

## Boardwalk Oracle

*by M.E. Proctor*

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**M.E. Proctor** lives in Livingston, Texas. After forays into SF (The Savage Crown Series), she's working on a series of contemporary detective novels. Her short stories have been published in Bristol Noir, The Bookends Review, Beat to a Pulp, All Worlds Wayfarer, Shotgun Honey and others. On Twitter: @MEProctor3

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The faded pictures on the vending machine showed a variety of cupcakes with and without a cherry on top, with and without chocolate chips. It didn't mean anything. Orlando knew that the images had nothing to do with the product that would be delivered. It was a game and it was very old. When he was a kid, his dad had taken him to the boardwalk and showed him the machine. He said it had been there for as long as he could remember. It wasn't as old as the fortune-teller machine, of course. That one went back to top hat and corset times. But the principle was the same. You put your money in and you got something worthless in exchange. The vending machine was actually a better deal. You retrieved an object. Something real that you could do something with. The fortune-teller only gave you a card. When Orlando went with his father, so many years ago, he lucked out. He got the biggest jawbreaker he'd ever seen. He worked on it all afternoon. He couldn't remember how much they put into the machine but it certainly wasn't a dollar. Everything was more expensive now, even silly nothings.

Orlando contemplated the pictures. If he got a jawbreaker again, this zap to the past would be complete. He could almost feel the shadow of his father behind him, just out of reach, and the faint smell of his pipe tobacco. His dad had been gone twenty years, with Mom close behind. Orlando was older now than his father

had been that day on the boardwalk. There was no boy holding his hand, however, waiting for the machine to deliver its meaningless bounty.

He took a deep breath and punched the picture of the chocolate cupcake, wondering if he might be making the same choice as before.

The machine whirred and clanked; a spark shot out of the back followed by a plume of white smoke. Orlando stepped back in alarm and looked around. He was alone. An old man walking his dog was too far to hear or notice anything. A couple of kids on bicycles had pedaled by and were now at the end of the seawall. It was eerily quiet. A late fall evening in the middle of the week, in an old resort town. Of course it would be desolate. That was why Orlando had come after all, to be alone with his thoughts, to allow himself to feel miserable without witnesses. Away from Gloria who shrugged at his megrims and declared that he was just plain bored because everything was going too well. It was pointless to try to explain to her that animal contentment wasn't what he aspired to. What he had imagined his life would be. She stared at him, round-eyed, and asked what he really wanted. The house, the pool, the cars, the expensive trips – fuck, his pricey whisky and cigars.

*What more do you want, hon?*

*I don't know, I don't know. I just know something's not what it should be.*

He was driving back from a routine board meeting when he saw the exit on the freeway and decided to take a peek at the ocean. The gray planks of the boardwalk and the vulgar neon signs of the bars and penny arcades had left a more lasting imprint on his memory than he realized. They were like wrapped presents for a bygone Christmas forgotten in a closet.

Even in the fading light of the day that concealed the worst scars of decrepitude, the seediness of the place could not be ignored. Many shops were boarded up and metal curtains were down on those that weren't. The coin-operated machines were battered, nicked and banged metal, flaked-off paint. Relics from the early age of automation.

Another blinding spark forced Orlando to shield his eyes. Lighted cupcakes were stamped on the inside of his eyelids. Was this thing going to explode? A deep gurgling sound came from the bowels of the machine, a wet organic eructation that awoke a mimetic echo in Orlando's stomach. He burped and tasted the coffee and blueberry muffin he had at the board meeting. He should leave. He had no business being here. This was silly. The past was gone and done. It certainly wasn't preserved in a malfunctioning vending machine.

The cavernous sloshing stopped and was replaced by a clear metallic clink. Was the thing returning his money? Orlando chuckled. Such surprising honesty!

He stuck his fingers in the coin return and felt around, gingerly. No telling what could be in there.

The pocket was empty.

Suddenly, jaunty carrousel music played and a green light flashed above the receiving tray. A deep *thunk* issued from the belly of the rusty beast. Orlando didn't remember the machine being that loud. Maybe because it had been noisy on the boardwalk that day, with vendors hawking food and carnival barkers trying to entice people into their garish exhibits. He put his hand in the shallow tray and swept its entire length.

He retrieved a key and a piece of wrapped candy.

The candy was a twin of the jawbreaker of yore. The key was a simple house key, similar to that on Orlando's keyring. A metal tag hung from it. It said *Christina Court* with the number seven embossed. An apartment building? Intrigued, he pulled out his phone and did a search. *Christina Court* was a seaside motel in walking distance. Somebody must have forgotten to return their key and dropped it in the vending machine.

*But there was that clinking metal sound when he thought his coins were being returned...*

He shrugged the thought away and decided to go to the motel. He didn't feel like driving home to Gloria yet.

What will these people say when hearing where he found their key?

It would make for an amusing anecdote. Something to enliven the next dreadful board meeting.

The motel was a sore sight. The office was in a clapboard bungalow that had once been painted white. The neon sign was off and the windows were dark. The place had either gone out of business or was strictly seasonal. A dozen small cabins fanned out behind the office building. A few had a sea view and direct access to the beach. The motel was in a prime location. Sadly, the enterprise had tumbled downhill with the entire town. There wasn't anybody to return the key to.

It wouldn't do any harm to take a peek at number seven. Orlando felt a vague trepidation, a light thrill. What would he find in the cabin? What if something had happened, a murder possibly. It was innocuous make believe and juvenile for a middle-aged banker in a three-piece suit. The motel had been closed for months. What murderer would leave a key where it could be found when there was an entire ocean to throw it in. Orlando shrugged. Being here summoned the kid that had enjoyed adventure stories, flights of fancy, and candy that made his eyes water.

Sand had blown over the path to the cabins. It was soft underfoot. Lucky number seven faced the beach. It was as dark as the others, as forlorn. He knocked anyway. What were the odds ... No answer. He tried the key. It turned without a

hitch and the door opened with nary a squeak. These cabins were better built and maintained than they looked.

Orlando tapped the light feature on his phone. He stood in a kitchen/sitting/dining room area furnished in typical beach style. Lots of white cane furniture and blue fabric. It wasn't new and far from luxurious but he could imagine a couple or family with young kids renting it for a week-end. Two doors in the back. One led to a bathroom with tub and shower, the other to the bedroom. Orlando switched on the flashlight and waved his phone around.

And froze.

There was somebody on the bed.

A boy, soundly asleep. He had pulled a blanket over himself and his head was buried in the pillow. His big mop of hair was all mussed up. Orlando went to wake him up and stopped with his hand above the child's shoulder. He was so close he could feel the heat radiating from the small body. He shielded the light of the phone and pondered what to do. The kid's face and hands were streaked with dirt. He might be five or six-years-old. The top of a torn tee-shirt was visible above the blanket. A lost boy, a runaway, a kidnapping victim? There might be heartbroken parents hoping for his return home.

The right thing to do was to call the police.

Orlando sat on the floor with his back against the bedroom wall. The child looked so peaceful, and the more he looked at him the more he hesitated to make the call. What if the boy had run away from violence and abuse, what if there were no parents? He should talk to him before he called anybody. Let the kid sleep a little longer. He would keep him safe. He unwrapped the jawbreaker and popped it in his mouth. He felt good in the cabin. Complete. He would wake up the kid when he was done with the candy.

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Orlando sat on the bed and tapped the boy's shoulder. The light from the phone bathed the room in softness. The kid rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Hello there." The kid scooted back against the headboard as if he'd been poked with a cattle prod. "It's all right. My name is Orlando." The boy shook his head. Orlando pointed a finger at the kid's chest. "What's your name?" A puzzled expression. The kid didn't understand English. Orlando tried what was left of the little Spanish his mother taught him. "Mi nombre es Orlando." He wished Gloria was there. She was fluent. "Cómo se llama?"

The boy smiled.

"Javier."

"Uh, donde es su papá, uh, mama?"

The kid looked away. There were tears in his eyes.

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Orlando called Gloria. She was the most sensible person he knew and the project that bounced inside his head, if she agreed to go along, would change their lives forever. She asked what was keeping him and he launched into an awkward story about his father, the boardwalk, and how things had changed but not really changed ... until she suggested he try doing it *in order, dear*. It all came out, the vending machine, the key, the jawbreaker and Javier. Gloria told him to give the phone to the kid.

What followed was a conversation in high-speed Spanish that ended when Javier handed him his phone back.

“I’m coming,” Gloria said. “Don’t do anything.”

“The police ...” Orlando mumbled.

“They can wait another hour.”

“What about the kid’s parents?”

“They didn’t make it, dear,” Gloria said.

From then on, Gloria was in charge. She handled the cops, the children protective services people, immigration, and the lawyer. Orlando tagged along with a smile on his face. He had known that he wanted to adopt the kid as soon as he unwrapped that jawbreaker.

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