

NEVER FORGET

An Excerpt from the Novel

A NATION BEST SERVED **HOT**

by
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SEYMOUR FLAKOWITZ was a child of the Holocaust. Born in 1932, the only child of Hans and Frieda, by his age of six the signs of trouble were everywhere in Germany. His hometown of Hamburg was no exception. After Krystallnacht in November, 1938—a nationwide Nazi campaign to round up Jews and confiscate weapons—Hans bought Seymour a one-way passage to England where he was to live with a distant cousin. Little Sy barely escaped the fate of his parents, grandparents and other relatives. A frumpy woman in her forties whose husband had fled for younger pastures, the English cousin was already saddled with three screaming brats. Good intentions were not enough and, using some of her inheritance, she shipped Sy to another distant cousin in America. When the American cousin turned out to be a con artist who stole the child's traveling money, Sy landed in a Jersey orphanage.

The people who ran the orphanage beat him every time he complained, which was pretty much always. No one would adopt him because he whined constantly. The school system rewarded Sy's lack of effort with failing grades but passed him up the ladder to get rid of him. To spite the system, he stubbornly retained his low Deutsch accent, refusing to Americanize his tongue.

Sy was the butt of practical jokes. He maxed out at one-hundred-twenty pounds and stood only five feet tall. Unable to defend himself against bigger bullies, he was constantly taunted.

As an adult, his New York number-crunching civil service career lasted forty years, rewarding Sy with regular cost of living raises for his lethargy and incompetence. At sixty-five, he was given a pension and an appropriate retirement gift—a faux gold watch that refused to work. His name was misspelled on the back.

Sy complained that the government took too much of his retirement. Each check was supposed to appear in his account on the first Wednesday of each month, but never showed until the second.

He religiously played the state lottery, which fueled dreams of a permanent South Seas getaway, but instead fleeced his wallet for hundreds of dollars each year. Sy kept this secret from his wife of thirty-five years. If Sadie ever found out, he'd be in for a sound thrashing.

Sadie was his parasitic wife, a rotund bully who relished every excuse to thrash her smaller husband. Physical violence was not an option for him. It certainly was for her as well as her piece-of-crap dog. Sy gagged at its name: Poopsie. A miniature rat terrier, the growling cur nipped at him every time he wasn't looking and was too quick for his foot when he retaliated.

Sy's neighbors in Centennial Village, a cheap condo retirement community in west Delray Beach, Florida, were old and cranky just like him. Visiting grandchildren were threatened with summary execution should they dare act their age.

The cantankerous couple had no children, let alone grandchildren. They hadn't slept together since their honeymoon, a two-day extravaganza in a cheap motel near Coney Island. After Sadie rode Sy's skanky frame for three minutes of "whoopy-don't," she proclaimed him inadequate and announced her retirement from future lascivious behavior. If he didn't like it, he could "pound sand." Sy had to look up the word "lascivious" in the dictionary. Thus endeth conjugal bliss.

Next door neighbors were constantly beating on their side of the common wall when Sadie harangued Sy in her nails-on-a-chalkboard voice, which was pretty much always. His neighbors hated him because he hated them. Everyone hated everyone.

Sy and Sadie lived in a culture of miserable elderly whose goal was to make someone else's day worse than their own. Most came from New York City's east side, where the Golden Rule was replaced by the Iron Pyrite Rule: "Screw unto others before they screw unto youse."

Sy craved sympathy but was lucky to receive a daily dose of apathy. The last time he could remember smiling was when he slipped tiny chicken bone shards into Poopsie's Alpo, causing a near fatal hack attack. The dog lived. Both he and Sadie were dismayed for entirely different reasons.

Anxious, Sy luckily avoided suspicion and was determined to try again. He'd have to be careful. Sy knew if Sadie caught him, Centennial Village would have its first rolling pin homicide.

Today started as every other, with Sadie nagging her do-nothing husband. "Seemowa, why don't you make yourself useful and go to the stowa? I'm sick o' lookin' atcha. Winn-Dixie got a special. Go get us some dollar chickens, as many as you can, and I'll freeze 'em. You don't make enough money for anything else. Why I married ya, I'll never know. You're good for nuttin'. Now get outta hea'."

Sy grabbed any excuse to get away. In silence he picked up his purple Minnesota Vikings golf hat that he'd bought for a quarter at the flea market. Dressed in his drab yellow sport shirt and candy-striped shorts, his bony legs peeked out like two popsicle sticks stuffed in worn green tennis shoes. It was Sy's "pistachio" outfit. Many older men in South Florida dressed like him. It was their way of saying, "I'm retired and don't give a shit."

Sy could have walked to the grocery store. It was only a half block away. But no one in South Florida walked when they could drive. Driving was a God-given right. It was the only time Sy felt empowered. Climbing into his '95 Ford Taurus, he had to adjust the seat all the way forward. Sadie always drove when the two of them went anywhere together. He would leave the seat forward just to piss her off the next time she drove—anything to exact a small measure of revenge.

Driving to the Winn-Dixie, he steeled himself for another round of parking roulette. Always full, the lot was typically too small for the traffic generated. His Taurus bore the scars of many battles. One more fender bender wouldn't matter. Sy was up to the challenge as he plunged into the fray, relishing the chance to vent his pent-up frustration.

Reserved for the disabled, handicapped spots were nearest to the stores and highly prized. It seemed everyone his age had handicap cards hanging from their rearview mirrors—the prescriptions for which were bribed from their doctors. No one but a sucker balked at grabbing these spots when they were available. Just last week he'd seen two spry old men with handicap cards vacate their cars and duke it out like kangaroos over possession of one of these cherished spots.

Sy had beginner's luck this day, securing a spot next to the handicapped zone on the third go-around. An old woman walking her grocery cart was the only obstacle. He honked his horn and barely missed the crone in haste to grab the spot. The unilateral row lasted a minute. Shriill threats and shaken fists greeted Sy as he exited his car. He simply ignored the diatribe and strolled into his favorite deli restaurant next to the Winn-Dixie. The infuriated woman waited until he was out of sight and looked around for possible snitches, then rammed her shopping cart

into the side of Sy's Taurus, leaving a large dent. Satisfied, she left the cart in the middle of a rare open space, flipped off the irate driver who wanted it, then drove off to fight another day.

Whenever free from Sadie's wrath, Sy's favorite hangout was The Bagels and Such sports bar. He wasn't a sports fan and detested bagels. It was the Such that drew him to this eatery. Sadie's meals could best be described as heart attacks on a plate. Jammed with fat, cholesterol, salt and sugar, everything she prepared was calculated to shorten his lifespan. Store-bought pastries, cheese soups, eggs fried in lard, macaroni and cheese, chipped beef on toast—nicknamed “SOS”—pancakes loaded with syrup and various flavored ice creams were some of her offerings. Threatening her diminutive husband with bodily harm, Sadie forced him to eat everything she served, hoping he would die of caloric overload.

Sy choked it all down, often leaving the apartment to stick a finger down his throat and heave Sadie sludge underneath the neighbor's hedge. No one could figure out why Mrs. Steinberg's hedge was so lush. It was the envy of the neighborhood.

To Sadie's dismay, Sy gained no weight and had the blood pressure, pulse and cholesterol readings of a long-distance runner. Sadie, however, had ballooned like a dirigible and was doubtless destined to pre-decease him if she continued this gluttonous diet.

Sy had one physical impairment, common at age seventy-five. He suffered from occasional incontinence and wore the cheap, store brand protective pull-ups that Sadie bought for him at Winn-Dixie. She teased him about it, making pee-pee jokes that turned his stomach.

Sy enjoyed salads—the “Such” he never got at home. Taco salads, oriental salads, even plain tossed salads, were all he ever ordered. His favorite—white asparagus with tossed greens, carrot slices, chopped tomatoes and scallions, black olives with the house vinegarette—was on

the menu today. He ordered it, and for thirty brief minutes, Sy sighed in contentment, forgetting his sundry woes.

Leaving the exact amount of money for the meal on his table, Sy hurried out of the sports bar, stiffing the waitress as usual. Only suckers left tips. He felt too good to cut short his outing, so a stop at the nearby Dollar General store was in order. Sadie would be angry at him for this dalliance. She wanted to know his whereabouts every minute. Whenever possible he would stall his return just to piss her off and assert his independence. A short period of emancipation was better than none at all.

Sy wandered the Dollar General aisles for a good half hour, not intending to buy, secure in the knowledge that he could afford anything in the store. Energized, he was now ready for grocery store conflict.

The Winn-Dixie grocery store on West Atlantic Avenue was a study in anthropological hostility. Most of the personnel were blacks. Of those, Haitians were the majority. Most of the customers were white and Jewish. It was a volatile combination, fire and ice. Hatred was endemic. Store managers were trained in anger management but swallowed Excedrin by the handful, trying their best to deflect tension. It was a losing proposition. Calls to 911 were frequent.

Sy grabbed a cart and marched to the meat department at the back of the store. A big sign loomed over the section: "CHICKENS \$1.00 EACH – LIMIT 2 PER CUSTOMER." No matter the plucked poltroons were the size of Cornish game hens. This was a good deal and they were going fast. Sy, oblivious to hostile stares, piled fifteen of the bagged and bleeding birds into his cart and started wheeling toward the checkout lines. He was a man on a mission.

“Mista, it say two to a customa,” chirped a stock boy who was feverishly re-supplying the chicken section.

“Hey buddy, can’t you read?” came another voice.

Sy ignored both and hurried to the front of the store, dripping a trail of poultry blood. Nothing would deter him from his appointed task. This was his day and he was empowered. He got in the “ten-items-or-less” lane, populated by eight customers and one young female cashier. A large black man in front of him wore a beard, a gold necklace and flashed two gold front teeth. His large head of braided hair was covered by a do-rag and his chest was covered by a cut-off tee shirt with the motto “HATE ROCKS” on the front. His cart held hot dogs, potato chips and a twelve-pack of beer. When the rest of the line moved up, the black was eyeing the check-out girl and failed to move quickly enough for Sy, who nudged the back of the man’s foot with his cart.

The curved metal bar that protrudes from a grocery cart’s lower rack is exactly the same height as an adult Achilles tendon. Seymour’s nudge registered somewhere between annoyance and pain, and the man turned on Sy with Black Panther wrath.

“Ow! You do dat again, ol’ man, and I shove dis cart up yo’ ass.” Then he saw the chickens. “Wha’ da fu’? Yo’ in da wrong line an’ yo’ got too many dem birds an’ way. Get out’a here, sucka.”

“I vant my sheekins,” replied Seymour, crossing his arms over his chest in defiance, standing firm.

The commotion drew stares and rumblings from customers. The female cashier shook her head. Trouble was brewing. She eyed her assistant manager, who loomed above the fray in his observation booth.

“Mista, da sign say two to a customa. Please take da res’ back,” the cashier said as the manager rose from his chair.

“Yeah, ya heard her, foo’.” The black man had right on his side and was starting to enjoy this.

“No! I vant my sheekins,” shouted Sy, stomping his foot for emphasis.

Customers on the adjoining aisles were watching with interest. Some were in favor of the much smaller man.

“Leave him alone, you bully,” said one.

“Let him have his damned chickens,” muttered another.

Drip...drip...drip. Chicken blood formed a small pool under Sy’s cart.

The assistant manager arrived and diplomatically suggested what he thought was a brilliant solution. “Sir, you may have your chickens if you go through the regular line eight times,” he proclaimed, pleased with his logic.

Applause and cries of “Yeah!” broke out spontaneously from some customers.

Sy was high on adrenaline. He would not buckle under the pressure. “No, no, no! I vant my sheekins!” he screamed, pushing his cart forward, this time with gusto...into one very pissed off black man’s stomach.

Big mistake.

HATE ROCKS pushed back with twice the force, ramming the cart into Sy’s gut. A distinct “Woof” from the small warrior could be heard three aisles down. Losing his balance, Sy careened into carts and customers behind him. A matronly woman at the end of the line had just picked up a designer birthday cake. The large box was balanced precariously on top of her cart. A domino effect of cascading bodies caused the box, cart and woman to careen into a giant

pyramid of stewed tomato cans. The crash sent the cake and seventy-two-cans cascading down upon her head, burying the poor woman. A few bystanders rushed to help, dragging the moaning, frosting-covered victim from beneath the avalanche.

The horrified manager ran to her aid. He miscalculated his approach. Sliding on the gooey cake frosting, he launched himself into an adjacent pyramid of muskmelons. Customers cheered heartily and applauded. Shopping for groceries with free entertainment—priceless!

The indignant customers in the “ten-items-or-less” line spewed epithets. The angry black man cursed loudest, looming with clenched fists over a prone Sy, who stared up at his adversary in shock.

“Fu’ yo’ mama! Fu’ yo’ papa! Fu’ yo’ gramma! Fu’ yo’, yo’ li’l shi’ fo’ brain assho’!” he screamed, spraying Sy’s face with spit.

Two elderly ladies in the next aisle watched the ruckus in amazement. Babs elbowed her friend, Sheila. “What’s he saying?” she asked in a loud voice over the mayhem.

“I think it’s called Ebonics, dear,” Sheila replied with a mixture of fascination and fear.

By now chicken juice had formed a robust river of sanguine salmonella, wending its way through many customers’ feet. People were hopscotching like clog dancers to avoid the flow.

Everyone was yelling. Some cursed in anger. Others howled with laughter. A hundred polarized voices picked sides. The assistant manager, new to his position, fled in panic to dial 911. “Emergency! Riot! Winn-Dixie, West Atlantic. Hurry!” he yelled into the phone.

A riot in a grocery store is an invitation to a world-class food fight. Pent-up hostilities rose to the fore. Customers emptied their carts, flinging everything accumulated from the produce aisle to the deli at nearby targets. Tomatoes, carrots, lettuce, cauliflower, peaches, strawberries, onions and acorn squash merged with sausage, sliced beef, liverwurst, Swiss cheese

and olive loaf merged in a hailstorm of edible weapons. Fist fights and hair pulling broke out. Customers fell to the floor, some rolling in the chicken blood, others slipping on gastronomic debris. Over the fray, a siren could be heard approaching.

Sy was now ringed by the angry mob. He had never been so frightened in his life, even when Sadie was on the rag. The black man was shaking him, just one of many who were shouting and threatening violence. Sy closed his eyes and scrunched his neck, wishing he were a turtle. In fear for his life, he lost control of his bladder.

Incredibly, Sy's midriff expanded like an automatic life preserver. A massive stench permeated the crowd, gagging everyone and causing a chain reaction of vomit throughout the store.

"He's got a bomb!" shrieked a woman covered in fruit juice and bile. She was pointing at Sy's expanding midriff.

What followed made the previous acrimony pale in comparison. Like Pamplona's "Running of the Bulls," an entire store full of screaming, shoving humanity raced for the exits. Left to fend for themselves, the weak and infirm were trampled in the mad rush for fresh air.

Sergeant Don Budd and his partner, Corporal Jack Anders had just arrived, responding to the 911 call. The sea of humanity disgorging from the grocery store looked like lemmings about to jump off a cliff. Many were covered in slime. All were choking and gasping. "Holy shit, would you look at that!" Anders exclaimed.

Budd grabbed his mike. "All units, we have a possible 10-55 or 10-81 in progress at the Winn-Dixie, West Atlantic, Delray. Proceed stat!"

Abandoning protocol, he added, "Damn it! We need back-up!"

Sy had fainted. Waking to the stench of skunk, landfill and vomit, he regurgitated his lunch in a viscous mass that covered his face and neck like multi-colored oatmeal. His pants had split open, revealing a mass of plastic goo surrounding his groin. Looking like he'd consumed a year's supply of Sadie's cuisine in one sitting, so inflated was his waist he could neither stand nor sit.

He was alone. The store was vacant. For five minutes, Sy thrashed about like an overturned tortoise, listening to the commotion outside. Crying for assistance, he received none. Helpless in his fragrant fate, his mind wandered to a place and time long passed. *This is what my relatives must have felt like at Auschwitz*, he mused.

Four tall beings dressed in Hazmat suits burst into the store. Sy looked up. Aliens stared down.

Just before fainting the second time, a single thought consumed his mind:

I am in Hell.