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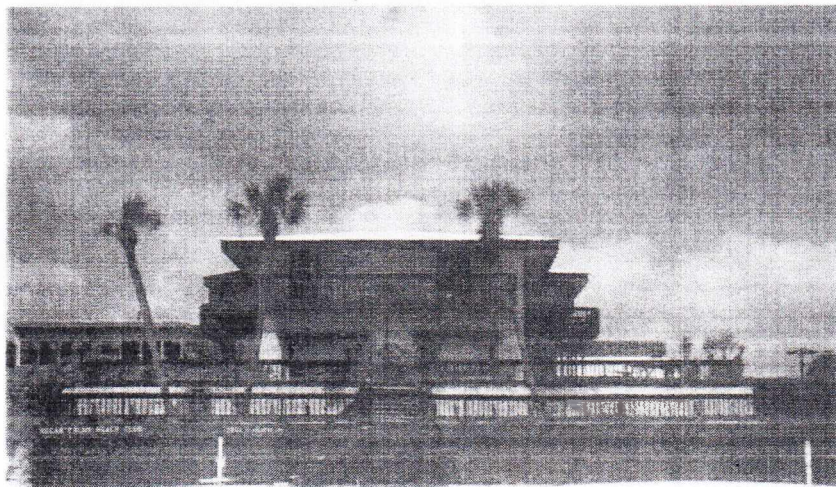
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UP FRONT

Hi! I hope everyone has been doing great. I've had lots of fun (Birmingham Arts Festival and Corks and Chefs, Birmingham City Stages, etc.) and some frustrations (nephew causing problems for Mom, flat tire, job insecurities, etc.) but I'll not bore you with details. This issue contains a vacation trip report and a short story by my good friend, Leana Justice (formerly appearing in these pages as Leana Grice).

First up, lets take a photographic survey of my annual vacation. This year, I again took my Mom to Florida, from May 5 until May 11. Of course, I have to go by way of NC to pick and drop her off. Needless to say, I'm fairly sick of driving now. We stayed in New Smyrna Beach, FL, which was the closest location of eligible time-share swapping to my Aunt Rose. We spent a lot of time with her. The time-share was very casual and a little run down but it was right on the beach. My biggest complaint was that it did not have a phone in the room or on the premises. Live and learn. Next time, I'll be sure to ask about that when I make the reservations.



We stayed at the Ocean Palms Beach Club, New Smyrna Beach, FL (above). One day we went to Silver Springs, FL.



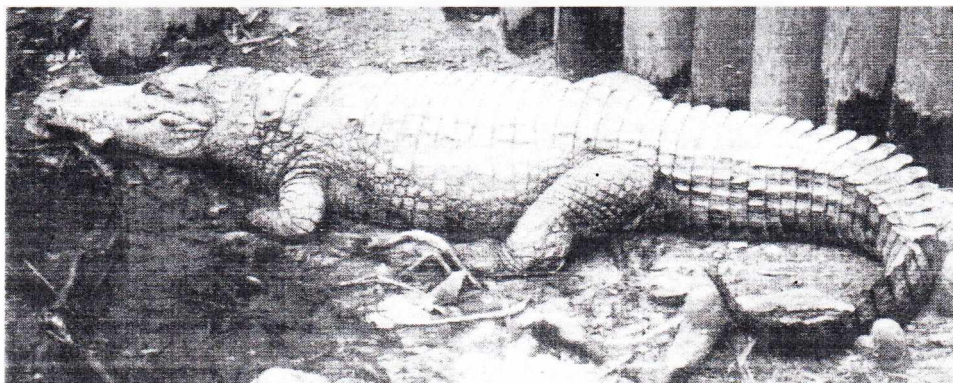
Mom and Aunt Rose in front of a Shrub Bear (Left) and A Real Kodiak Bear Cooling Off in its Pool (Right).



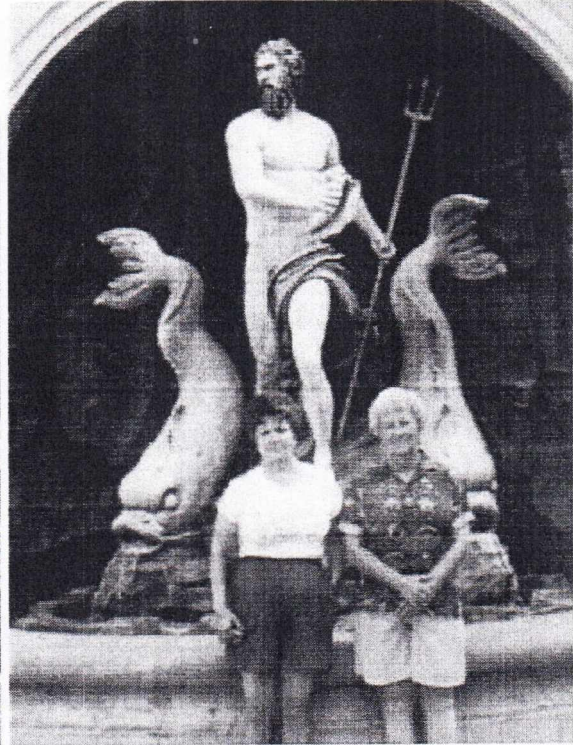
Mom and I by a Stone Face Native (Left) and Audience Member Gets "Snaked" by Animal Guide (Right).



Smelly Giraffe Head Shot (Left) and Roller Skating Cockatoo from Bird Show (Right).



Florida Icons One and Two (Above).



Mom, Aunt Rose and Cousin Cathy at Epcot (Left) and Mom and Aunt Rose at Italian Fountain at Epcot (Right).



Aunt Rose, Cousin Johnny, and Me at Johnny's (Above).

FICTION

"You Dirty Ratbot" by Leana Justice

I'm like the majority of New Chattanoogaans; I hear the First Alert Quake sirens, I focus on my soles a few seconds, verify the road is not rippling toward me, then I'm back to business. The sirens trigger if a truck drives off a bridge, a building is imploded, or if a big concert strikes up in the civic dome. A pack of love-crazed feral dogs one set off a sensor on Old W Road. I mean, cheese whiz, the sirens scream almost daily.

When the New Chattanooga council adopted my innovative victim rescue protocol, my heart pounded at every warning. I wanted to rescue people, wanted hero status, job satisfaction, grins, backslaps, victory signs flashed in my wake. Ratbot rescues found victims when dogs refused to re-enter epicenter zones, when wiring confused remote heat sensors, when evac crews had no clue where to start digging. After Big Quake, I worked weekly, then monthly as sub-standard structures were removed, until every day is like today--a timesheet, flex benefit worksheet and infrastructure fine-tuning opportunity.

No one behaves differently when quake sirens sound. At least, no one who still lives southeast of Louisville. We know in our heads another Big One *could* strike along the fault, but ordinary life *is* devouring our daylight hours. My parents and 400,000 of their closest demographic relatives moved east as soon as the rippling subsided and the Red Cross direct deposited relief checks. My folks call whenever a Three Ringer registers, but they once called at a Deuce.

My folks know I can't leave New Chattanooga; they know I lack a survival instinct sufficiently strong to wrench me from the one job where I've achieved respect and a smidgeon of fame. Their daughter is the Ratbot Rescue Director, leading an entire division--of four--of SafeZone, Inc.

At 11am the sirens sounded: I took little notice. May 18th was a workday mugged by heavy overcast skies and dense oak pollen. I logged out for lunch and stuffed my PDA into my hideous, large blue vinyl purse: all good Ratbot Rescue operators were legally required to conceal carry. Survivor flashback lawsuits (crust shock) could cripple a company.

All PDA owners were required to conceal carry. After the Big One, all available PDAs were loaded with global positioning information - most culled from the massive GM car owners' database - for locating an individual's last known location. Then volunteers dug. People waited hours, then days, watched a stranger's fingers fly over a tiny keypad. A few stubborn or fact-denying survivors waited two weeks until authorities and volunteers recovered a body from what was once a bus stop, apartment complex or dormitory. The sight of PDAs sometimes

evoked terrible flashbacks, crust shock. Once my dentist had unexpectedly walked into the waiting area as I checked email; he transformed into a mewling hysteric, curled onto the floor, head cupped between his arms. My dentist's thin-lipped receptionist had presented me with a scrawled referral card and narrowed eyes.

I walked out of my fifth floor office into the transportation hallway. The city's shriller, Second Alarm warning sirens kicked in its caterwaul as I debated elevator, stairs or air lift.

"Gonna be a solid Three Ringer," commented the water bottle mobsters.

I pushed open the stairwell door.

"Down!" My supervisor yelled over the metal banister from the flight above. I froze with my hand on the rail, one foot mid-air. My supervisor never shouted. Several people two flights lower gaped open-mouthed. "Down!" continued my supervisor, throwing his long frame down the stairs.

A marketing rep I admired dropped his Sunny Delight and crossed himself. He jerked open Level Four's door and leaned inside. My head felt very light. I watched his Daffy tie sway and heard him shout, "It's real! Cover!"

Standing still felt very comfy.

"Downstairs," My supervisor pushed me against the banister, nearly dislodging my purse. He kept descending, followed by other people like the rep and women in tennis shoes and fitted skirts.

I couldn't believe how clear and slow events unrolled. Until I took my first step: then I ran, pounded down the stairs, ears stuffed with muffled gasps and distant sirens. Floor Five to the reinforced ground level lobby, a calm piece of my brain guesstimated, 30 seconds. 60?

The stairway lurched, gave what amounted to an uppercut to my right foot, and I slid onto the stairs. I wrapped my hands round a rail as the ground clapped into its original position.

"Down!"

I followed my supervisor's trumpeting voice, entered the lobby and squeezed underneath a broad prepared lentil. Emergency power wasn't necessary, yet. My coworkers' garish clothes assaulted me as more bodies crammed into the long, narrow, windowless lobby. A safe concrete coffin, my calm voice noted. I sneezed. No one blessed me; sirens drown them.

Next the ground dropped, and I levitated no seconds before falling onto the receiving clerk's foot. A crack drove between the floor and our welcome fountain that rested in the lobby's center.

"It's a Four Square," I reported to myself. Standing, I braced myself against the lentil's side and told the receiving clerk, "A Four Square."

She yelled, "What?" and bounced on her bottom.

Then we all heard the crust 'boom', distant, heavy as the ocean, louder than sirens.

"Down!"

"God-"

I crouched, buried my head in my arms and wanted Mom. Wanted too many things, and time. Our lobby pitched like a pond swarming with frogs. My mind's eye pictured ripples striking top-heavy lily pads while the entire earth shimmied/played Russian leapfrog. Car alarms, dogs, anything audible made itself heard. Outside bricks and mortar tumbled. Over 52 deaths from falling decorative tile, I coldly recounted.

The ground trembled, then stopped, energy spent. Our lobby remained intact. I stood straight, dropped my purse to my elbow and opened it, checked my PDA for damage. Emergency First Response phone center personnel filed out of the lobby, returning to their Floor 2 stations. I emailed, Report, Lobby West Door, to all Ratbot Rescuers as I carefully avoided trampling people still on hands and knees.

I inventoried Ratbot operators. Dala gave the thumbs up sign when she reached my center of operations. Her brown eyes positively sparkled. "Finally, earned money." Quick as a bonfire she whipped her PDA from the pockets of her tangerine pantsuit. Dala, my ever-ready.

My supervisor cc.ed me on an instant message to the Handler's chief: Ratbots were needed at the historic Choo-Choo. The train depot's structure was compromised, half the roof collapsed, and a swarm of wedding rehearsal luncheon members were trapped. The tourists' condition was undetermined. "The flimsy timber walls probably won't survive aftershocks. Ripple's ETA 2 hours."

Butch shook his head when he reached me. "PDA's smashed." The giant Green Bay fan hung his head. An unconscious Ratbot operator needed medical attention. Butch frisked him, but the fool'd illegally abandoned his PDA.

Our Handlers signalled when they reached the Choo-Choo. I watched via web cam and digital conferenced with my supervisor, on-site EMTs and the Ratbot Handlers. The structure leaned off-center. Half the roof was propped by diagonal girders, beams, and flimsy, twisted pipes. "Like a fur trapper's box," muttered Butch, watching the scene from Dala's screen.

"Except this trap flattens the pelt," Dala replied.

I signalled for quiet and everyone concentrated as I moved to split screen. The EMT's shirt dripped, possibly from sprinklers and sweat. He carefully repeated that we had four unaccounted groomsmen. Stretchers passed left to right behind the EMT. "The floor, roof, walls...it's all a matchstick palace. We need time to pull back before the aftershocks," he said. He dried his glasses on a lamppost flag advertising an Inna Submarine movie. "Your Ratbots will be our eyes, tell us where to extract." Civil authorities lowered the siren's volume, to our relief.

Dala and I powered up our rescue vehicles, released small doses of electricity into the media-cerebellum of our rats. We sent GO! commands. With one push from three

miles away, our surgically-altered rats felt euphoric when they placed one paw before the other. Pleasure lapped the front of their furry rodent bodies, they were attached to battery and video harnesses, then the Handlers stepped aside.

I sent Skank north toward the building's guest restrooms and mobile salad bar, while Dala propelled Mrs. Frisby toward the structure's south side. Her rodent skulked and hurried through the shadows, but Skank dashed across an open area in misty pleasure. Dala tries to operate Mrs. Frisby in accordance with street rat instinctive behaviors, whereas I feed Skank's brain and body goody surges for doing my very human bidding. My screen bounced with Skank's point of view. She reached a mountain of fallen masonry and steel girders and crouched, frozen, as a helicopter flew over. "Thread the needle," I muttered. Skank wormed left, up, over, right, all the directions her nimble little package could sniff out. Her harness detected a faint heat source, and Skank found a small fire where a chafing platter had stood. I logged the hazard with the EMT's account and urged Skank deeper.

We heard metal scrap metal, then saw the west wall slide, snapping temporary supports to rest at a 20 degree angle from the ground.

"Will it pull the other walls down?" whispered Butch; neither Dala nor I answered. "Can't be anyone left alive?"

Dala and I steered our rats through refuse mazes for an hour. North, Skank's harness reported another heat source, more diffuse, closer to the salad bar and to an emergency exit. Along the south wall, Mrs. Frisby hopped over fallen switchman lamps and crushed conductors' caps. Until Mrs. Frisby found the dessert bar and soft yogurt heaven. Dala cursed and hit her keypad. "There's no punishment," she stamped her orange clogs. "She'll never budge. Stay is pleasure. Go is pleasure. Dah!"

Skank wriggled along a beam, knocked down an occasional railroad crossing sign or ticket puncher. Her microphone picked up the depot wall's distress and strain. The east wall, my brain coolly adjudged, will soon fall inward, crushing all the toots below.

Skank reached timbers fallen at crazy angles, with a few severed electrical wires wiggling. Her microphone detected coughs and calls beyond the blockage. I got her busy investigating the breadth of the timbers. Butch emailed the lead EMT, who said he'd move excavation equipment to the north wall's easternmost door and wait for my signal. I fed happy thoughts to Skank, but she wavered. Human voices weren't appealing. I stroked her lobes with warm electricity, coddled her with bubbly endorphins and cursed her from three miles away. Less than an hour. Drunk groomsmen, dead or alive because of me.

I poured Skank another dose, then stopped the flow completely. Detox detention. She was a rat with no memory of how to get back, with strange scary sounds and her animal's ESP alarm from an approaching aftershock. I flexed my fingers, waited as Skank sniffed the air. She put a paw against an opening in the timber pile, and I guided her. Skank hopped into the hole. Butch and Dala cheered.

The tunnel ended shy of the open area near the

trapped groomsmen. I backed her up, on a lower dose, then revved her into another opening. This tunnel passed through the debris, but the opening was too narrow for Skank. "Dala, get a GPS lock on Skank, then email the EMT ASAP." Skank's mike clearly recorded. "Somebody! Hey!"

Another, deeper voice said, "Shut up a minute. I hear something."

"Somebody!" Clearer and loud with renewed hope. "our friend's hurt."

I pleased Skank forward, alternate sides, so she'd move her body left to right, widening the opening with her wormy movements.

The EMT emailed, "Time's short. Can we remove the door without injuring or destabilizing?"

"We don't know yet. Snag," replied Dala.

I concentrated on Skank, driving her faster against the obstruction, amplifying the good sensations to disguise bruises she'd doubtless contract.

"Shut up," groom two said, "That sound...it's not people."

"Hello!"

Skank's head broke through, only her widest point, the shoulders, still trapped.

"Not a dog."

"Somebody! Under the salad bar. Our friend's unconscious."

"It sounds too small."

"Hello. The dark's making your imagination act up."

Skank's infrared camera revealed an open pocket under the metal salad bar, with three men in suits. An obese man sprawled face down, a delicate pixie blonde curled fetal

position, and the deep-voiced groomsmen kneeled, staring out. A metal girder, split floor to ceiling, support a portion of roof. The weight had flattened the bar's wheels, but lent the strength needed to save their lives. And the exit door was to their left, at the north and east wall junction, behind a fragment of drywall.

"Excavation crew retreating to safe zone."

My job. Skank's mike could work 2-way. I would talk them through the exit. I tickled Skank with delight, so she crammed her hips against the timber edges. The camera harness hung.

"Some kinda animal," insisted groomsmen two. He groped in a coat pocket and extended his arm out from the sheltering salad bar. He flipped on a lighter exactly when Skank burst past the obstruction, with my jolt of cerebral happiness so powerful her jaws chattered.

"Aaagh." Both men screamed. Groomsmen two jerked to stand. The salad bar rocked when his shoulders struck its metal underbelly, and the supportive girder split wider. A section folded toward the center of the depot.

"Stop! You'll kill us."

I sent Skank forward. I stammered a broadcast message and blinked her harness lights.

"Wait," Dala began.

Groomsmen two interrupted. He yelled and tried to run west, away from Skank and the exit door. The blonde groomsmen followed and grabbed his sleeve. Trapped in the dark, groomsmen two spun, an extended arm struck a crucial bracing timber, and Butch covered his eyes.

I watched the east wall crush that terrified man, my index finger pressed flat against the keypad, pleasuring Skank through her death.

DOWN BACK

I hope everyone has a great Summer. DeepSouthCon40 is wearing me out already (running the Art Show) but I look forward to it. Hope to see a lot of y'all there.

Once of my latest endeavors has been to try to take art classes. I've taken two sessions of "Figure Drawing" offered by the Huntsville Art League. Here are some recent sketches, small enough to scan.

Sincerely,



Randy B. Cleary



My First Pen and Ink and Ink Wash Sketch



My First Pen and Ink and Gouache Sketch