daytime."

"What are you babbling about?"

Colleen stood up. "Never mind. Just watch your show."

The kitchen sparkled. Colleen hesitated to sully it by placing her dirty dishes in the sink. How could Brett

The Vampire Clause

have cleaned it so thoroughly in such a short period of time? Not only were the dishes clean, but they were all put away as well. The counter tops and table had been wiped clean, and even the floor shined as if it had been recently mopped.

Her heart sank. Dejected and uncertain what to do next, Colleen walked into her bedroom, shut the door and locked it. Maybe it was nothing. She had no proof; just the wild speculations of an over-active imagination.

Colleen tossed and turned. Her mind kept playing short scenes over and over again. Brett standing in his doorway. The strange flapping sound she thought she heard at night. Brett coming out of his room just as the sun set. Her mind kept repeating the same questions over and over again. Why have I never seen him eat? Why have I never seen him out during the day? Where does he go in the evening? Why doesn't he ever talk?

A faint sound, like flapping wings. Colleen froze and listened intently.

A creaking door, barely audible. Colleen waited, shivering under her covers, as her clock marked the passing seconds.

Slipping out from under her covers, Colleen eased open her bedroom door and looked down the hall. The apartment was silent as a tomb. The full moon cast an eerie light into the distant living room. Squeezing past her door, Colleen sidled along the hallway and paused at Brett's door. She put her ear to the door and tilted her head down, listening for the slightest sound. She noticed a small, dark spot on the floor. She knelt for a closer look. Was that a drop of blood?

Colleen jammed her fist into her mouth to stifle a scream. She turned and hurried back to her room, closing the door behind her as quietly and quickly as she could.

Part II: FanStory

Mr. Calvert knocked on the apartment door. He looked at his watch and knocked again. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other to ease the strain of his weight on his right knee.

Malcolm opened the door.

“Hey, Mr. Calvert.” He paused a moment, panicking over the condition of the apartment before remembering that Brett had cleaned the kitchen last evening. Malcolm stepped back and invited Mr. Calvert in.

“Good evening, Malcolm,” Mr. Calvert said. His eyes inspected the living room in a single glance and he nodded faint approval. “Thank you for making the time to meet with me.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Calvert,” Malcolm said. “My classes are usually over by midafternoon anyway.”

Mr. Calvert walked across the living room and glanced into the kitchen.

“As I mentioned, I received a rather strange call from Colleen.”

“Yeah, what was that about? Her room is cleaned out.”

Mr. Calvert crossed the living room again and stepped far enough into the hallway to glance into the bathroom. He turned to look at Malcolm.

“I’m not certain. She babbled something about the lease needing a ‘vampire clause’ and made it clear she would not set foot in here again.”

“Huh.”

“I understand the dynamics of strangers residing in an apartment. There is a clause in the lease that allows a person out of the lease, with thirty days’ notice, if there is an incompatibility.”

“That’s cool.”

“Colleen has agreed to pay through the end of next month. However, you and Brett are still responsible for the full amount of the rent. I will do my best to find

The Vampire Clause

another, but if you have any college friends in need of a room please let me know.”

“Okay.”

Mr. Calvert had returned to the front door again. He turned up his nose slightly and sniffed.

“You may want to get a deodorizer.”

“I will, Mr. Calvert.”

Malcolm closed the door and returned to his TV show.

Boda de Muertos

Writing Prompt

Wedding of the Dead

Deadline: Oct 23, 2012

Topic: Write a story about a wedding of the dead that includes the following words: Mr. and Mrs. (you give them a name)...saw, hatchet, blood, scared, Romania

Limit: 700 – 4,000 words

Authors' Note: The title of this story is Spanish for "Wedding of the Dead." Mexico honors the dead by celebrating the "Day of the Dead" on November 1st for children and infants (Dia de los Inocentes – Day of the Innocents) and November 2nd for adults (Dia de los Muertos – Day of the Dead). Tucson has an amazing parade that anyone can join.

Carole paused to get a better look at the church across the street. It was a modest Catholic church that occupied half a block in the middle of the downtown business district. Made of white-washed brick, the building had an unassuming foyer at the entrance that was flanked by two small, oval stained glass windows.

"What is it, Carole?" Barry asked, stopping to look back at his walking partner.

Carole and Barry were co-workers at the Social Services office. They had taken up walking at lunch time primarily to lose weight, but it didn't hurt that their health insurance provider discounted the premiums for anyone who participated in wellness activities.

Carole's weight was due to age and children. She had turned fifty this year; a fact that had scared her into this walking routine. Her four children still lived at home. The oldest had just entered high school and the youngest was still in grade school. Carole had a frumpy appearance born of exhaustion. Working full time and raising four kids was taking its toll. Her short, black hair was often unkempt, and her glasses rarely sat straight on her nose.

Barry's weight was due to emotional eating. Still in his early twenties, he had recently moved out of his parents' house. The fighting and bickering between his

Part II: FanStory

mother and father had become intolerable. It was beyond his comprehension why they stayed together. Moving out was his first step toward changing his life. Once he lost some weight, he hoped to settle down and have kids of his own. Barry tended to wobble when he walked, and he had a nervous habit of brushing his hair out of his eyes. He had shoulder length brown hair that was parted in the middle.

Carole squinted at the sign board in front of the church.

“It still says the Chandler wedding is on for today,” she said.

“Huh. That’s odd. Weren’t they killed last week?”

“Yes!” Carole said, suppressing a shudder. “You think the church would show some respect for the dead and take down the message.”

“They were killed with a chain saw, I heard.”
Barry brushed at his hair and licked the sweat off his lips.
“There was blood everywhere.”

Carole ignored him. Looking left and right, she started across the street.

“What are you doing, Carole?” Barry hesitated before following her.

Five stone steps led up to the arched doors. The finish on the thick, pine door frame had worn thin, and the frame itself was carved up with initials and scratches.

Pressing down on the latch, Carole eased open one of the doors and peeked in. The drab foyer was about ten feet by six. On one end there were several racks laden with coats and scarves. A set of paneled doors that swung in both directions led to the nave.

Barry grabbed the door and opened it wider.

“I don’t think we should be in here,” he said.

“It sounds like there’s a service going on.”

Carole stepped across the foyer and pushed on an inner door.

“It’s a wedding!” she whispered over her shoulder.

A bride and groom stood at the altar in front of a pale-faced priest. He appeared to be trembling. And the couple in front of him seemed – odd in some way. The tuxedo and wedding gown seemed to hang a bit loose. The wedding party, standing on either side, had grisly expressions on their faces. The pews in the first two rows were sparsely populated.

“I, I now p-pronounce you, uh, man and, uh, wife,” stammered the priest. “Y-you may k-kiss the b-bride.”

The couple turned to kiss and Carole could feel her knees buckling. Barry let go of the outside door and grabbed her elbow.

“What is it?”

Barry looked in just as the couple turned. His jaw dropped and his eyes popped.

“L-ladies and g-gentlemen,” the priest said. “M-may I p-present Mr. and Mrs. Robert Ch-chandler.”

The grins on the couple’s faces were the grins of Halloween skulls. The bride and groom were skeletons. They clasped their bony hands together and jumped over a hatchet lying on the step in front of them. The audience raised a half-hearted cheer as the recessional music started playing.

Carole’s heart was pounding in her throat.

“I have to get out of here,” she croaked.

Turning, she almost knocked over Barry in her haste and ran straight into the front door. Barry opened it and Carole stumbled out and down the stairs, nearly plowing into a limousine that had pulled up to the church. She lurched around behind the car and managed to avoid tripping on the tin cans tied to the bumper. The rear window was painted with the words “Just Married – Romania or Bust!”

Carole didn’t quite make it across the street before falling to her knees, gasping for breath. Barry wobbled up beside her.

Part II: FanStory

“Carole! Are you okay?” He pulled out his cell phone. “I’m calling an ambulance.”

Carole shook her head and mouthed “No.”

She lifted one hand. Barry took it and helped her up. He led her to a bench and sat her down. Carole held one hand to her chest and slowly caught her breath. She watched as the Chandlers got into the limousine and drove away. Family, friends, and the wedding party, all with bewildered expressions, filed out of the church and headed for their cars.

“This never happened,” Carole said.

“But—”

“Who would believe it? Not a word to anyone! Do you hear me?”

Barry nodded.

“Okay. Let’s go back to work.”

Doorway to the Next World

Locked Room Contest

Deadline: Nov 1, 2012

Topic: The vacation cottage you rented for the summer has a locked room. You break into it and...

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

Jack turned off the back road and onto the narrow, dark path. It was lined with tall trees that blocked the sky. The tires of the car jogged along the uneven ruts, and Jack had to grip the wheel to keep from being tossed about. In the passenger seat, Sally had one hand on the dashboard and another on the doors' arm rest.

The hundred and fifty foot long drive finally ended in a clearing, in the center of which sat the cottage. The light of the moon shone on it, enveloping it in a magical glow. The cottage was small and quaint with brown walls, wood-trimmed windows and a thatched roof.

Sally let out a tired chuckle. "It reminds me of the one from Hansel and Gretel."

"Yeah."

Jack stopped the car by the front door and popped the trunk. Together, they unloaded their luggage and carried it up the few steps and set it on the porch.

"You have the keys?" Jack asked.

"Somewhere in here." Sally rummaged around in her purse. "A bit of light would help. Ah, here they are."

Sally opened the door, grabbed two bags and dragged them into the living room. It was small and sparsely furnished. The right wall had a fireplace, the left wall had three doors and a kitchenette occupied the rear.

"Oh, this is sweet!"

"Just a little farther in, honey."

"Oops. Sorry." Sally took a few more steps to make way for Jack. He put down the bags he was carrying and let out a heavy sigh.

Part II: FanStory

“It is nice,” he said, looking around. He reached back with his foot and pushed the door shut. “Man, I’m hungry!”

“We’ve got to unpack.”

“Come on.” Jack grabbed his wife around the waist and pulled her back from the luggage. “Just a quick snack. We’ve been driving all afternoon.”

Sally laughed and slapped his hand. “You’re not helpless. I’m sure you can manage in the kitchen without me.”

“Okay, but I promise you it won’t be as much fun.”

Jack checked every door along the way. The first one opened into the bedroom containing a four poster bed, a bureau and a vanity. The second opened into the bathroom, which had a claw foot tub and a free standing sink. The third was locked. Jack jiggled the handle to no avail. He shrugged and continued into the kitchen.

Sally carried the bags one at a time into the bedroom and tossed them onto the bed. She opened all of them and stepped back to think for a minute. She decided to start with the hanging clothes, and began to unfold them from the suitcases and put them in the closet.

Jack walked into the bedroom with a sandwich in hand.

“Want a bite?” he asked.

“Sure.” Sally turned and took a bite out of the sandwich. “Ugh! Too much mustard.”

“Did you know,” Jack paused to finish chewing and swallow. “That there is a locked door by the kitchen?”

“No,” she said. “And until these clothes are put away, I don’t care. Let me have another bite of that sandwich.”

Jack handed her the plate and picked up where she left off. He emptied one of the suitcases into a drawer, and then put the empty case inside of a bigger one. Soon

all their belongings were put away and the suitcases stowed under the bed.

“Let’s go check out that locked door,” Jack said.

“Really? I’d like to start a fire and just sit.”

“You’re not helpless. I’m sure you can handle the fire without me.”

Sally laughed and punched him in the shoulder.
“Fine. Go play with your locked door.”

* * *

Jack scratched his chin and stared at the knob.

“Get it yet?” Sally asked.

“Not yet. Maybe I’m not doing it right.” He examined the short length of wire he’d found.

“I wonder what’s on the other side.”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Curiosity...”

“Yes, I know.” Jack’s tongue played at the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. “Can you get me a flashlight?”

Sally returned in and shined the light on the keyhole. Jack squinted and jiggled the wire. There was a click and Jack turned the knob and pushed on the door and—

—it swung inward and pulled him through, closing behind him with a slam.

Jack landed on his hands and knees onto sticky pavement. He stood up and sniffed his hands; they smelled like cheap red wine mixed with... something. He sniffed again and could smell the distinct scent of marijuana.

“Sally?” he called. Wiping his hands on his shirt, Jack looked around. He was in a dark alley dimly lit by fading security lights. A grey Cadillac was parked nearby.

“Sally, where are you?” Jack turned to face the wall and examined the door. It was an old steel door slightly mangled along the edges from long use. The knob

Part II: FanStory

rattled loudly, but the door was securely locked and Jack could not get it to open.

“Sally!” Jack pounded the door with the flat of his hand. “Can you hear me? Are you there?”

“All right now, Tommy boy,” a gruff voice called from behind him. “Can’t have you breaking in, can we?”

Jack turned and brought a hand up to block the beam of a flashlight in his eyes.

“I’m sorry?”

“What’d I tell you about smoking and drinking, Tommy?” The beam lowered and Jack could see the man was a police officer.

“Officer!” Relief tempered his voice. “I seem to have gotten lost. I came through this door and—”

“Is that right, now, Tommy?” The officer sighed. “Guess you’re going to have to sleep this one off in a cell.”

“A cell?” Worry crept back in. “No, wait, you don’t understand. I was in a cottage with my wife—”

“Tommy, your wife left you two months ago.”

“There was a locked door. I managed to open it and found myself here.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk.” The officer shook his head and took Jack by the elbow. “Didn’t I tell you about smoking and drinking? Come along peacefully, now, and don’t make me cuff you this time.”

“But...” Jack stumbled along as the officer led him to a squad car parked at the end of the alley. “Wait! Who’s Tommy?”

“Aye, you’ve got it bad this time.” The officer opened the door and guided Jack into the back seat.

“I have to find my wife,” Jack continued as the officer started the car and pulled away from the alley. “Officer! I know my rights. I’m entitled to a phone call.”

“Yeah, you’ll get your phone call. Now quiet down before I knock you out.”

Jack remained quiet until they arrived at the police station; a dark and gothic-looking building with a grey

stone facade. The desk sergeant looked up as the two men entered.

"Tommy's going to pay us another visit, hey Mike?" the sergeant said.

"Aye, that he is, Bill."

Jack stopped as they passed the phone booth; Mike nudged him on.

"I'm allowed a phone call."

"Why don't you wash up first, Tommy?" Mike opened a cell door and pushed Jack into it, closed and locked the door, and left without another word.

Jack looked around the dingy cell. He walked over to a sink in the corner. The water trickled out at a maddening slow rate. Jack cupped his hands several times before he collected enough to wash off the last of the sticky wine. The next handful was splashed on his face, and then he turned his attention to his shirt. The stains from where he had wiped his hands were barely visible on the brown shirt; nevertheless, he tried to get enough water to rinse it somewhat.

After he finished cleaning up, Jack looked around for a towel. He walked over to the bed and picked at the blanket, but it was too coarse. The pillow did not have a case, and the sheets looked like they hadn't been washed in a while. Jack shook his hands in the air to dry them.

Mike, the police officer, returned and opened the cell door.

"I suppose you're still wanting your phone call?"

"Yes," Jack said, and strode out of the cell.

"You'll be needing this." Mike pressed a coin into his hand.

Jack looked at it. "A dime? Phone calls are a quarter."

Mike snorted and pointed to the pay phone.
"Make your call."

Jack picked up the receiver and studied the instructions.

Part II: FanStory

“I’ll be damned,” he muttered, and then dropped the dime in the slot and dialed Sally’s cell phone number.

“We’re sorry. The number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number you dialed and try your call again. Thank you. We’re sorry—”

Jack hung up the phone, picked the dime out of the return slot, and tried again.

“We’re sorry. The number you have dialed is not in service. Please check—”

Jack slammed the receiver down. “What the hell?”

“Hey!” Bill called from the desk. “Easy on that phone, hey?”

Jack picked up the receiver, dropped the dime in the slot, and pressed each button with care.

“We’re sorry. The number you—”

“Agh!” Jack slammed the receiver down again.

“I think you’d better try it later, Tommy boy,” Mike said, and pulled Jack away from the phone.

“There’s something wrong with that phone. It’s not connecting to my wife’s cell number.”

“You’re wife’s in a cell, too, Tommy?” Mike smiled and winked at Bill.

“Her cell phone. It’s not connecting to her cell phone.”

“Cells don’t have a phone, Tommy.”

“My name is Jack, not Tommy.”

“Whatever you say, Tommy. Back to your cell now.”

“But I have to get back to the cottage and find Sally.”

“And who is Sally?”

“My wife!”

Mike shook his head as he locked Jack in the cell.

“He’s going on tonight, hey?” Bill said when Mike returned to the front desk.

Doorway to the Next World

“Aye, he is,” Mike said with a sigh. “Poor fellow. The wife did a cruel thing leaving him that way. He’s going on about some ‘Sally’ woman now.”

“Cherchez la femme fatale, hey?”

“Ha! Ha! From your lips to God’s ear.”

* * *

Jack stirred at the sound of the cell door rattling. He sat up and squinted at his jailer.

“Rise and shine, Tommy boy,” Mike said. “You’re free to go.”

“My name is Jack,” he said as he shuffled out.

“And stay off the drink.”

Outside the police station, Jack took a deep breath to clear his head and looked around. He didn’t recognize the street at all. The sky was threatening rain; he’d have to decide on a course of action soon.

Jack spotted a café across the street. Checking his back pocket for his wallet, Jack sighed in relief and walked across the street. The café was small. A few narrow tables for two lined the wall on either side of the door, and in front of him was a bar that ran the width of the room. A couple was seated at a table in a corner, huddled together and whispering. Bill, the desk sergeant, sat at one end of the bar.

“Hey,” Bill said, nodding at Jack.

Jack nodded back and sat on a stool. The waitress, wearing a pink uniform with a white apron and a name tag that said “Alice,” turned over the cup in front of him and filled it with coffee. She moved on before Jack could say “Thanks.”

The condiment rack had only real sugar; nothing artificial. Jack sighed and emptied two packets into his coffee, and then hunted around for powdered creamer.

Part II: FanStory

“Here ya go,” Bill said, sliding a small stainless steel carafe toward him. Moisture beaded the lower third of the sides.

“Thanks,” Jack said. He poured some cream into his cup and stirred. He took a sip and scowled. Real cream and sugar?

“Can I take your order, hon?” Alice asked.

“Hm? Oh. Just the coffee, thanks.”

Alice scribbled on an order ticket, ripped it off, and slapped it onto the counter in front of Jack. He glanced at it. Fifty cents for the coffee, three cents tax. Cheap coffee.

“That’s not what I said, Sally. You’re twisting my words.”

Jack looked over at the couple in the corner.

“Then what exactly did you mean to say, Jack?”

Jack gulped the coffee and pulled out his debit card, setting on top of the bill.

“Cash only,” Alice said as she walked past, picking up his cup, saucer and spoon.

Jack looked through his wallet and found a dollar bill. He returned his card and pocketed his wallet, and then left the café.

The sky hadn’t cleared any; neither had it rained. He’d have to take his chances. Perhaps he’d find a store to buy an umbrella while he looked for the alleyway. A methodical search was called for; Jack would circle the block around the police station and work his way outward in widening circles.

The hours passed. Jack sat down on a park bench to rest his feet. He closed his eyes for a second and felt a sensation that he was falling. A loud tapping startled him awake, and he sat back up.

“No loitering, Tommy boy,” Mike said as he holstered his Billy club.

“Officer,” Jack said as he rubbed his eyes. “I’m trying to find the alleyway where you picked me up.”

Doorway to the Next World

“Your car has been towed. You won’t find it there.”

“I don’t care about the car. I need to find that door and go back through it. Hopefully, it will return me to the cottage.”

Mike sniffed the air around Jack. “Have you been drinking and smoking again? What did I tell you about that?”

“No, I haven’t. I don’t drink and I don’t smoke. Can you tell me where the alley is?”

“Aye, but Sam won’t be letting you into his storeroom.”

“What?”

“That’s the back door into Sam the Grocer. He won’t be letting you in.”

“I’ll worry about that when I get there.”

“Fine, then.” Mike pointed to the one side of the park. “Head down that street two blocks, turn left, three more blocks and a right. That’ll put you in front of Sam the Grocer.”

“Thanks.” Jack stood and turned toward the park.

“Stay off the drink.”

“I will.”

Fifteen minutes later Jack found himself in front of the little grocery store; a mom-and-pop precursor of convenience stores. The kind of neighborhood grocery store you could still find in any of the five boroughs. In fact, this one reminded him of a small market not far from his company’s home office in Manhattan.

His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten since... dinner last night?

The aisles were narrow and the shelves were packed with everything imaginable. Jack wandered, looking for something he could eat with little preparation. The back wall had one refrigerated case that stood next to a door. Jack stopped in front of the refrigerator and surreptitiously eyed the door. It was ajar and clearly led to

Part II: FanStory

the storeroom. He craned his neck for a better look, and was startled when the door opened and a stocky man stepped through it.

“Help you find something, pal?” the man asked.

“Um, do you have anything in a single-serving size?”

“Don’t even know what that is.”

“Smaller than these,” Jack pointed to the milk and juice cartons on the refrigerator. “Sized for one person.”

The man stepped away from the door and peered into the refrigerator. Jack had a clear view into the storeroom, but it looked like a storeroom. There didn’t appear to be anything out of the ordinary.

“Sorry, this is all I sell.”

“Are you Sam?”

“Sam I am.”

“Did you notice anything... strange... last night?”

Sam shrugged. “Strange? No.”

“It would have been about midnight, in the alley.”

“We close up at eight. Wouldn’t have seen anything. Why do you ask?”

Sam was scrutinizing him, and Jack was acutely aware that he hadn’t showered and was still wearing the same clothes from last night.

“No reason. Thanks.”

Sam nodded, closed the storeroom door, and headed for the front of the store. Jack grabbed a quart of milk, a package of sliced cheese, and a package of sliced deli meat from the refrigerator. In the bread section he picked up a loaf of whole wheat and carried his selections to the cash register. Jack pulled out his debit card while Sam rang up the items.

“Five twenty-nine,” Sam said. “Cash only.”

Jack pulled out the last bill in his wallet – a five.

“I should have gotten my change at the diner.”

“Don’t sweat it. You look like you need a meal.”

Doorway to the Next World

“Thanks.” Jack picked up the paper bag with his groceries and left the store. A bench sat across the street, facing a park. Jack walked over and arranged his groceries on the seat, using the paper bag as tablecloth. He made a double-decker ham and cheese sandwich and took a large bite. Setting that down, he opened the carton of milk and washed down the mouthful. Still holding the milk in one hand, he picked up his sandwich with his other hand and took another bite.

The park looked familiar. Jack studied it carefully.
“Having a picnic, Tommy boy?”

Jack nearly choked on the food in his mouth. He turned to see Mike the police officer.

Jack coughed to clear his throat. “Yes.”

“Make sure you clean up after yourself. Don’t be leaving your trash around.”

“I won’t. I mean, I will. I mean, I’ll clean up.”

“Good boy.”

“Officer, isn’t this the same park? Wasn’t I sleeping on a bench on the other side of this park?”

“Aye, that you were.”

“Then why did you give me those roundabout directions? Why didn’t you just direct me across the park?”

“Have you been drinking and smoking again?
What did I tell you about that?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well, you must be daft, then.”

“Daft?”

“Sure. Everyone knows you can’t cross the park.”

“You can’t?”

“Have you been—”

“No. I haven’t. It... slipped my mind. I forgot.”

“All right, then. Have a nice day. And stay off the drink.”

“Yes, officer.”

Jack ate a second sandwich and drank half the carton of milk.

Part II: FanStory

“What do I do with the rest of this now?” Jack looked about, hoping to find a homeless person or someone in need he could give the rest of the food to. There was no one else around. He packed the food carefully back into the grocery bag.

“I guess I’ll hang onto it, and throw it away when it goes bad.” Jack looked around again. “Why am I talking to myself like that?”

He must have fallen asleep sitting because his head snapped up suddenly. His neck and back were sore from slumping in the bench. The sky was dark; hours must have passed.

Jack stood and picked up his bag of groceries. He walked across the street and stood in front of the grocery store. Through the window he could see the light of the refrigerator case. The door was locked. Sam had gone home for the day.

The store was on a corner. Jack walked down the side street and found the alleyway. The grey Cadillac was gone, as Office Mike had said.

Jack put down the bag of groceries next the door he had come through the night before. Scouring the ground, he was able to find a piece of metal wire. The light from the security lamps was barely adequate, but Jack was hopeful he could pick the lock. Jack squinted and jiggled the wire. There was a click and Jack turned the knob and pulled on the door and—

—it swung outward and sucked him through, closing behind him with a slam.

“Jack!” Sally said. “What happened to you?”

He was standing once again in the cottage living room. Sally looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“What... happened?”

“Yeah. The door opened, you fell in, and it closed. I couldn’t open it. Two minutes later, it opens again and you look like you’ve been through the mill.”

Jack gulped and sank to the floor.

“You look like hell.”

“I... feel like hell.”

“Let’s get you onto the couch, and I’ll get you some water.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Sally helped him to his feet and onto the couch.

She then went into the kitchen and returned with a glass of water. Jack took a sip and set it down.

“Well? What happened?”

“I had the strangest experience. I was gone for about a day.”

“It was only a few minutes.”

“It seemed like a day. I was in a dark alley at night. A cop arrested me and put me in jail.”

“Whatever for?”

“He thought I’d been drinking.”

“You don’t drink.”

“That’s what I told him. He kept calling me Tommy.”

“Tommy?”

Jack nodded and took a sip of water. “So, I got out the next morning and walked across the street to a café that had a waitress named Alice.”

“Like that old TV show. You know, with Mel’s Diner?”

“Yes. There was a young couple in the corner. They were fighting. Their names were Jack and Sally.”

“Isn’t that odd.”

Jack took another sip of water. “I had some coffee and then wandered around looking for the alleyway. The cop kept showing up everywhere. He told me the alley was behind a grocery store.”

“What happened next?”

“I bought some groceries and ate some sandwiches. When it got dark, I went around to the back into the alley and managed to get the door open, and here I am.”

Part II: FanStory

“Wow. You sure smell like you’ve been in those clothes for a day. Why don’t you take a hot bath?”

“Good idea.” Jack got off the couch and headed for the bathroom. He looked back to see Sally studying the door.

“I’m kind of curious myself, now.”

“No!” Jack said. “Let’s go home.”

“Why? We just got here. This is our first romantic weekend away in years.”

“Then let’s go somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Just not here. This place gives me the creeps.”

“We won’t get our deposit back.”

“I don’t care. Let’s just pack up and go. We’ll find someplace else.”

“That’s rather adventurous of you.”

“Yeah, well, you always wanted me to be more adventurous.”

Sally smiled. “Yeah. Okay.”

Did You See That?

This Sentence Starts the Story

Deadline: Nov 26, 2012

Topic: Write a story that starts with the sentence “Did You See That?”

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

Author Notes: This is actually two stories. I had written a story for my “Trading Post” series (coming in the Spring of 2013) and had planned to post it to this contest. Well, I neglected to post it to the contest, which requires new postings only. I had been pondering the oddities of language and phrase conjunctions in the criminal justice system – particularly, an Arizona prosecutor’s office – and decided to whip one off for the contest. The result is the first story in this set. After I wrote it, I realized there were other statutes that sounded funnier. I re-wrote the story using the same characters and setting, and that’s the one I posted for the contest. It’s the second one in this set.

Possession of Burglary Tools

“Did you see that?” Chris asked, craning his neck and twisting at the waist like a pretzel to look back. He ran his pencil-thin fingers across his forehead to move the bangs out of the way and squinted.

“See what?” Stan asked. He stopped, wheezed once, and did a slow wobble that turned him enough to look at his friend.

“Under that table.” Chris pointed. “That’s a fine looking set of burglary tools.”

Stan and Chris were engaged in their favorite activity – strolling through the Tanque Verde Swap Meet to see what they could pick up for a five-finger discount. The table at which Chris pointed was the standard long folding type and draped with a cloth that exposed what was under the table from the front.

“It sure is,” Stan said.

“I don’t see anyone at the table.”

“Go snag them.”

Chris sauntered over to the table and, when he thought no one was watching, bent down and reached for the tools. Out of nowhere, a ruler flew out and cracked him across the knuckles.

“Ow!” Chris yelped. He stood and licked the blood off his hand.

A tall, hawkish man rose like a periscope on the other side of the table and fixed his gaze on Chris.

“Are you attempting to possess my burglary tools?” Roger asked in a high-pitched, nasal voice as he brandished his ruler. “Do you realize that is a violation under Arizona Revised Statute 13-1505A? Attempt to possess burglary tools is a Class 1 Misdemeanor.”

Chris was shaking his hand. “That hurts!”

“Serves you right.”

“It’s just that it’s such a nice set of tools,” Chris said with an ingratiating smile. “I just had to have them.”

“They are mine!”

“Please? I’ve got to have them. Look, I’ll even pay you.” Chris patted his pockets as if searching for his wallet.

“Are you soliciting me for possession of my burglary tools? That is a Class 2 Misdemeanor. Not as bad as attempt, but it’s still against the law.”

By this time, Stan had wandered over. He peered under the table at the tools, and then clapped Chris on the shoulder.

“My pal hasn’t any money,” Stan said, and pulled a roll of new bills out of his pocket. “How much do you want so he can have those tools?”

“You are facilitating the possession of burglary tools!” Roger’s voice cracked. “That is a Class 3 Misdemeanor! Not as bad as soliciting or attempt, but it’s still against the law.”

“I’m just trying to help out a friend.”

“Hah!” Roger pointed a finger and glared at them. “You two have conspired to possess these burglary tools, haven’t you? That is a Class 6 Felony. You two are in trouble deep. Felons!”

“Hang on, pal! You’re already in possession of the tools. Isn’t that against the law?”

“Oh, dear.” Roger looked stricken. “Oh me, oh my. That is also a Class 6 Felony.”

“So, who’s the one in deep trouble? I’ll tell you what. You sell us those tools and you’re off the hook. We won’t say a word to the cops.”

“It’s a deal!” Roger sighed with relief. “One hundred dollars is all I ask.”

“Here you go.” Stan peeled off a Benjamin and handed it to Roger. “Nice doing business with you.”

Chris picked up the tools. He and Stan turned to go.

“One moment, gentlemen.” Roger’s voice sounded serious; he’d lost the timid attitude.

Chris turned to see Roger flashing his badge.

Part II: FanStory

“Both of you are under arrest. I think you know what the charges are. And, I believe this bill is counterfeit. That is a Federal offense.”

Chris dropped the tools and took off, sprinting down the aisle between the tables. Stan didn’t have a chance; Roger was around the table and had him cuffed in two seconds flat.

Chris stopped short when a uniformed officer appeared at the end of the aisle. Turning on his heel, Chris dodged one person and nearly collided with another. He turned again and crashed into a table, knocking it over. The air pushed out of his lungs as he fell onto the edge of the table. As he struggled to stand up, the officer caught up with him and grabbed his arm. Chris pulled loose, but the action caused him to spin and fall over the table again.

“Hold up, pal,” the officer said. “I’m sure you don’t want to add resisting arrest to the list.”

“13-2508,” Roger said as he walked up with Stan. “Also a Class 6 Felony.”

The officer helped Chris to his feet and cuffed him, and then Chris and Roger were escorted from the Swap Meet.

Equine Tripping

"Did you see that?" Chris asked, craning his neck and twisting at the waist like a pretzel to look back. He ran his pencil-thin fingers across his forehead to move the bangs out of the way and squinted.

"See what?" Stan asked. He stopped, wheezed once, and did a slow wobble that turned him enough to look at his friend.

"Out in the parking lot." Chris pointed. "That's a fine mare."

Stan and Chris were engaged in their favorite activity – strolling through the Tanque Verde Swap Meet to see what they could pick up for a five-finger discount. The horse that Chris was pointing to had distracted him.

"It sure is," Stan said.

"A fine looking mare." Chris stared longingly.

"Oh, all right. Go on, then." Stan said. "I know you like to have your fun."

Chris sauntered to the end of the aisle and through the gate, far enough ahead of the horse so that he could prepare. He picked up a stray fence post, set one end in the path of the horse, and watched in anticipation as the horse approached.

Out of nowhere, a young, hawkish-looking boy appeared beside Chris.

"Is this an attempt at equine tripping?" Roger asked in a high-pitched, nasal voice. "Do you know that is a violation under Arizona Revised Statute 13-13-2910.09? Attempted equine tripping is a Class 2 Misdemeanor."

"It's all in good fun, kid." Chris looked sideways at Roger. "You want to give it a go?"

"Aw, I don't know."

"Look, I'll even pay you." Chris patted his pockets as if searching for his wallet.

Part II: FanStory

"Are you soliciting me to trip an equine? That is a Class 3 Misdemeanor. Not as bad as attempt, but it's still against the law."

By this time, Stan had wandered over. He peered the horse, and then clapped Chris on the shoulder.

"My pal hasn't any money," Stan said, and pulled a roll of new bills out of his pocket. "How much do you want?"

"You are facilitating equine tripping!" Roger's voice cracked. "That is also Class 3 Misdemeanor! Not as bad as attempt, but it's still against the law."

"I'm just trying to help out a friend."

"Hah!" Roger pointed a finger and glared at them. "You two have conspired to trip this equine, haven't you? That is a Class 1 Misdemeanor. You two are in trouble deep!"

"You're awfully smart for such a little brat," Chris said. "How about a hundred dollars?"

Stan peeled off a Benjamin and handed it to Roger.

"Wow! I've never seen a hundred dollar bill before." Roger scrutinized the bill. "Wait until my dad sees this! It looks like a counterfeit!"

Stan tried to snatch the bill back. "How do you know so much, kid?"

"My dad's a cop."

Chris dropped the fence post just as a uniformed officer walked up. He was a taller and chunkier version of Roger.

"What's going on here?" Andy said.

"Take a look at this, dad!" Roger showed his father the bill. "And, they're trying to trip that equine!"

"I recognize both of you scoundrels. You're under arrest. I think you know what the charges are. And if this bill is counterfeit, that's a Federal offense."

Did You See That?

Chris took off back through the gate and sprinted down an aisle between the tables. Stan didn't have a chance; Andy had him cuffed in two seconds flat.

Chris stopped short when a uniformed officer appeared at the end of the aisle. Turning on his heel, Chris dodged one person and nearly collided with another. He turned again and crashed into a table, knocking it over. The air pushed out of his lungs as he fell onto the edge of the table. As he struggled to stand up, the officer caught up with him and grabbed his arm. Chris pulled loose, but the action caused him to spin and fall over the table again.

"Hold up, pal," the officer said. "I'm sure you don't want to add resisting arrest to the list."

"13-2508," Andy said as he walked up with Stan. "A Class 6 Felony."

The officer helped Chris to his feet and cuffed him, and then Chris and Roger were escorted from the Swap Meet.

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 several more books.

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Deadline: Dec 31, 2011

Logline: A father and son find themselves trapped in the Bermuda

Triangle after embarking on a quest to discover what
happened to the father's missing parents.

Limit: First 15 pages

FADE IN

INT. GREELA'S TEXTILE SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

The main entrance is a glass door with a bell hanging from the handle. The large interior is illuminated by sunlight coming through the door and windows. Specialty woven fabrics hang from every nook and cranny in the wall and fill bins crowded together on the floor. A sales counter runs the length of the back wall which has a curtained doorway leading to a back room.

JEV SELTY slumps in a chair behind a loom in one corner. His gaunt and spectacled face follows long, thin fingers as they weave the heavy cloth.

The bell jingles as MO HENLY enters the shop. Jev, intent on his work, doesn't notice. Mo is a tall, robust woman with an unkempt appearance. She glances around the shop and then strides to the sales counter, which she raps sharply two times.

WAN-JUP GREELA passes through the curtain from the back room. He is a spritely old man with a quick smile.

WAN-JUP

Greetings, Mo! You are looking as lovely as ever.

MO

You are far too kind to a common woman.

WAN-JUP

What can I do you for?

MO

Part III: The Writer's Store

My mistress desires more flannel.

WAN-JUP

And how is Sorceress Vawne?

MO

She is well.

Wan-Jup turns his attention to Jev.

WAN-JUP

Jev. Jev!

Jev stops the loom and looks over the top of his spectacles.

JEV

Yes, Master Greela?

MO

I'm so sorry I bothered you, Wan! I didn't see Jev sitting over there.

WAN-JUP

It's no bother at all. Jev, do we have any more of the sturdy red flannel? The fine woven one? Jev extricates himself from the loom.

JEV

I believe so, master.

Jev weaves through the maze of bins to one in particular and picks up a bolt of red flannel. He walks back and sets it on the counter.

MO

That's it!

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

WAN-JUP

Thank you, Jev. How much does the Sorceress need?

MO

Three yards will do.

Jev returns to the loom as Wan-Jup unwinds a length of flannel from the bolt, measures and cuts three yards. Pushing the bolt aside, he folds the material and hands it to Mo.

MO

Thank you!

WAN

My pleasure. Great day!

MO

Great day!

Mo leaves the shop. Wan-Jup drums the counter with his fingers.

WAN-JUP

Jev. Jev!

Jev stops the loom and looks over the top of his spectacles.

JEV

Yes, Master Greela?

Wan-Jup takes a deep breath and sighs heavily.

WAN-JUP

It's almost closing time. Why don't you head on home?

JEV

Yes, master.

Part III: The Writer's Store

Jev shuts down the loom and shuffles out of the shop.

INT. JEV'S KITCHEN - EARLY EVENING

Jev is putting dinner on the table just as TAL SELTY, his pre-teen son, enters. Tal is a more vibrant version of Jev. Tal tosses his backpack into a corner and sits at the table.

JEV

How was school?

TAL

It was okay.

Tal eats rapidly, not looking up to speak.

JEV

Have you chosen?

TAL

Well... potions, I guess.

JEV

Len-Dag Grey is a fine Potions Master. You would do well.

Tal finishes eating, wipes his mouth and gets up from the table.

TAL

Gotta meet some friends.

The door slams behind Tal. Jev finishes eating, cleans up the kitchn and goes to bed.

INT. JEV'S BEDROOM - LATE NIGHT

Jev is tossing and turning in his bed.

BEGIN DREAM SEQUENCE

Jev is floating on the ocean. Storm clouds hide the stars and distant thunder rumbles ominously. A ball

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

of lightning forms overhead, causing Jev to wince at the sudden splash of light. The ball spins and expands into a vortex. From the center Jev can faintly hear a man and a woman calling out.

JAK

Help us, Jev! We're trapped.

JEV

Father? Mother? Is that you?

MAY

Help us, Jev!

JEV

Father! Mother! Where are you? I can't see you!

Jev splashes frantically as he looks up into the sky. The vortex collapses and disappears.

END DREAM SEQUENCE

Jev is thrashing about in his bed and getting tangled in his sheets. He awakens and sits up in his bed, wide eyes staring up at the ceiling.

INT. GREELA'S TEXTILE SHOP - EARLY MORNING

Jev slinks into the shop. He is exhausted and has dark circles under his eyes.

Jev takes his place behind the loom, starts it up and continues his work. After a moment, the loom malfunctions. Jev manages to stop the loom, but the cloth now has a huge knot in it where the threads have tangled.

The bell on the door jingles. Jev looks up to see a customer standing in the doorway, one hand still resting on the doorknob. The customer frowns, shakes his head and leaves. Wan-Jup passes through the curtain from the back room. He places the ledger he is carrying down on the counter and opens it to a bookmarked page.

Part III: The Writer's Store

The bell on the door jingles again. Wan-Jup looks up and smiles at the customer standing in the doorway.

WAN-JUP

Great day, friend!

The customer frowns, shakes her head and leaves. Wan-Jup stares at the door for a moment, and then looks over to where Jev is working at the knot.

WAN-JUP

Jev!

JEV

Yes, Master Greela?

WAN-JUP

Come over here.

Jev walks over to the counter.

WAN-JUP

Your aura is darkened, and you haven't slept.

Jev says nothing. He just stands, staring at the counter and shifting uncomfortably.

WAN-JUP

Tell me!

JEV

It was just a few bad dreams.

Wan-Jup glares at Jev.

JEV

I... I dreamt my parents were calling for help.

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

WAN-JUP

Your parents! They're not lost after all!
That's wonderful news! What are you going to
do?

JEV

There is nothing I can do.

WAN-JUP

You can't ignore their call! That would be
cowardly! Are you a coward or a man?

Wan-Jup looks around the shop.

WAN-JUP

You have filled my shop with negative
energy. You will have to leave until this is
resolved. Go!

Jev stares at him, dumbfounded.

WAN-JUP

Go! Now!

EXT. MAIN STREET - LATE MORNING

Jev stumbles out of the shop and stops on the
sidewalk. He looks about uncertainly a moment, and
then begins walking in no particular direction.

He stops in front of Nan's Cafe, hesitating at the
door before deciding to sit at one of the small
tables on the sidewalk.

Tal approaches cautiously, his manner very different
from the night before. His back pack is slung over
one shoulder and he has piece of paper in one hand.

TAL

Dad?

Jev looks up at his son. Tal sits at the table,
looking uncertainly at his father.

Part III: The Writer's Store

TAL

I stopped at shop so you could sign this permission slip. Master Greela told me he sent you away.

Jev sighs, takes the piece of paper and stares at it.

TAL

Master Greela said I should ask you about Grandpa and Grandma. What about them?

JEV

I had a dream.

TAL

About Grandpa and Grandma?

Jev nods.

TAL

What about them?

JEV

They called to me. They asked me to help them.

Tal stands suddenly, nearly knocking the table over.

TAL

We have to answer their call!

JEV

There is nothing I can do.

TAL

Dad! Yes there is! We have to!

Jev shakes his head and stares down at the ground. Tal kneels in front of his father and stares into his eyes.

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

TAL

Please, dad! We have to! Please!

Jev studies his son's pleading eyes. A metamorphosis takes place and a look of resolve crosses Jev's face and he stands up.

JEV

You're right, son. We have to answer their call.

Jev begins walking with purpose down the sidewalk. Tal hurries to keep up.

INT. ELA-DEY VAWNE'S SITTING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mo Henly leads Jev and Tal into the sitting room. The room has a few pieces of comfortable chairs and a large coffee table. The colors are pastel blues and greens. Several wall-mounted candles provide light.

MO

Sorceress Vawne will be with you shortly.

JEV

Thank you.

Jev and Tal sit down. Mo disappears through another door.

Ela-Dey enters the room. She is simply yet elegantly dressed and moves in a stately manner. Although youthful looking, her face manifests great age and wisdom.

ELA-DEY

It is good to see you as yourself again.

Jev and Tal jump to their feet.

JEV

Sorceress Vawne--

Part III: The Writer's Store

Ela-Dey holds up her hand.

ELA-DEY

You have had a vision about your parents.

JEV

Yes, I--

ELA-DEY

Your journey will be perilous. Come with me.

INT. ELA-DEY VAWNE'S WORK ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ela-Dey's workroom looks like a small kitchen. A cluttered table occupies the middle of the room. The walls are covered floor to ceiling with shelves packed with an assortment of items.

Ela-Dey walks to the table and picks up two small red flannel bags by the ties.

ELA-DEY

I have prepared a mojo for each of you.

Jev and Tal take the bags.

ELA-DEY

Each mojo contains a few talismans and charms to protect you on your journey.

JEV

How do we use them?

ELA-DEY

You will know. At a time of need, reach into the bag, pull one out and invoke it.

TAL

How do we know which one?

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

ELA-DEY

It does not matter. The imbued magic will guide your selection, provided you do not think too much about it.

JEV

What do we do with them?

ELA-DEY

Take them home and select a few small personal items. Add them in the bag and tie the bag to your belt loop. Keep the bag in your pocket and with you at all times.

JEV

Thank you, Sorceress.

ELA-DEY

Bring your parents home.

INT. JEV'S LIVING ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Jev and Tal carefully select a few small, personal items to place in their mojos before pocketing them. They shoulder their backpacks and Jev takes one last look around as they leave the house.

EXT. ROODY'S MARINA - LATER

Jev and Tal arrive at Roody's Marina on the other side of town. It is a small dock with about half a dozen boats of varying sizes.

KON-ROH ROODY is a ragged looking barrel chested man with the smell of the sea about him.

KON-ROH

Ahoy, Jev! Ahoy, Tal!

JEV

Great day, Master Roody.

Part III: The Writer's Store

KON-ROH

I hear yall be needing a boat.

JEV

Yes, Master Roody, if you have one available.

KON-ROH

Yall be heading to that Devil's Triangle, I hear. Yall be needing a sturdy craft.

Kon-roh walks down to the end of the pier. Jev and Tal follow.

KON-ROH

Yall be wanting the Sea Queen. She's a trim and rugged two man boat. If she can't get ya there, none will.

JEV

Thank you, Master Roody. I promise to bring it back in one piece.

KON-ROH

Jest bring ya parents back, Jev. Safe and blessed journey.

Jev and Tal board the boat and stow their backpacks. Jev goes to the helm and starts up the engine while Tal unties the mooring lines from the dock.

Tal pulls a hand drawn, water protected map from Jev's backpack and studies it.

TAL

We'll need a heading of 1.429 radians.

JEV

Don't we pass through the Devil's Chain?

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

TAL

Um... there's a string of islands going northwest to southeast.

JEV

Yes, that's the Devil's Chain.

TAL

It's going to be tricky getting through.

JEV

We'll make it.

EXT. ON THE OCEAN EAST OF DEVIL'S CHAIN - MID AFTERNOON

The sun is shining and the water is calm. They are far from any visible land.

Tal is at the helm and Jev is studying the map.

TAL

We should be close now?

JEV

Close. Did the wind just change direction?

Tal shrugs his shoulders.

TAL

Didn't notice.

JEV

There! Again. I'm sure of it!

Jev stands up and scans the horizon. The waves start forming a circular pattern in response to the changing wind.

JEV

Something's happening!

Part III: The Writer's Store

The wind gets stronger and the waves start forming a whirlpool. Clouds darken the sky. A tropical storm begins to rage.

TAL

I can't hold the wheel!

JEV

I'll take the wheel! Batten down!

Jev takes the helm and Tal begins to secure the boat.

The whirlpool is stronger and deeper. The winds reach hurricane speed and strength.

TAL

Dad!

JEV

Tal! Hold on tight to something!

The boat is battered about by the winds as it circles closer and closer to the center of the whirlpool.

TAL

Da-a-ad!

Tals call fades as the boat sinks through the center of the whirlpool.

FADE OUT

The Price of the Spoils

Deadline: May 15, 2012

Logline: A soldier returns from an 18-month deployment and finds that the family home is missing - even the address no longer exists.

Limit: First 15 pages.

FADE IN

INT. AIRPLANE - LATE AFTERNOON

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS BEN HARRISON is perched on the arm of a first class seat and leaning against the wall of the airplane. Half a dozen civilian passengers stand or sit facing him, listening intently to his stories.

He is not a physically attractive man. He is squat and swarthy-looking, with crooked teeth, thick frowning eyebrows, and a large scar across his forehead - a badge he wears proudly. Somehow, though, his enthusiastic storytelling has drawn these people to him like the proverbial moths.

Ben pauses for a breath and subconsciously licks his lips.

BEN

I tell you, it was pure luck he didn't see me! Passes right by me! I pull the trigger and nothing! I'm out of bullets! He starts turning back, so I flip my gun and bam!

Ben swings his arms as if he is batting a ball.

BEN

Right in the kidneys!

Part III: The Writer's Store

The collective gasp of the group is interrupted by the sound of the "Fasten Seat Belt" signal.

STEWARDESS
(over intercom)

The Captain has turned on the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign. Please take your seats and fasten your seat belts. We will begin our descent into Atlanta shortly. Thank you for flying Delta Airlines.

Ben settles himself into his seat and stares out the window. He is exhausted from the long flight and soon begins to doze.

INT. AIRPLANE - LATE AFTERNOON - continuous

He awakes with a start when the plane touches down. Opening his eyes and looking around, he notices that things look subtly different. The other passengers are still the same people but, just as he is, they are now dressed in military uniforms. Not certain what is going on, he says nothing. Instead, he sits and watches, hoping to figure it out.

INT. AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

The plane arrives at the gate and the passengers deplane. The group from first class are walking in formation. Ben stays back, taking up the rear.

Leading the formation is MAJOR SAM PEARSON of the Navy. He is a good-looking, compact man with an olive complexion.

As first class clears the gate, a large crowd behind ropes in the waiting area let out a grand cheer. Ben nearly walks into the person ahead of him when the group comes to a stop.

The Price of the Spoils

MAJOR PEARSON

Ten-hut!

The group salutes smartly and the crowd cheers even louder.

MAJOR PEARSON

At ease!

Company... celebrate!

The first class group brakes formation, the ropes come down and the crowd moves in to mingle. Wait staff can be seen at buffet tables on the other side of the lobby.

Ben stands where he is, looking lost. Pearson walks over and clapped him on the back.

MAJOR PEARSON

Harrison! I've heard some good things about you from your CO.

BEN
(saluting)

Uh, sir, thank you, sir!

MAJOR PEARSON
(laughing)

As you were. We're on leave, soldier. I think we can dispense with formalities after the action we've just seen.

BEN

Yes, sir.

TRACY BALLARD, a young woman who looks like Snow White, walks up to them.

Part III: The Writer's Store

TRACY

Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt, but
are you Private Benjamin Harrison?

BEN

Yes, ma'am, I am.

MAJOR PEARSON

He's the one you'll want to talk to,
ma'am. I know when I'm extra baggage.

Pearson nods and walks away, joining another conversation.

TRACY

Private Harrison, I'm Tracy Ballard, a reporter for the Atlanta Journal. Would you mind answering a few questions?

BEN

No, ma'am, I suppose not.

TRACY

(laughing)

You can call me Tracy.

BEN

Tracy, ma'am.

TRACY

Okay, then. I understand your regiment was at the forefront of a major campaign that ended very successfully. Can you tell me any details of that campaign? What were the primary objectives?

The Price of the Spoils

BEN

Well, I, uh--

TRACY
(smacking her forehead)

Ah, silly me! You're a private, so you probably don't know that. Let me take a different track. Tell me what your regiment did, and what role you played.

Ben hesitates, looking lost and confused.

BEN

Well, ma'am, uh, Tracy. Our regiment was tasked with breaking through the enemy line at Tagascot...

INT. AIRPLANE - LATER

The party has wound down. A cart is making its way around the lobby collecting passengers.

CART DRIVER

Please! Allow me, sir.

The young driver jumps out of the cart, grabs Ben's bag and sets it in the back. A few of the first class personnel from his flight are already in the cart.

INT. AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

They disembark when the cart stops in the transportation area. The driver insists on handing each person their bag personally, saluting as he does so.

EXT. AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

They walk over to stand in line and wait for a cab. An usher salutes the person at the head

Part III: The Writer's Store

of the line, takes her duffle bag and escorts her to an available cab.

Ben is standing in line, not paying attention.

USHER

Sir? Your bag?

BEN
(dazed)

Huh?

USHER

May I take your bag, sir?

BEN

Oh, sure.

Ben hands the bag over and follows the usher to a cab. The usher holds the door for Ben while he gets into the cab, then places the bag in the trunk, shuts it, and hits the car twice to signal they are good to go.

INT. CAB - CONTINUOUS

SARAH MACDONALD is a well-groomed woman with short blond hair and wears a uniform with the symbol for the Yellow Cab Company emblazoned over her left breast.

SARAH

Where to, friend?

BEN

Um, 31525 Shaffer Court, Union City.

The Price of the Spoils

SARAH

Right on.

The cab pulls away from the curb and they are soon on I-85 southbound.

SARAH

I'm Sarah, and I'm happy to serve our honored military.

You're in the army.

BEN

Yeah.

SARAH

On leave?

BEN

Yeah.

SARAH

Been to the front?

BEN

Uh, yeah.

SARAH

What's it like?

Ben's eyes light up.

BEN

It's great!

Part III: The Writer's Store

SARAH

Right on.

BEN

I tell you, there's nothing like the thrill of combat.

SARAH

You miss it.

BEN

(scowling)

I do! I wish I didn't have to take leave. I belong on that front!

SARAH

You'll be back soon.

BEN

Not soon enough! Man, I live to kill those bastards! We have to protect our way of life.

SARAH

Right on.

Ben regales Sarah with stories from the front as they drive to Union City.

The moment they pull off the highway, though, Ben can tell something isn't right.

BEN

(staring out the window)

There's supposed to be houses here.

The Price of the Spoils

Sarah nods in reply. She turns onto Shaffer Court at a sign that reads "Union City Industrial Complex 15-A" and stops at the curb a few hundred feet along the road.

BEN
(alarmed)

Where's my house?

SARAH

Don't you know?

BEN

No!

Sarah parks the car where it is, removes her seat belt and turns sideways so that her back is to the door and she can see into the back seat. She looks him dead in the eye.

SARAH

The spoils of war, my friend.

BEN
(confused)

What? What do you mean?

SARAH

Don't you know?

BEN

No!

Ben jumps out of the cab and runs across the street, grabbing the chain link fence and rattling it. Sarah follows and stands next to him, looking at him with a sympathetic expression.

Part III: The Writer's Store

SARAH

Our enemies landed here five years ago,
raping and pillaging the neighborhood.
Few survived.

BEN

Huh?

SARAH

The factories were built to manufacture
weapons. You joined the army to avenge
the death and disgrace of your family.

BEN

I come from a long line of military
men! All the way back to the Civil War!
I serve my country proudly, just as my
father did, and his father, and his
fathers' father, and his father before
that, and--

SARAH

(shaking her head)

That may be the way you remember it,
but that's not what happened here.

Ben turns and makes as if to grab her by the
collar.

BEN

What do you mean by that?

Sarah watches him, unperturbed by his
confusion and anger.

The Price of the Spoils

SARAH

As I said, my friend. In this world,
history has passed differently than you
remember.

Ben raises a fist and drops it in frustration.

BEN

I don't know what that means.

SARAH

Doesn't our enemy have family?

BEN

What?

Ben exhales heavily and rolls his head.

BEN

I don't know. I suppose.

SARAH

Don't our troops land in their
neighborhoods, raping and pillaging?
Wiping out their neighborhoods?

BEN

Raping? Pillaging? We are the United
States of America, for Christ's sake!
We don't do that!

SARAH

Don't be so sure.

Ben turns and bangs on the fence.

Part III: The Writer's Store

BEN

Where's my house?

SARAH

It still exists. You must find it.

Sarah fades out and disappears.

BEN

How do I do that?

Ben turns, but there is no sign of Sarah or the cab.

FADE OUT

A Nutmeggers' Honor

Deadline: September 15, 2012

Logline: A New England matriarch with a week left to live pledges her fortune to whomever in her small town fulfills her dying wish.

Limit: First 15 pages.

FADE IN

INT. OLIVIA ALLSPICE'S BEDROOM - LATE EVENING

OLIVIA ALLSPICE is lying in her bed. She is a wafer-thin woman in her late 70's. Despite her emaciated appearance, her face is fine-featured and she has intense blue eyes.

The bed has a large canopy over it with heavy drapes. The room is filled with dust-covered Victorian-era furniture.

DR. ALAN RICHMOND is sitting on one side of the bed with a stethoscope to her chest and is listening intently. He is a solid man in his mid-fifties, sporting crew-cut hair with gray at the temples.

CHLOE CARTER is sitting on the opposite side of the bed stroking her mother's cheek. Chloe is Olivia's daughter. She is in her early fifties, and has the same fine-featured face and intense blue eyes as her mother. Her wispy blond hair is showing the signs of gray so evident in her mother's hair.

JAMES CARTER, Chloe's husband, stands behind her with his hands on her shoulders. For as much as Jack and Chloe look alike, James and Chloe differ. His dark skin and black hair and eyes were a stark contrast to her pasty-white skin.

JACK ALLSPICE, Chloe's older brother by a year and half, is standing at the foot of the bed. Except for an extra six inches in height, Jack and Chloe could be twins.

Behind Jack stands his daughter-in-law PENNY ALLSPICE with her two children EVIE and JOSHUA. Penny is a plump redhead in her late twenties. Her children, aged nine and seven, are fair-skinned like their parents and have strawberry-blond hair.

Part III: The Writer's Store

Olivia rolls her head on her pillow and lets out a sigh.

DR. RICHMOND

(pocketing his stethoscope)

Well, I'd say she has about a week, no more.

CHLOE

(a tear rolls down her face)

Thank you, doctor.

OLIVIA

(wailing)

That no-count Mr. Everett!

JAMES

Mr. Everett?

CHLOE

(shaking her head)

I'll tell you later, hon.

Dr. Richmond stands up.

DR. RICHMOND

Your mother needs to rest.

PENNY

Okay, kids. Time for bed!

Everyone files out of Olivia's bedroom. Penny walks Evie to her bedroom to tuck her in for the night, while Jack goes with Joshua to his bedroom. Everyone else takes the stairs, walking around Olivia's lift at the top, to the sitting room on the first floor.

INT. JOSHUA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Joshua jumps into his bed and climbs under the covers, pulling them close to his chin. Jack sits down on the edge and smiles at his grandson.

A Nutmeggers' Honor

JOSHUA

Tell me the story of Captain John and the pirates!

JACK

Well, now. Almost two hundred years ago, your great-great-great-great-grandfather Thomas Allspice started the family nutmeg business. His brother, Captain John, would take those nutmegs down to Charleston for trade. One day, with a hold chock full of barrels of nutmegs, he had just sailed past Block Island when out of nowhere came a pirate ship!

JOSHUA

Arr!

JACK

Now, Captain John knew he couldn't surrender his cargo, so it was going to be a fight.

Penny peaks into the room and watches her father-in-law as he tells the story. She smiles, and then walks downstairs to the sitting room. Dr. Richmond is standing by the open door, talking to James.

INT. ALLSPICE FOYER - CONTINUOUS

DR. RICHMOND

Call me if you need me, but there really is nothing more I can do.

JAMES

Thank you, Doctor.

James closes the door and turns to see Penny coming down the stairs.

JAMES

How are the kids doing?

Part III: The Writer's Store

PENNY

Oh, they're fine. Evie seems to be taking it well, and Joshua only cares about the pirate story.

JAMES

(laughing)

I was the same way when I was his age.

INT. ALLSPICE SITTING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

James and Penny walk together to the sitting room, where Jack's wife MARGARET and Penny's husband GEORGE are talking with Chloe about Olivia's health. Margaret is a thick brunette with black-framed glasses resting on the tip of her nose. George looks a lot like his brother Jack.

George stands up and gives Penny a quick peck on the lips.

GEORGE

How are the kids?

PENNY

They're fine, honey.

James walks over to the bar and pours himself a drink.

JAMES

How about you all tell me about this Mr. Everett?

CHLOE

Uh, I think we should wait for Jack.

James takes a pull from his drink.

JAMES

Alright. Has anyone reviewed her funeral arrangements?

A Nutmeggers' Honor

PENNY

James! How can you bring that up at a time like this?

Chloe punches James in the arm affectionately

CHLOE

It's okay, Penny. James is just planning ahead. It's something he's good at.

MARGARET

Honestly, I'm glad to have him around. I know I'm not thinking straight right now.

GEORGE

God forbid we get to the cemetery and can't find her plot!

PENNY

(glaring at George)

That's not funny.

GEORGE

Just trying to lighten the mood.

George walks over to the bar where James is still standing.

GEORGE

What are you drinking?

JAMES

Scotch, neat.

GEORGE

Sounds good. I think I could use one.

George pours himself a drink and takes a tenuous sip.

Part III: The Writer's Store

Jack enters the sitting room and joins George and James at the bar. He pours a snifter of brandy and takes a quick gulp.

PENNY

Is Joshua okay?

JACK

Heh. That boy loves that pirate story.

Penny frowns.

JACK

Don't worry. He's a normal seven year old boy.

PENNY

But doesn't he care that his great-grandmother is dying?

GEORGE

Of course he does, honey.

JACK

Boys are more outer-focused than girls. He cares; he's just going to deal with it differently than Evie.

JAMES

What about this Mr. Everett?

CHLOE

(to Jack)

I wanted to wait until you got here before saying anything.

Jack nods and tops off his drink.

JACK

Well, it's sort of related to the pirate story I tell Joshua.

A Nutmeggers' Honor

JAMES

How so?

Jack takes another sip of his drink.

JACK

Well, Mr. Everett was a professor turned preacher turned politician about the same time Thomas and John were starting the family business, back in the 1830's.

JAMES

That was long before your mother was born.

JACK

Yes, it was. But the dishonor runs deep in the family. At least, as far as Mother is concerned. She's kept it alive. Our business is thriving and no one outside the family even remembers the story, so I don't get what the big deal is.

JAMES

Are you gonna tell me the story, or keep me hanging?

JACK

Sorry. Well, Mr. Everett got it into his head that John was filling the barrel ends with real nutmegs and the middle with wooden ones. He happens to run into Sam Slick in General Peep's Tavern in Boston.

JAMES

Who is Sam Slick?

CHLOE

A sketch writer. Most of his writings were published in the Novascotian.

Part III: The Writer's Store

JAMES

Alright. So?

JACK

Sam mentions to Mr. Everett that he's speculating in nutmegs. Mr. Everett accuses John of being a scoundrel and tells Sam about his suspicions. Sam thinks it's a great story and publishes it. It became a standing joke in the trade and almost put the family out of business. Not to mention the people of Connecticut came to be called nutmeggers, in not so polite terms.

JAMES

So that's why people give me a dirty look when I use that word.

JACK

That would be why.

MARGARET

Jack, someone should tell Larry about Mother.

CHLOE

I've got errands to run tomorrow. I'll stop by the shop.

INT. ALLSPICE DINING ROOM - THE FOLLOWING MORNING

Everyone but Olivia and James are sitting around one end of a long dining table eating breakfast. At the opposite end of the table, the Captain's chair sits in empty isolation.

The adults are quiet, but the kids are teasing each other.

EVIE

Mom, Josh keeps touching my bowl.

A Nutmeggers' Honor

PENNY

All right, you two! Go brush your teeth.
It's almost time for school.

Evie races Joshua to the bathroom.

CHLOE
(glances at the clock)

I need to get going, too. I can take them
today.

PENNY

Thanks, Chloe, that would be great. I really
need to get started on cleaning out the
attic. James left already?

PENNY

Yeah, he has a meeting in Hartford. He'll be
back late tonight.

GEORGE

Jack and I will be late tonight, too, hon.
We've got the new equipment coming in and
want to make sure it's installed right away.

MARGARET

Leaving the women to the house?

Jack and George stand. Jack kisses Margaret on the
forehead.

JACK

Sorry dear. I promise to spell you tomorrow.

Jack and George leave the dining room, and the sound
of the front door closing is heard a minute later.

PENNY

Kids! Your Aunt Chloe is leaving!

Evie and Joshua push at each other to be the first
into the foyer, where Chloe is waiting next to the

Part III: The Writer's Store

door. After they put their jackets on, Chloe opens the door just as the bell rings. ROBERT HENNESSEY looks up, startled at the quick response. He is a pudgy man with a comb-over covering a balding head.

CHLOE

Mr. Hennessey. What brings you here today?

ROBERT

(tugging nervously at his tie)

Um, your mother has a few questions about her will.

CHLOE

Her will?

ROBERT

Yes. May I?

CHLOE

Uh, sure.

Robert shifts his brief case from one hand to the other.

Chloe steps aside and allows Mr. Hennessey into the house. She closes the door behind her as she walks with Evie and Joshua to her car.

EXT. MAIN STREET - MID MORNING

Main Street in the town of Nutmeg, Connecticut has two lanes separated by a wide median which is adorned with trees and streetlamps. Randomly placed along either side of a one mile stretch can be seen the town hall, police station, post office, library, church, the Nutmeg Diner, and Nutmeg Gifts.

Nutmeg Gifts is a small shop that specializes in nutmeg themed gifts. The shelves are cluttered with nutmeg products: spice, butter, essential oil, and scented candles. There are also nutmeg-shaped paperweights, salt and pepper shakers, and tissue holders, as well as an array of nutmeg-themed postcards and gift cards for every occasion.

A Nutmeggers' Honor

Chloe parks her car in front of Nutmeg gifts and enters the shop.

INT. NUTMEG GIFT SHOP - CONTINUOUS

BARBARA ALLSPICE stands behind the counter at the cash register. She was sitting on a stool behind the counter. She is a stout woman with light brown hair and reading glasses perched precariously on the end of her nose.

She looks up from the book she was reading at the sound of the bells on the door.

BARBARA

Chloe!

Barbara puts the book down and comes around the counter to give her sister-in-law a hug.

BARBARA

How are you?

CHLOE

Fine. Is Larry around?

BARBARA

He's in the back. Is something wrong?

CHLOE

Can you get him, please?

BARBARA

Sure.

Barbara pokes her head through a doorway to the back room.

BARBARA

Larry! Chloe's here!

Larry comes out of the back room and gives his sister a quick hug.

Part III: The Writer's Store

LARRY

What's up, sis?

Chloe takes a deep breath.

CHLOE
(blurting)

It's Mother!

LARRY

What about Mother? Is she okay?

CHLOE
(shaking her head)

She had another episode last night. She started rambling on about Mr. Everett again. The doctor thinks she won't last a week.

BARBARA

Oh, my goodness!

Who is this Mr. Everett?

LARRY

Okay. I'll see if I can get my kids to come over this weekend. Me and Barbara can come by tonight.

CHLOE

Thanks, Larry.

Chloe hugs her brother.

CHLOE

I have to run. I've got some more errands.

EXT. ALLSPICE MANOR - LATE AFTERNOON

Chloe pulls into the driveway and notices a car parked in front of the house that she doesn't recognize. It's a sporty-looking blue Pontiac. Reaching for the front door knob as she climbs the

A Nutmeggers' Honor

porch steps, she is surprised when the door opens.
MORGAN PARKER, a thin young woman with a bright
smile and dark, curly hair, greets Chloe.

MORGAN

Hello!

Chloe stops short.

CHLOE

You look like that reporter for the Daily
News.

MORGAN
(extending her hand)

Morgan Parker.

Chloe ignores Morgan's hand.

CHLOE

What do you want?

MORGAN

Just having a friendly chat with your
mother.

CHLOE

What about?

Morgan puts her finger and thumb to her lips and
makes a turning motion, as if locking her lips.

MORGAN
(chortling)

Oh, mum's the word!

Morgan runs down the steps past Chloe and on to her
car. Chloe watches as Morgan starts her car and
drives away.

Chloe walks into the kitchen. Penny and Margaret are
there preparing dinner.

Part III: The Writer's Store

CHLOE

Why was Morgan Parker here talking to
Mother?

MARGARET

I didn't let her in.

PENNY

Neither did I.

INT. ALLSPICE SITTING ROOM - LATE SATURDAY AFTERNOON

The house is full by late Saturday: three children and their spouses; six grandchildren with their spouses; and two great-grandchildren. The adults are chatting in the sitting room.

A hush falls in the sitting room when Olivia hobbles in with Evie pulling the oxygen tank, mounted in its two-wheeled cylinder cart, behind her.

Olivia makes her way to the one chair that remains vacant despite the crowd and sits down heavily.

Olivia's breathing is labored, and she struggles for many minutes to recover from the effort.

OLIVIA

I have a ... announcement... to make.

Everyone in the room is silent and paying close attention.

OLIVIA

It is my dying wish... that our name be restored to honor.

To that end, I pledge my fortune to whoever fulfills my wish. There will be an announcement to that effect in tomorrow's Daily News.

There is a collective gasp in the room.

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JACK

That's impossible!

LARRY

She'll be dead in less than a week.

JAMES

I don't see how you gonna do that in the time she has left.

While everyone talks and argues loudly about Olivia's announcement, Olivia stands and hobbles back out of the sitting room with Evie's assistance.

INT. ALLSPICE FOYER - CONTINUOUS

Evie helps Olivia into the lift that is now resting at the bottom of the stairs. Olivia's holds herself rigidly and her face has a stoic and determined expression.

Miscellaneous

This section contains one-off entries I wrote. I introduce each story with the prompt.

The Barbarian Code

Mitzi Szereto announced in the summer of 2011 that she was accepting submissions for her “Thrones of Desire” anthology (<http://mitziszereto.com/>). The posting for it on her website was quite inspiring, so I decided to try my hand, despite the fact that erotic stories are not my forte. This is a cleaner version of the story.

The market was no place for a Barbarian. Unfortunately, it was one of those facts of life that could not be avoided. Reginhard needed a new scabbard, and he could not get one anywhere else.

That's progress for you, he thought to himself as he surveyed the disarray. A few years ago, a caravan began coming through in the spring and fall. It stopped in this empty field outside of town so the traders could sell their wares.

Back in the day...

Reginhard paused at a tent and eyed the sheaths. This merchant sold a large variety. The longer sheaths for swords were tied to the ceiling frame and hanging against the walls, while the shorter ones for knives were displayed on a make-shift table.

A peasant couple was shopping there also. The husband glanced up from the sheath he was holding and ran a disdainful eye along Reginhard’s taller form.

“Now, now, Bill,” the wife said, cooing softly. She placed a hand on Reginhard’s forearm, and a small shudder rippled through her body. The bound strength of the sinewy muscles sent a sensational tingle from her fingertips to her toes. “He’s shopping, just like the rest of us.”

“Come along,” Bill said, putting down the sheath. He grabbed his wife’s hand and dragged her away.

Reginhard clenched his teeth and took a deep breath. It would not be honorable to show disrespect by responding. The man had made no threat; he merely expressed a preference.

Part IV: Miscellaneous

This was why Reginhard disliked the market – the reactions of the common folk. Barbarians were generally tall and well-muscled. Reginhard himself was still a strapping youth, barely twenty years of age and ‘thick as a barrel,’ a compliment among Barbarians, although he heard royalty use it to mean ‘thick-headed.’ Royalty considered Barbarians to be even lower in class than peasants.

Barbarians lived a simple, nomadic life in harmony with nature. The strength of their convictions gave them a confidence that the peasants seemed to lack.

The confidence was an aphrodisiac. Most women and some men practically fell over themselves in their futile efforts to satisfy a subconscious desire stirring within. He knew of the fantasies; had even participated in a few. Confidence was like a magnet for the animal lust lurking in the hearts of peasants and royalty alike, although the royalty were much more discreet about it. Too often, though, a night of passion would be mistaken for love. For that reason, Reginhard had decided not to engage in trysts with anyone except another Barbarian.

The other side of that coin was antagonism. Some women and most men were intimidated by the confidence exuded by a Barbarian. Reginhard could never understand that. Barbarians would not harm another except in need or defense. It was drilled into every Barbarian since childhood. They lived and died by a very strict code of honor.

Reginhard turned his attention back to the sheaths. He walked over to one of the scabbards tied to the ceiling and examined the workmanship. The leather was well tanned, and the straps were secure. It had a simple design that appealed to him. Reginhard did not care for elaborate designs.

“Only the finest quality, sir,” the merchant said. “You may call me James, and it would be my pleasure to serve.”

Traders, for the most part, responded with neither desire nor dislike. It was their business to sell. Emotions tended to cloud their minds and have a negative effect on profit.

“I am Reginhard.”

“Ah! Would that be Reginhard, son of Waldheri?”

“The same.”

“I have followed with interest the stories of your strength and wisdom.”

“Flattery will not sway me.”

“No, no, I can see that. In fact, what I have to tell you may cost me a sale.”

“Why would you sacrifice a sale?”

“Because it would pain me to see dishonor brought upon a family.”

“What has that to do with me?”

“I have information about your father.”

“My father died in battle, defending the King.”

“So it has been said. I have heard stories to the contrary.”

Controlling his anger, Reginhard put down the scabbard and glared at James.

“You will tell me what you know.”

“Some say he is a prisoner, held in a dungeon for treason.”

“That is a lie!”

“I have spoken to a castle maid who has seen him.”

“You will tell me her name.” Reginhard had to work at restraining himself. So far, this had been a private conversation; therefore, no dishonor. However, if he had proof the merchant was spreading these lies—

“Not all of my information is free.”

“I should kill you for repeating such things.”

Reginhard turned from the merchant and stormed off, heedless of the crowd around him. Fortunately, most

Part IV: Miscellaneous

peasants had a healthy respect for the might of a Barbarian, and gave him a wide berth.

* * *

Klothilda caught up with her brother a short distance away and found him leaning against a tree, staring into the valley.

“Reginhard?” she called. “Is everything alright? I saw you leave the marketplace.”

He took a deep breath and turned his head. She could see the well-hidden anguish written in the cast of his eye.

“What’s wrong? I saw you talking to James. Did he say something?”

“He claims to have information about our father.”

“What kind of information? Did he say?”

“He claims our father is being held captive in a dungeon for treason.”

“Oh. That would be a real problem for us if it’s true.”

Reginhard said nothing.

“Given the choice, though,” she continued, “I’d prefer he was a captive rather than a traitor. Then at least the dishonor would not be ours to bear.”

“We do not know that either is true.”

Klothilda removed the scabbard from her back and sat on the ground, facing the valley. She laid the scabbard within easy reach before her in case she needed to draw the sword. After a moment, Reginhard scanned the area and then sat down beside her, placing his scabbard before him so that he could draw his sword without striking his sister.

They sat for several minutes, fusing their thoughts and feelings with Mother Nature surrounding them.

“We must know the truth,” Reginhard said after he had released most of his anguish to the Sacred Mother.

The Barbarian Code

“Yes, we do,” Klothilda said with an impish smile. “And I think I can find out what else James knows. I’ve caught him looking at me.”

“It is not right to use a person in that manner.”

“Reginhard, your problem is your overdeveloped sense of ethics and honor. People have been using sex as a bargaining chip for centuries.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“What is right? What is wrong? Don’t we define that for ourselves? If James chooses to be used in that manner, is it wrong? It is a Consensual Agreement.”

Reginhard said nothing. He knew she was right, but didn’t want to admit it. Barbarians did not live by the written word. They had no laws or contracts to complicate their lives. A simple oral tradition, passed down from one generation to the next and instilled since birth, guided their lives.

* * *

Klothilda returned to the marketplace just before dusk. The merchants were beginning to close up for the night. She caught James’ eye from a distance and smiled at him.

Non-Barbarians were on odd breed. They often confused love and sex, which caused no end of problems. The result was convoluted mating rituals, resulting in confusion, frustration and illicit acts. As a matter of honor, Klothilda never involved herself with married folk unless both man and wife were in agreement. It would be a violation of their Consensual Agreement, and she would be dishonored for being a part of that.

Single folk were fair game, though. And she did enjoy the game.

Klothilda sauntered over to James’ tent and eyed the sheaths.

“What is your pleasure, Klothilda?”

Part IV: Miscellaneous

Reaching for a random sheath at the back of the table, she purposefully leaned just enough for James to get a good look at her cleavage. She had worn the smaller cloth bustier, lacing it tight at the bottom and leaving it loose at the top. If she bent over too far, her ample breasts would pop out. She knew that from personal experience.

Barbarian women had the same reactions from others as Barbarian men did. Klothilda was both robust and shapely, as Barbarian women were. More importantly, though, she enjoyed using her body in sexual conquest. She enjoyed the challenge of discovering just the right nuances to entice her prey, just as her brother enjoyed the challenge of tracking and capturing his prey, although the end results were different. Reginhard's exploits kept them well-fed. Her exploits, though, on occasion helped them gain information to which they would not otherwise have access.

And men, in particular, were so much easier to entice. They required very little coaxing.

She knew she had James' attention. The problem was it wasn't serious attention at this point. Her provocative stance was only innocent flirtation at this early stage in the game. That was about to change. The trick to this game was remembering that James was, at heart, a trader. He expected everything to have a price tag.

She picked up the sheath and stood back up.

"Tell me about this one," she said, stroking it once.

"Ah, that one! Quite a story there." James' eyes kept dropping to her chest. She knew he was hoping for another glimpse. "Made in India, using a special process to soften the leather to prevent abrasion."

"You don't say." Klothilda slipped two fingers into the sheath and slid them back out again. "You're right. Very soft and smooth."

James did his best to contain his reaction, but Klothilda noticed the slight rise of his eyebrows. He was

checking the bait, but was not hooked yet. She felt the thrill of the hunt and allowed it free expression.

James stiffened. He took a deep breath, let it out, and then smiled. Walking around the table, he placed his arm across the small of her back and rested his hand on her hip. Taking the sheath out of her hands and putting it back on the table, he looked her straight in the eye.

"This is about your father, isn't it?" he asked.

Klothilda inhaled deeply and turned toward him, brushing against his chest.

"I can't fool you, can I?"

James made no effort to hide his interest. He grinned as he got a good long look. He slid his hand down from her hip so that it rested at the top of her buttock. Klothilda swayed her hips a bit, rubbing up against his erection.

"Coy doesn't work for you," he said. "I have information your brother wants. Are you willing to pay the price for it?"

"I consent to the agreement."

"I was hoping you would say that. Help me close up?"

"Sure."

Closing up was a matter of dropping the heavy curtains and tying them at the base of the poles. The tent was attached to a wagon, and the merchants slept in the wagon. Guards patrolled the grounds at night.

James gave Klothilda the job of tying down the curtains while he supervised. He looked on as she reached up to unroll the curtains, and then bent down to tie them. She seemed to know he was watching because her movements were slow and salacious, seductive and stimulating. Not much longer and she would be his —at least, for this one night, for a small price.

Klothilda finished and turned to face him. James opened the door at the back of the tent that led into his covered wagon.

Part IV: Miscellaneous

“Inside,” he said with a gesture.

“Yes, boss,” she said, smiling timidly and climbing the steps.

“Coy doesn’t work for you.”

“So you said.”

Klothilda wasted no time. She was already lying on her side on his bed by the time James closed the door. She sent him a “come hither” look, but he chose to play it out. Savor the moment. He had all night; he wanted to make the most of it.

James sauntered over to the bed and sat on the edge. He ran his hand over her body. He started at her shoulder, along her side, over her hip and down her thigh. She purred, rolled onto her back and pulled him to her. They kissed. James brought his hand up, entangling his fingers in her hair. Gripping her locks, he pulled. She let out a low growl and tipped her head, exposing her neck. James moved in, nuzzling her neck and nibbling her ear lobe.

“Ooh, that feels good.”

Releasing her hair, James brought his hand down and placed it on her belly.

“Do my neck some more,” she said.

* * *

James woke up a few hours later to see her watching him. She lay on her side beside him with her head propped up on her hand.

“Not bad for a trader,” she said.

“Huh,” he said. “I don’t believe I would survive too many more nights of that.”

Klothilda laughed. “That, my friend, is Barbarian sex.”

“It’s much more than I bargained for. So, I’ll tell you this. The maid’s name is Drusilla. She works at the main castle, where they keep the traitors in the dungeon.

She had filled in a fortnight for the dungeon maid, and that's when she saw him. He was chained to the wall with two others."

"How did she know it was our father?"

"She talked up the guard and got their names; the guard didn't know any more than that. I was able to figure out the lineage from there. The story going around is that he fought in a rebel uprising against the king."

"Thanks." Klothilda lay down and snuggled next to him.

"Our agreement is concluded. You don't have to stay."

"I know."

* * *

The market outside the castle was even worse. This one was much bigger and with a lot more people. For the most part, though, they minded their own business and paid little attention to other shoppers, including Reginhard. That suited him just fine. Barbarians were not frequent visitors to castles; they preferred to stay as far away as possible. Unfortunately, Reginhard could not approach the person he needed to see anywhere else.

Reginhard paused at a booth selling fancy cloth. *A castle maid would want to dress nicely*, he reasoned.

"In the market for a nice piece of cloth for the little lady?" the merchant asked.

"No, thank you. I'm looking for a castle maid."

"I'm sure I can't help you there," the merchant said with a wink. "And I'll bet you do well enough on your own."

"No, I mean I'm looking for a particular castle maid. Her name is Drusilla Wickham."

"Ah, yes! Delightful girl. I think you might find her a bit timid for your tastes, though. Unless, of course, you're interested in that sort of woman."

Part IV: Miscellaneous

“No, you don’t understand. I need to speak with her.”

“Your business with her is none of mine,” the merchant said, casting about the throng of people. “Ah, there she is! Over at the fruit stand. Dirty blond tresses wearing the gold embroidered frock.”

Reginhard looked over to where the man was pointing.

“Thank you. I appreciate your assistance.”

“You’re quite welcome. Are you sure I can’t interest you in a few yards of this lamé? Drusilla was admiring it earlier. It’s certain to win her favor.”

“I am not seeking her favor.”

“No? Well, my handsome young friend, if you care to stop by around closing time...”

“I appreciate your offer. However, I have taken a vow of chastity.”

“Very well, then. Good day!”

“Good day.”

Reginhard walked over to the stand and waited while Drusilla haggled with the merchant. It was odd, he thought, that her hair would be described as dirty blond. Her manner as she wrangled over fruit was pure as a snow flake. And she had large, blue eyes that just drank you in.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Drusilla,” he said when she was finished.

“Yes?” she asked nervously. “Do I know you?”

“No. I am Reginhard, son of Waldheri. James Tanner told me—“

“Oh,” she said, looking down at his feet.

“Is there some place more private we can talk?”

“Uh, well, sure,” she said, flustered, dropping her purchase. She’d never spoken to a Barbarian before, especially one so young and handsome. The few she’d seen in the dungeon were decrepit, and certainly did not talk!

“After you, please,” Reginhard said, bowing. He then picking up the package and handed it to her.

Alarmed, she turned and collided with another customer. The man smiled down at her, clearly pleased to find his arm nestled in cleavage. She apologized and walked swiftly away from him, head down and pausing once in a while to make sure Reginhard was still following. After a few minutes of zigzagging through the town, they arrived at a small cottage.

"It's my day off today," she said in a loud voice, "so am I visiting with my mother. My mother is not home at the moment."

Drusilla opened the door and led him inside. The cottage was dimly lit by the sun passing through curtains on the window, drawn to keep out the heat of the day. The main room served for both sitting and dining, and was simply furnished with a small table and a few chairs. One other door led to what must be the bedroom.

"James sent you?" she asked after the both sat down.

"No. He merely told me you had seen my father, Waldheri."

"How is he? James, I mean."

"He is well. What do you know of my father?"

"Not very much," she said, staring at a spot on the table. She couldn't look him in the eye. "I only know what the guard told me."

"And what did he tell you?"

She could feel his soft brown eyes on her; soft despite the hardness he projected. There was something very appealing about how different this man was.

"James trades for information sometimes," she said.

"He does. Do you wish to trade with me for your information?"

Drusilla nodded and picked at the spot on the table with her fingernail.

"What do you desire?"

"Uh, well, James has a lot of experience."

Part IV: Miscellaneous

“Trading? Yes, he’s been doing it a very long time.”

“No, uh, *experience*,” she said in a soft voice.

“Experience? Do you mean with women?”

Drusilla nodded. “I am not *experienced*, and I was thinking James might be more interested if I were.”

“That is why you brought me here, and announced your mother was not at home.”

Drusilla liked to nod a lot.

“I am not here to take advantage of your innocence. It is not the Barbarian way.”

“I, I just thought, maybe...”

Reginhard eyed the young maiden. Her naivety was compelling in an odd way. A part of him wanted to scoop her up, hold her close and reassure her that everything would be alright.

“Do you consent to exchange your information for a dalliance with me?”

Drusilla’s cheeks reddened and she nodded again. Reginhard drew in a deep breath and considered his options. He had sworn off assignations because of the complications. She did seem quite smitten with James, but that could change. Dare he risk it?

“Very well. I agree.” Finding his father and satisfying family honor was his main priority. He would have to be careful with her.

Reginhard stood up, towering over the girl. Drusilla stood up and led him into the bedroom. She stopped next to the bed and turned to face him. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and she was shaking slightly. He laid his sword on the bureau, and then went to her and cupped her face in his hands. Conscious of how fragile she was, he softly kissed her on the lips. Sweeping his hands back, he lifted her hair out of the way, kissing her neck and untying her frock. The garment dropped to the floor and she stood exposed. He pulled back a little to get a good look at her body. She was smaller framed than a Barbarian

woman, but still well proportioned. Her lightly tanned skin was almost the color of her hair.

Drusilla's body began to shake, and Reginhard knew right away that she was frightened. He dropped his hands to his side. She immediately stooped to pick up her frock and then ran around to the other side of the bed.

"I—I can't do this," she said as she dressed.

"I understand. Thank you for your time."

"Wait!"

Reginhard stopped in the doorway.

"We can, we can still trade."

"What do you desire?"

"Perhaps," she sat down on the bed, "we could pretend?"

"James would not be fooled."

"I know."

"And I will not lie."

"You don't have to. Just kiss me at the front door when you leave. Gossip will do the rest."

Reginhard paused a moment to consider. "I agree."

Drusilla patted the bed next to her, and Reginhard sat down.

"All I know about the Barbarian prisoners is the King holds them as an example. The story is they were part of a rebellion against the King."

"Can you describe the layout of the castle and the entrance to the dungeon?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. She quickly provided him with the details he needed. "One of the night guards, Mark, is a bit sweet on me. He'll get you into the castle."

"Thank you. I am satisfied."

"One more thing! This king is not well-loved as his brother was. Many would pay to see him deposed."

At the front door, Reginhard made a big show for the neighbors.

Part IV: Miscellaneous

* * *

Several days of discreet surveillance and information gathering later, Reginhard identified and met Mark and arranged to get inside the castle. Mark was also able to provide some additional details for getting into the dungeon. It was a torturous process avoiding the guards and working his way down. In many ways, it was not much different than tracking an animal. Reginhard finally made it to the dungeon.

Picking his moment, Reginhard surprised the guard and retrieved the keys. Opening the cell with the three Barbarians hanging on the wall, he respectfully approached one man.

“Father,” he said.

The old man lolled his head. “Reginhard? Is that you, my son?”

“It is I. Forgive me, Father, for what I must do.” Reginhard pulled his sword and prepared to strike.

“Not – a – traitor,” the old man croaked.

Reginhard lowered his sword and took a step closer.

“King. Overthrow.”

“The king overthrew the previous one?”

“Brother.”

“His brother? The king overthrew his own brother?”

The old man nodded.

“You were defending the rightful king!”

“Yes.”

Reginhard sheathed his sword, relieved. “Then this is the king’s dishonor. I will deal with him. But first, I must release the three of you.”

A sound behind him caused Reginhard to turn around. Half a dozen palace guards stood at the cell door.

“Ho there, Barbarian. Hand over your weapon.”

The Barbarian Code

He was boxed in. If he were outside he'd have a fighting chance. As it was, he could do nothing but surrender his sword. The lead guard took it while the other guards grabbed him and placed him in another cell, chaining him to the wall.

"Mark is far more loyal than you were led to believe," the lead guard said. "We will find out from you where you got your information, and that person will be dealt with."

* * *

The chains were solid. On both sides of the wall, stirrups were embedded at a point just above his knees. He would not get out of this one with brute force. His only hope would be to watch for an opportunity.

An opportunity soon presented itself. The guard was replaced by a young woman with raven hair and red lips, wearing a grey, floor-length cloak.

She unlocked the cell and walked in.

"So, you are the Barbarian come to rescue his father?"

"What if I am?"

"I am Princess Isabel Rusch, niece to King Oswyn Rusch."

"And you are here to interrogate me?"

Isabel smiled. "You could say that."

"You will learn nothing from me!"

"Nothing?" She walked up and placed her hand over his heart. "What is it that drives a Barbarian's heart? Honor? Would you really have killed your father as a matter of honor?"

"Yes."

"Would you fight as hard to restore the proper King?"

"If the current King holds an ill-gotten title."

Part IV: Miscellaneous

“Well, then. I’m sure you could teach my uncle a thing or two about honor.”

Her hand slid down to his stomach and he drew in a sharp breath.

“Ah, the teacher has arrived.”

“You cannot—”

She took a half step back and in one quick motion removed her cloak. She was not wearing anything underneath.

She had milky white skin; nothing at all like a Barbarian woman, or even a peasant woman, for that matter. She looked like a delicate China doll. He squirmed a bit, sweat glistening on his skin.

“Mm,” she purred. “I can do anything I want.”

She approached him and pressed her lips against his chest. Involuntarily arching back, Reginhard’s head hit the wall – hard.

* * *

Reginhard awoke to the sound of keys in a lock. Six guards were at the cell door. Four remained outside with swords drawn while the other two entered.

“It’s your lucky day, Barbarian,” said one as the other unlocked the chains holding him to the wall.

“You’ve been chosen to be challenger in today’s games.”

Small iron cuffs on the wrists bound his arms behind him. They led him up to the first floor and out the back of the castle. They proceeded around the castle and entered the main courtyard through a side entrance.

The perimeter of the courtyard was lined with peasants. In the center was a mounted knight in full armor with lance at the ready. On the ground in front of him lay Reginhard’s sword.

Trumpets blared in a fanfare. Everyone looked up at the castle balcony, where the king was smiling and waving as the crowd rallied. An old man climbed on top of

a wooden platform underneath the balcony and silence descended.

“His Majesty, the King Oswyn Rusch!”

The announcement evoked a mixed reaction from the crowd.

“Today’s challenger: a Barbarian!” The crowd cheered. “In a fight to the death against Sir James Leynham of the King’s own Honor Guard.”

The old man bowed and stepped down. One of the guards that had led him to the courtyard removed the cuffs and pushed him toward the center. Reginhard took one step forward to absorb the force of the push, but was otherwise unaffected. He began a wary circling of the rider.

Reginhard feinted with a move for the sword, and rolled as Leynham sailed past him. The lance missed by inches. Reginhard came out of the roll and leapt for his sword while Leynham reined his horse and turned for another run. Another roll and near miss, and he had his sword. The crowd let out a resounding cheer.

Reginhard lunged forward, anticipating that Leynham would respond with an attack. Instead, Leynham surprised him with a quick retreat and side pass. The unexpected move actually worked in Reginhard’s favor. He leapt and landed a hit with the broad side of his sword on the horse’s hind quarter. The horse reared, throwing its rider. Leynham rolled, but not quickly enough to miss another swipe from Reginhard. The sword clanged against armor. Leynham responded with a kick to Reginhard’s midriff. While Reginhard staggered back, Leynham regained his feet and caught a sword thrown to him by one of the guards. They both lunged, crossing swords and clutching close.

“A horse and armor,” Reginhard hissed in Leynham’s ear. “And now a sword thrown to you. Is this an honorable fight?”

“I serve at the pleasure of the King.”

Part IV: Miscellaneous

Leynham pushed and the two men split apart. They circled each other, each looking for an opening.

“When the proper holder of the crown sits in exile?”

Leynham dropped his guard a moment, and Reginhard nearly landed a blow.

“I serve at the pleasure of the King,” he repeated, less certain of his conviction.

“Why does a man of honor fight for such a King?”

Reginhard threw his sword to the ground.

“My quarrel is not with you, Sir Leynham,” he shouted. “My quarrel is with the King!”

Leynham hesitated. Many began a chant of “Kill him!” But the rest of the crowd and about half of the guards murmured uncertainly.

Emboldened, Reginhard continued.

“He dishonors my family by holding my father — a man who fought on the side of the rightful King!”

Leynham made a choice. “Barbarian! Take up your weapon! We will fight for honor!” Turning to his men, he said, “The rightful King hides in a cottage in the peasant village. Today we reclaim our honor, and return him to the throne!”

The guards were evenly divided, but the villagers threw in against the King’s men. The ensuing battle was short as those loyal to the current regime were routed. Reginhard caught site of Oswyn Rusch and cornered him at the coffer, attempting to fill his pockets. As Oswyn rose, laden with gold, Reginhard deprived him of his head in one clean stroke.

* * *

Several weeks passed while the formerly captive Barbarians recovered enough to travel. Sir Leynham met them at the main gate of the castle.

“Barbarian!” Leynham called.

The Barbarian Code

Reginhard paused and waited for the knight to approach.

“I am in your debt,” Leynham said.

“My family honor has been satisfied,” Reginhard replied. “The debt is satisfied.”

The two men clasped hands firmly. Without another word, Reginhard turned and led his father and the other two Barbarians home.

Adventures in Archiving

I have a page on my writer's website called "Oddly Prompted" (<http://writeraka.com/writingPrompts.aspx>) that randomly selects five story elements and strings them together to create a prompt. I was ambitious enough to think I would write an entire book filled with stories from these prompts, and perhaps I will someday. For now, here is the one that I've written so far.

Prompt: Write a detective piece about an archivist who gets into a car accident. At some point, the archivist must appear in a butcher shop and encounter a plumbing snake (not necessarily at the same time).

I'm a loner and I like it that way. I'm that guy you see on the bus with the balding head, black-rimmed glasses and bow tie staring out the window, clutching a briefcase in his lap. I spend my days in a basement and, if I'm lucky, I never speak to another soul the whole day.

Today was not one of those days.

"Arnold Jones?"

I swore softly and turned from my desk. A tall, gangly man with a cheesy mustache and curly brown hair was grinning at me from the door to my inner sanctum. He wore a tie and a brown suit jacket with patches on the elbows.

"Yes?"

"Barnum, PI," he said, flashing a card and taking another step towards me.

I sighed. Did he really think he was Tom Selleck? "What can I do for you, Mr. Barnum?"

"I, uh, understand you're the chief archivist here."

"You understand correctly."

"Heh. It must be a lot of working keeping track of this stuff." Mr. Barnum walked over to my desk and wrapped on it with his knuckles, all the while peering down the stacks as if an answer to some question known only to him was going to jump out.

Part IV: Miscellaneous

“I have a lot of work to do, Mr. Barnum.” I glanced at my computer screen and began to reconstruct the train of thought this man had so rudely interrupted.

“Yeah, sorry. I won’t take up a lot of your valuable time.”

I jotted down a few notes. “You have already taken up several minutes to no end that I can perceive.”

“Oh, yeah, well I was told you keep track of all the records of the history of this town. I’m here about Jon Talbot.”

Mr. Barnum was leaning with his knuckles on my desk. He reminded me of a chimpanzee, especially with the quizzical look adorning his face.

“You know, Jon Talbot?” he continued. “Great-great-great-something-or-other of the founder of this town who died last month under mysterious circumstances.”

“Would you kindly get to the point of your visit?”

“Yes, well, it seems that the *Daily Record* had a slightly different version of its cover story that didn’t quite make it out the door.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, and apparently this story contains evidence that his death wasn’t an accident.”

I was getting tired of Mr. Barnum starting nearly every sentence with “oh” or variations of “yes.” On top of that, this wild theory of his didn’t help my souring mood.

“Do you have any proof?”

“Oh, naturally. I spoke to a junior copy editor last week who had seen the story and who, by the way, is now missing. It’s all very strange, don’t you think?”

Mr. Barnum stared deep in into my eyes, and it was all I could do to stifle a laugh.

“I don’t have time for conspiracy theories.”

“Yes! Exactly! Neither do I. That’s why I came to you. If anyone can help me, it’s you. After all, your job is to ensure the accurate recording and storage of our town’s historical records, isn’t it?”

“It is, but I don’t know how I can help your cause.”

“Oh, simple. You belong to some association of archivists, don’t you?”

“The Society of American Archivists, yes.”

“Yeah, so I figure you must know the archive guys at the *Daily Record*. I figure you could introduce me, get me behind the lines so to speak, and I could poke around. You know, ask some questions. There must be a record of the story draft somewhere, maybe on a backup or something.”

Mr. Barnum’s wild suppositions sounded more like stabs in the dark than any attempt at “figuring” it out. He was grating on my last nerve.

“Why should I help you?”

“Oh, well, because if you don’t help me now then I go to the police with my evidence and they issue warrants to search your archives and the archives of your friends at the *Daily Record*.”

I should have known he would not be above idle threats. It was clear I wouldn’t be able to get rid of this nuisance unless I cooperated.

“I will need to clear it with the chief of staff.”

“By all means.” Mr. Barnum grinned and perched on the edge of my desk.

I picked up the phone and called Roy Sanford, the mayor’s chief of staff. It was a very short conversation.

“It seems you’ve already spoken to Mr. Sanford.”

“Oh, didn’t I mention that? The mayor’s office is very anxious to clear this thing up.”

“Very well. Let’s proceed.”

We took the elevator to the first floor, and I followed Mr. Barnum to his car – an old Pontiac Firebird more suited to James Rockford than Thomas Magnum. I barely had time to fasten my seatbelt before he accelerated into traffic. I shuddered as he made a rolling stop at the red light and turned onto Main Street.

Part IV: Miscellaneous

Another vehicle ran the next light, causing Mr. Barnum to swerve onto the sidewalk and crash into a light pole.

Mr. Barnum banged his hands on the steering wheel. “Did you see that? That guy was gunning for me. Now I know I’m on the right trail.”

I shook my head and pushed open my door. I was a little dazed from the incident and from being struck by the airbag. Stepping out of the car, I swerved to avoid the open manhole and nearly tripped over the plumber’s snake that was being fed into the opening.

“Hey, look out buddy! You okay?” One of the town workers had stood up and taken my elbow to lead me away from the manhole.

“I’m fine.”

“Let’s go, Arnold! We’ve got a job to do.”

I turned and saw that Mr. Barnum had backed his car off the sidewalk. The passenger door was open and he was beckoning me to get back in.

Thankfully, the rest of the trip to the *Daily News* building was uneventful. The guard waved me in and I led Mr. Barnum to the archive room in the basement.

“Well, Arnold! It’s great to see you again!”

Bernie Larson was an affable smart-aleck. I could never tell when he was serious and when he wasn’t. For my own sanity, it was easier to assume he was serious; an attitude from which he derived no end of pleasure. He would frequently make odd comments in order to trap me with an implausible opinion.

“Hello, Bernie. This is Mr. Barnum.”

“Barnum, PI.” Mr. Barnum had stepped forward as soon as I’d made the introduction and extended a hand.

“Ah, you’re a dick.” Bernie shook Mr. Barnum’s hand. They were grinning at each other like idiots.

“Oh, I’ve been called worse, believe me!”

I shook my head. This guy could not be that stupid.

“Mr. Barnum is investigating the death of Jon Talbot. He seems to think you might be of assistance.”

“On the down low, of course,” Mr. Barnum added.

“Of course!” Bernie agreed. He turned to me and asked, “Is this guy for real?”

“Unfortunately so.”

“Anything for my pal Arnold. What can I do you for, Mr. Barnum?”

“Call me Dan.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” I interrupted, “I believe you can continue without me.”

“Oh, yeah. Hey, thanks. I owe you one.”

“That will not be necessary, Mr. Barnum.”

I stopped at the security desk on my way out to make a phone call to Mr. Sanford. My nerves were frayed after the accident and spending so much time with Mr. Barnum. The sanctity of my archives had been violated, and I would not be able to get any more work done today.

I boarded the Main Street bus and rode it to the transfer point for my regular bus, a location almost two miles farther from my house. After a ten minute wait in the bus shelter, I was bound for home. As the bus passed the mayor’s office, I realized my briefcase was still in my office. Oh, well.

I remained on the bus for two more blocks. I was in the mood for a pork roast, and Sam’s Butcher Shop was not far from my house. The residents of my neighborhood are primarily elderly folks who can no longer cook for themselves. I like it here because it’s quiet. A few years ago, Sam’s wife Lorna began cooking up roasts and selling single-serve portions. She was a lifesaver, in more ways than one. Sam’s shop had been on the brink of bankruptcy; he couldn’t compete with the superstores. The meals were a big hit with the local community.

“Mr. Jones, how are you today? It’s early for you. Is everything alright?”

Part IV: Miscellaneous

Sam was a jovial man with even less hair than I. He often played Santa Claus at Christmas to the great amusement of his senior customers.

“It has been a stressful day. I think I will have—“

“The pork roast! I know my customers, Mr. Jones. You like your pork roast when you are stressed.”

I smiled. There is nothing like true customer service. I was beginning to feel better already.

“Thank you.”

Sam pulled out a nicely wrapped slice from the back of the refrigerator and placed it on the counter.

“The missus has made this one fresh this very afternoon. I sell it to you instead of the morning roast.”

“Thanks.” I was unable to keep the gratitude out of my voice, which explains my uncharacteristic use of the informal expression.

I paid Sam for the roast and walked the two blocks to my apartment. I still had a bottle of Beaujolais, and it complimented the roast with cranberry relish, the green beans and the applesauce very nicely. I retired for the night a very contented man.

I sensed a darkening of my doorway. I looked up from my desk to see Mr. Barnum standing there, his face wearing that foolish grin of his.

“Arnold Jones?”

“Yes?” I said, sighing inwardly. I had hoped not to see him again.

“Yeah, I just stopped by to thank you again for introducing me to Bernie. I’m sure you heard the police have re-opened the case.”

“Yes, I have heard that.”

“Oh, right. You are the town archivist, after all. This case has been a boon for me. I owe you one.”

“Really, that is not necessary.”

“Okay, so here’s my card. Just call if you need anything.”

I accepted his card and smiled politely, filing it in the recycle bin as soon as he’d left.

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 four collections of short stories covering science fiction, fantasy, and general fiction.