



Lowcountry Weekly is pleased to announce the winners of the **Second Annual Sea Island Spirit Writers Short Story Contest.**

Participation was even better this year than last! The writers were asked to complete the prompt “The sky went black...” in 750 words or less. There were so many great stories, we’re glad the Sea Island Spirit Writers served as judges, not us. Thanks to everybody who entered a “short short” this year, and congratulations to the winners!

FIRST PLACE: ‘Charlie’s Time’ by Tom Bixby

SECOND PLACE: ‘On Good Authority’ by James Moss

THIRD PLACE: ‘Two for the Road’ by Timothy Lawler

And now, the winning stories...

FIRST PLACE

‘Charlie’s Time’

By Tom Bixby

The sky went black as the parachute flare floating overhead hissed out its final breath. He could barely see the concertina razor wire coiled just feet in front of his bunker. This close to the equator there were nearly twelve hours between dusk and dawn. Tonight there was no moon and the thick low cloud cover of the monsoon blocked even the faintest starlight. It was Victor Charlie's time, when the hunted became the hunter.

Just a few nights earlier a cherry up the line gave in to his urge to smoke a cigarette. He cupped the flame of his Zippo behind his hand, but in the two or three seconds the glow was visible a sniper put a round through his hand that exploded out the back of his skull. Charlie was out there. The question was whether he would strike again next week, in the next hour or even in the next split second.

The soldier patted the left breast pocket of his jungle fatigues where he kept his precious short timer's calendar. It was an hour past midnight. Technically he had only thirty-six days and a wake up left before he would climb aboard the big silver bird that would fly him back to the world, but he would wait until sunup up before he crossed off number thirty-seven from his calendar. Everyone at war was at least a little superstitious.

He was alone on the bunker tonight. His partner had just been medevaced to a hospital with malaria symptoms and there were no replacements available. He didn't feel alone. He felt like Victor Charlie was right there with him, watching and listening to his every movement. Sometimes he became afraid that Charlie could even tell what he was thinking. Tonight, it was so dark and so quiet out there by himself that he had begun to imagine all sorts of horrors including a full regiment of North Vietnamese regulars crossing the rice paddy that served as a no man's land at the edge of the camp perimeter. That's when he'd called for the mortar tubes on the hill behind him to send up the flare. He knew the only thing he would probably accomplish was lighting up his own position for the enemy, but at least it got rid of his gnawing anxiety about an imagined N.V.A. assault force just outside the wire.

He had called for illumination two nights ago also. Something had moved in the tall elephant grass at the edge of the rice paddy. He thought it was a testament to the kind of hell they lived in to know how relieved he was when he found out it was only a tiger stalking him.

Tonight, in the complete darkness and silence, he knew his own runaway thoughts could be his most terrible enemy. He fought to keep his mind from panic. He put his hand over the pocket with the short timer's calendar. He'd made it through well over three hundred nights at war already. When the sun came up he would only have thirty-six left to gut out. Less than six hours until daybreak, he could do this. He took a long slow deep breath and settled in again to listen... and to wait.

His eyelids were as heavy as sandbags when the sun finally peered out through the narrow band of sky between the top of the foothills and the bottom of the low lying monsoon clouds. Within minutes he heard the grinding of jeep gears as his relief drove up over the berm behind him. He stood up and stretched outside the bunker. He started to relax as he felt the warmth of the tropical morning sun on his cheek. He looked down at his pocket, reached inside with two fingers and took hold of his short timer's calendar.

He caught a brief glimpse of a spark of some kind from deep within the elephant grass across the rice paddy. Before he could raise his head to look, he felt a twinge in his left eyebrow. His head snapped back and his knees buckled. He landed in the deep red dust with a soft thud. PFC Charles Conway was on his back staring straight up, when the sky went black.

SECOND PLACE

'On Good Authority'

By James Moss

"The sky went black."

"Black?"

Short Story Contest Winners

Written by Editor
Wednesday, 16 November 2016 07:10

“Black,” Evan repeated.

“Black,” Sam said skeptically, after a pause.

“That’s what I’m telling you. As sure as I’m standing here, it went black.”

“What color was it before?”

“I don’t know. Blue.”

“Blue?”

“Blue.”

“Blue.”

The two stared at each other. Sam let a touch of wryness into the line of his lips. Evan shifted on the transom and pointed the boat toward the far off pier.

“You’re sitting.”

“What?” said Evan.

“You’re sitting not standing. As sure as you’re sitting there, it went...”

Short Story Contest Winners

Written by Editor
Wednesday, 16 November 2016 07:10

“Black.”

“Black indeed. Then what happened?”

“That’s the point, no one knows.”

“The point of your fishy story about a black sky is that no one knows what happened next?”

“It’s not the point of the story. It’s the point of the black sky. No one knows how it arrived or what happened next.”

“But you were there.”

“No, I wasn’t there. If I was there, I wouldn’t be here.”

“So how can you swear blind that the sky went black if you weren’t there?”

“I have it on good authority.”

“From someone who was there?”

“No, of course not. From someone who knew someone who had a relative there.”

“That’s not what would generally be thought of as good authority.”

“He’s a very religious man.”

“Who? The relative?”

“The someone who had the relative.”

“And this lends credence to the tale?”

“It does.”

“What about the relative’s faith? Or what about the someone’s who knew the someone? Doesn’t the good faith of every teller of the tale affect its truth?”

“They’re both religious. Perhaps not quite so much.”

“And you Evan. Are you religious?”

“You know I am, Sam.”

The boat sputtered in the choppy waves and Evan wrestled the tiller to get them pointed back toward the pier, which seemed to be no closer now than it had been when the

conversation started.

“Of course,” Sam shouted over the grinding motor, “being religious doesn’t necessarily stand for good authority. There are those who think it does. But we know religious types have been bearing false witness forever.”

“Well I believe him.”

“Who?”

“My friend who knows the person who had a relative there.”

As hard as Evan was working to keep the little boat on course, he was glad of the distraction. He wished he’d never told Sam about the black sky. But having done so, he had no choice but to follow through. Sam was always the same. He believed nothing Evan ever told him, at least not completely. But he seemed to find something especially dubious about the black sky.

Sam for his part was looking past Evan, off into the distance beyond the boat’s wake. He didn’t know why he had locked on to the black sky. But maybe, he thought, he had had just about enough of Evan’s tales that were a little too unspecific about the hows and the whys and the wherefores. And Evan wasn’t the only one. There were plenty of others who loved to repeat without question tales they had heard from others or from others who had heard from others. Sam was fed up with it. He wanted details, reasons, explanations. He wasn’t ready to suspend disbelief quite so readily. He wasn’t going to color the world with tall tales of questionable origin, no matter how much their retelling might make him the center of attention. The world needed something it could rely on. Not twice-chewed myths from long ago.

It had started to rain slightly as they drew closer to the pier, enough to make the two men huddle down as they bounced across the water. They had been close for many years and their silence was as plain as their speaking. They knew the drill. Evan would angle the boat toward the pier and Sam would grab the painter, spring expertly from the foredeck and lead the boat along the dock to a decent tying off point while Evan cut the motor. But they weren’t there

yet. They were still some four hundred yards out and it was getting choppy.

“It’s going to come in hard by the looks of it,” said Evan scanning the sky.

“It’s the one thing you can rely on,” said Sam.

“That and the fish not biting,” said Evan. Sam looked round at his friend and smiled ruefully. He nodded and Evan gunned the motor one last time.

THIRD PLACE

‘Two for the Road’

By Timothy Lawler

The sky went black, but I didn’t panic right away cause Freddie and I had been through a lot of big storms together over the years. The winds had been getting stronger all afternoon and the electricity had been out for hours. I sat still trying to let my eyes adjust. The house lights weakly flickered back on for a brief instant but the blackness then returned with a gloomy finality. We would have just finished watching the Six O’clock news like Freddie and I had done most nights for 48 years before his passing last June. Now, with no lights and the sky so dark, I was starting to get a tad worried.

I felt my way slowly into the kitchen, headed to Freddie’s “junk-drawer” for the flashlight. Hopefully, Freddie hadn’t taken it out and forgot to put it back in the drawer where it belonged. Freddie was known to do that kind of thing. How much I missed him. He’d be taking care of me right now, telling me to sit still while he got us some damn light.

My hand touched the flashlight in the drawer and I felt a brief wave of calm. I moved the switch but nothing happened. I clicked it back off and on again several more times with some desperation and still only ended up in complete darkness. Freddie probably knew the batteries were dead and had meant to change them, but never got to it. I loved him with all my heart, but that man could procrastinate with the best of 'em.

Freddie handled batteries and I had no idea where he kept them. I knew there were A's, C's and D's but I'd never heard of anything needing B's. Freddie would know why there were no B's or he would make something up so he would look like he knew why. He had a knack for making up stuff, but I could always tell and I just let it pass so he could feel important.

After many tries, Freddie finally quit smoking years ago so I had no idea where he might have kept matches at this point. Our stove was electric, not gas, which Freddie was never happy with, but it meant that I had no way to light my darn candles.

I sat in the darkness and began to think, WWFD. Lord, forgive me, but this was a Freddie joke that always made me smile when he said it. He had his shortcomings but he handled every situation that life threw at us. He would have gone into the kitchen, got himself a shot of whiskey with a beer chaser and sat down at the table and come up with a plan. So I headed into the kitchen, taking it slow in the dark, and poured myself a shot since I'd always known where he hid his whiskey. I sat down at the kitchen table to come up with a plan for what to do next, thinking how much easier this would be if Freddie were here with me.

The whiskey burned as I swallowed, but it gave me a warm feeling that spread through my body. A sense of calm washed over me as I focused on the problem at hand and it became clear that Freddie had the right approach as the whiskey really helped to clear my mind and quiet my nerves.

"Well, what'd you come up with?" the low familiar voice asked from across the table. I was startled for the briefest instant, but then I let those welcomed sounds wash over me. "And young lady, how is it that you clearly knew where I kept my whiskey but you have no idea of where I kept the batteries?" In the darkness, I was drawn to the loving twinkle in his eyes as he raised his shot glass and drank. He set it down empty and continued, "A long time ago, I promised to take care of you forever. Well, things didn't go quite the way we expected, did they? But I'm thinking, maybe this second time will be the charm." His hand folded over mine one more time, as it always had.

Short Story Contest Winners

Written by Editor

Wednesday, 16 November 2016 07:10

The next day, firemen checking that everyone was safe in the aftermath of the hurricane, found no one home in Freddie and Marcie's place, but they did remark about the two empty shot glasses on the kitchen table next to the half-empty bottle of whiskey . . .