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**You Got Yo' Seff A Big One.** (11 min 14pt)

I press the silver fork against my cheek. It feels cool.

We're sitting at breakfast in the soupy-hot late August humidity of our hotel's ancient dining room. The tables are covered with white linens that match the waiter's cotton gloves. The fresh-picked Asters are bent over in their little table vases, victims of the feverish Virginia morning air. A steady rivulet of sweat runs down my chest. When I reach again for the silver fork to start eating my eggs, the handle is seductively cool. I want to press it against my face again. When you want to press flatware against your skin then it is the hot season in Dixie.

This August, in 1964, I'm eating breakfast with my boss Carl, a fellow New Yorker traveling with me on a photo shoot for his client, the Richmond, Virginia Chamber of Commerce. The campaign is to capture northerners who are considering relocation to a more gracious and manageable size city. <sup>Sax!</sup> He smiles watching me struggle with my first bowl of breakfast grits. "Don't worry. I know a bagel place down here. It's an authentic Jewish Deli across town where they import real pastrami, pickles and bagels from New York City. We'll go there for lunch tomorrow." I nod politely thinking, "Jews, here, with a southern accent? I can't imagine it. Bagels, smuggled in at night, moonshine style? How yummy could that be this far away from New York?"

We're staying in the venerable old landmark William Byrd Hotel. My room is upstairs on the eighth floor. It's cooled by a huge rattling wood-faced air conditioner but this lobby-level dining room doesn't have any such luxury. The waiter says instead, management counts on the falling cold air escaping from the ten stories of air-conditioned guest rooms.

My photography career has been gaining a little momentum. I've been hired by Carl's small New York public relations firm to travel to Virginia and photograph all the good things about Richmond, the State Capital. Yesterday I photographed busy views of downtown shopping and a park playground with new swings and sandboxes. Today, I'm going to try to make an old folks home look inviting and pleasant. I've never been in any such facility before.

I envision scenes of Norman Rockwell-like elders gathered around a Thanksgiving dinner table. What I find is very different.

The home is an old large white clapboard farmhouse with shutters and a wide front porch. When I carry my cameras inside, I see old white-haired people, wrapped in cotton bathrobes, sitting in wheelchairs, lining the halls like abandoned crumpled statues. Most are sleeping or staring into their laps.

One old woman raises her head and smiles and says something too quietly for me to hear. I nod and give a wiggly fingers wave.

Two women in wheelchairs raise their heads as I pass by and smile and say things I can't quite understand.



I feel sad and crank up an extra wide grin. The overpowering smell of over-washed linen mixed with alcohol, urine and random wisps of fecal odor challenge my senses. I can't seem to concentrate on the chore of scouting the scene for photo locations and faces that I need to shoot. A woman in a white nurses outfit says "Let me show you where the activities happen."

I'm suddenly dizzy and feel light-headed. I don't like being here. I excuse myself to walk outside to the porch where I take deep breaths of fresh air.

Carl joins me and says, "This isn't going to be easy. Just try and find something hopeful, for God's sake."

It takes two hours to build a picture framing two residents on the shaded front porch both in fresh bathrobes smiling at each other. A man sits in a wheelchair next to a woman in a rocker. I'm baking in the full hot midday sun yelling directions into the shade for them to look at each other while a white-uniformed attendant serves ice tea on a tray. I make two trips from behind the camera to the porch scene to add plants behind the old couple so it looks more upscale. I am thinking to myself, "This is where photojournalism crosses the line and becomes pure public relations."

I am exhausted.

Carl is pleased with the image, convinced that the Chamber of Commerce will like our handling of this difficult subject and he cheerfully announces that even though it's 2:30 in the afternoon, he is taking me to the Jewish Deli across town for lunch.

I can barely keep my head up to chew the pastrami on rye sandwich that Carl calls a miracle, considering that we are 350 miles south of the Lower East Side.

The bagels have a slightly sweet Wonder Bread note and the pickles taste store-bought from having lived in a jar with preservative instead of a barrel of garlic laced brine. I nod approvingly and say that I think I will go back to the hotel and take a nap to be better rested for the next day's shoot of Richmond's Historic neighborhoods.

Entering my room, I toss my black camera bag onto the tall-backed chair with a floral-themed embroidered backrest and hurry over to the window and turn the round dial switch of the colossal air conditioner to the high position. The ceiling light dims and the floor shakes as it rumbles to life blasting chilled air into the hot stuffy room. I glance at the window to be sure the blinds are closed and strip to my underwear. I fling myself onto the humped-back Chenille-covered mattress of my bed and luxuriate in the flowing torrent of cool dry air.

I close my eyes and immediately start to drift off to sleep when a loud "clackety" sound like a broom handle being dragged heavily down the big wood slats of the old venetian blinds over the air conditioner.



My eyes pop open and I sit bolt upright, feeling vulnerable in my semi naked state and scan the window for the cause of the racket. I see something move between the three-inch wood slats of the blind.

I have goose bumps all over my body as a large Kelly green creature with a stick-shaped green body and folded forearms swivels his head looking around the room. A memory flashes in my mind of an article I read about giant insects called praying mantises that bite the head off their partners after mating. I shiver and leap off the bed, grabbing the wastepaper basket. I slam the oval opening of the trash can against the wood blind to try to trap this scary-looking creature. It falls backward through the blind and lands on the carpet. I grab a TIME magazine and throw it on top of the flailing titanic insect. It is bigger than the magazine cover. I never saw a bug this big.

I lay a Bible from the night table on one edge of the magazine to try to keep the Mantis trapped and grab for the telephone to dial the front desk. When the operator answers I shout, "Please send someone to room 804. I have a ten inch Mantis here." There's a long pause and, in a very thick Southern drawl, she says, "Y'all have a ten inch what? As scared and panicked as I am, I sense I'm sending the wrong message. "A bug, a giant bug, A monster green bug is in here and I need someone to get it out, now!" "Yes, sir" she replies.

I hang up the phone and fix my eyes on the magazine. The mantis's legs are moving but it's not making too much of a struggle. I back away from the window and, without taking my eyes off the magazine, I slip into my slacks.

There is a knock on the door and I open it to see a very short red-uniformed bellman with a pillbox hat and white gloves standing with a dustpan and hand broom. He smiles and says, "How can I help you?"

My legs are wobbly with fear as I pull his arm and guide him to the monster on the floor. Seeing the green tail and legs protruding, he bends down and gingerly peels back the magazine to reveal the bug which raises itself up on its legs and opens his giant wings. "Oh, my! You got yo seff a big one." he exclaims and uses the bristles of the brush to drag the bug onto the bottom of the dustpan. Holding pressure against the flailing mantis, he walks towards the bathroom and says, pointing with his chin to the toilet, "Lift the lid."

He brushes the creature off the dustpan into the toilet and jerks the flush handle. Water pours around the huge bug who has spread himself across the watery abyss holding on with his arms and long legs. The water settles down and he's still looking at us, not sewer-bound, but still swimming. I reach and give the flush handle another yank followed by a second and a flood of water pours on top of this bug who steadfastly holds on in the center of the swirling vortex of the flush. I'm terrified at his determination to remain in my bathroom and at the same time I admire how he fights to stay alive.

The bellman takes his hand-brush and pokes the mantis in the midsection trying to stuff him into the hole. He pokes and I flush.



We are both in a fight-to-the-death, a feverish struggle with a ten inch Kelly-green insect.

Finally, inch-by-inch the mantis disappears into the porcelain hole and seems gone. I flush six more times just to make sure. The bellman asks "Is there anything else I can do, sir?" I don't take my eyes off the toilet bowl, fearing that the green monster is just waiting for things to quiet down before he flings himself back into my room. "No, thanks. I appreciate your help" I mumble out the side of my mouth without turning my head.

After he leaves, I stand staring tensely into the toilet for a very long time imagining that a vengeful mantis will eventually launch himself out of the commode and attack me while I'm seated during a routine visit. I shiver at the thought.

It may be only the idea of the mantis's revenge but I suffer the inability to function in any seated capacity on a toilet for the next four days. Not until I return to my home in New York City do I finally go back to my normal routine in the security of my own rooms where we New Yorkers have learned to deal with our local legendary toilet residents. I remember years ago coming to accept the claims of snapping turtles, sewer rats and baby alligators growing to adulthood in the sewer pipes of New York's apartment buildings.

Scary as New York's sewer pipe citizens might be, I still fear the Mantis' visual accuracy when biting off the head of his lover after a romantic encounter. I don't need any toilet monster making any mistakes about what's dangling beneath the rim. ##