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The Ignoble Nobel Prize Winner
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Chapter 1

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A chitinous crunch and piercing squeal greeted Grant Highgrim when he stepped out of his dented rusted car, making his stomach turn as he scraped the remains of a huge bug from his shoe. Highgrim had hated creepy-crawlies ever since his older brother tackled him and made him eat the disgusting things. Resolved to get the interview with the world's oldest man hiding in the small town nursing home, Highgrim ignored the sulfurous stench that rose from the bug's carcass and his churning stomach.

My landlord's not going to wait much longer for my rent.

Three months into his new job at the stupid ad sheet, his rent was overdue. His salary barely covered his rent and gas, let alone food and beer. The interview was a make-or-break. He rubbed the little starch belly growing underneath his belt buckle.

I'm sick of noodles and potatoes.

Peering around the parking lot, he saw hundreds of thumb-sized and larger beetles marching toward the far side of the care facility. They disappeared under cars, only to reappear closer to where stark branches of leafless trees leaned over the roof on the far side of the lot. The vermin sent his skin crawling. For a moment, he gazed at their progress, not believing his eyes.

More of the vile pests, disjointed antennae wriggling like tentacles, surrounded the nursing home than infested the fields around his apartment complex. Some of the vermin here were ten times the size too. These creatures mustered as if planning an attack. Shuddering at the thought of intelligent bugs, Highgrim, careful not to step on the large insects, sprinted across the lot into the nursing home as if hellhounds chased him.

When the doors hissed behind him, Highgrim glanced around the lobby to see if anyone had noticed his inelegant entrance. The foyer was empty. Highgrim leaned against the doorjamb to catch his breath.

If this keeps up, I'm going to have a heart attack before I get another paycheck.

A huge Wheel of the Master hung high on the wall across the well-lit lobby, the religious icon reminding the aged residents peace waited for them at the end of their life's journey. The different pieces of colored glass along the spokes and rim sparkled, especially the amethyst chunk at the hub. Little splats of color sparkled across the flagstone floor, only to dim as a cloud passed overhead. The aroma of holy incense, blocking the stench of the infernal beetles outside, filled the air. The floor and walls were blessedly free of vermin, and a sense of peace, a warm benediction, flowed over him. For the first time since moving to this infernal delta backwater, Highgrim felt safe. The low wooden counter below the Wheel appeared unattended. Surprised, the reporter scanned the lobby for

someone to lead him to his subject. As he stared, the light from the skylight above grew dimmer.

Pulling out a handkerchief, Highgrim wiped his balding forehead. I wonder how they keep the vermin out of here. He searched for bug traps but saw none.

A piano began to bang in the distance. A host of wavering, off-key voices rose...or shouted...or just moaned rose in an oldies sing-a-long. One creative participant yipped like a dog in rhythm with the song. Grant Highgrim stepped deeper into the empty lobby, ready to run, but he had a deadline to meet if he wanted to call himself a reporter again. Somewhere in this confusion existed the world's oldest human being, 150 years young, waiting to divulge his secret formula for a long life...if the geezer could remember...and Highgrim could coax him to talk.

His boss had bet him he would fail, just like all the other reporters who had tried to interview Dr. Henry J. Allsdipp had. Highgrim's research told him not even one slick broadcast types had managed the feat over the years. He wondered why. Most people loved talking about themselves if given the opportunity.

Just like that SOB of a boss to stack the odds.

The gauntlet had been thrown when his publisher told Highgrim he had passed his probation period at the Ad Gazetteer. Gathering his courage, he had suggested that the shopper's readers might like some local human-interest stories along with the quaint and curious facts then scattered among the ads.

The publisher had smirked. "I don't need a reporter. I need a compiler of interesting facts. A high school kid could do the job after school."

Highgrim had swallowed hard, knowing he'd gotten his job because he could design attractive layouts and readable pages. Still, he searched his mind for some way to convince his boss to give him a chance to be a reporter again and maybe a raise, but he came up lacking.

"You think you got the skills to interview our local celebrity?"

"Who's that?" Highgrim cringed at the thought of interviewing some hog caller or crochet maven. "What's their specialty?"

"Didn't know we had an actual Noble Prize winner living in Delta, did you?" The chuckle shook his boss' belly. "Bet you a bottle of Jack Daniels Black Label that you can't get Dr. Allsdipp to talk to you. He talks to no one."

...excerpt...

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