

One Last Request  
By Hilary Hattenbach

WINNER OF THE 2016 MONA SCHREIBER PRIZE FOR HUMOROUS FICTION

Abe and I struggled to push Marty off the golf cart. At 86-years-old, Marty wasn't a big guy. He was like a stubbed-out cigarette – short, wrinkled, and used up. But now that rigor mortis had set in, he may as well have been wearing a cement hat and matching loafers.

Getting him in the cart was easy. We paid \$100 to Gerry Garcia, the nurse with the Desi Arnaz haircut. He shoved Marty into a sleeping bag and strapped him in with bungee cords.

“If you get caught, I deny everything,” he said.

Earlier today, we were all playing poker in Marty's apartment at Sunshine Haven Retirement Home. One minute Marty had a crooked grin on his face and the next, it was like he got shot with a ray gun. An eerie stillness came over the guy. His eyelids flapped and he collapsed, face-first, onto his tuna sandwich. It wasn't the only death I'd witnessed at Sunshine Haven but it was the first time it happened to a good friend.

Now here we were at his favorite fishing hole in the Everglades National Park, to fulfill a promise. The three of us visited this spot last month. Marty said, “Do me a favor. When I die, bring me here and feed me to the alligators. That'll make me happy.”

We didn't tell a soul except Gerry and snuck Marty out in the wee hours. If anyone asked, we'd say he moved to the Dominican Republic.

The air was thick with the smell of marsh, like a wet beach towel left in the trunk of a car overnight. “I can't believe you talked me into this, Stan,” Abe whispered. He'd insisted on wearing a pink golf shirt with an Everglades Golf Club cap to try to blend in.

Swamp water lapped against the riverbank and a swarm of mosquitos buzzed near my cheek. I couldn't see much except the half moon up in the 2am sky.

"I'm just glad he died in October. At least it's breezy out here."

Abe let out a rickety cough followed by the whistle of his inhaler. "Looks like we murdered him."

"Obviously. But can the cops really fault us for making a friend's dream come true?" I used my cane to push the top of sleeping bag. Abe pulled from the bottom. His medical ID bracelet clanked against the gold-knotted chain he always wore around his wrist. "For Christ's sake, Abe. You sound like a tambourine player."

"It's my tinnitus. I can't hear it."

I rolled my eyes.

"Maybe we should give up and go back," Abe said.

"I'm not letting Marty down." I whacked the bag hard. It slid off the seat, making a thud against the dirt.

"How do we get him in the water? I can't lift him. I've got stenosis," Abe said.

"Oh, you have stenosis? You've only mentioned it 200 times." I shook my head.

"We have to roll him, like a burrito."

It took a while but, by kicking the bag along, we got Marty to the water's edge. Abe huffed and sat down to catch his breath. When I turned to check on him, I saw a police cruiser's flashing lights approaching.

"Uh oh."

Abe spotted the fuzz and took two hits off his inhaler. "Shit. I'm a wanted man," he wheezed. "I used to rob banks. I can't get caught."

“What?” This required a longer conversation than we had time for. “Leave it to me.”

I squatted in the dirt and had to think fast. “Marty, there’s no time for a eulogy. Vaya con dios, brother.” I kicked the bag and it flopped into the water. The surface rippled as the alligators dragged our friend deep into the swamp.

“You all right, sir?” The cop’s flashlight shined in my face.

Abe stood behind me sucking on his inhaler.

“Keep it down, Soldier. We’re surrounded. You trying to get us killed?” I said.

“Sir. I think you’re confused. Stan Goldberg, right? Sunshine Haven reported that you, Abe Peterson here, and Marty Kleinman went missing. Where’s Marty?”

“Soldier. Are you here on a rescue mission or not? We’ve been stuck in this jungle for months. I’ve got malaria.”

The cop pointed his light at Abe who shrugged and said, “He’s been like this all night.”

“Okay, Mr. Goldberg. I’ll get you home safe,” the cop said.

I faced the swamp and waved. “So long, pal. See you on the other side.”

The cop didn’t even think twice about it.