



All the News I Can't Use

Nobody wears dark suits in Florida unless they're going to a funeral or have something super serious to discuss.

This guy seemed like he thought his shiny midnight-blue outfit made him look slick. He kept tugging his tie and flicking his bangs while checking out his reflection in our glossy (but fake) marble countertop.

"P.T., mind the front desk," said Mom, dialing down the volume knob on the walkie-talkie she wore clipped to her belt. "I need to talk to Mr. Pompano in my office."

"It's Pom-PAN-o," said the man in the suit.

"Sorry," said Mom.

The guy just nodded like she should be.

"P.T.?" said Mom.

"Okay," I said with a shrug.

"This way, Mr., uh, Pom-PAN-o . . ."

She held open the door to her tiny office and quickly whispered, "Keep Grandpa busy!"

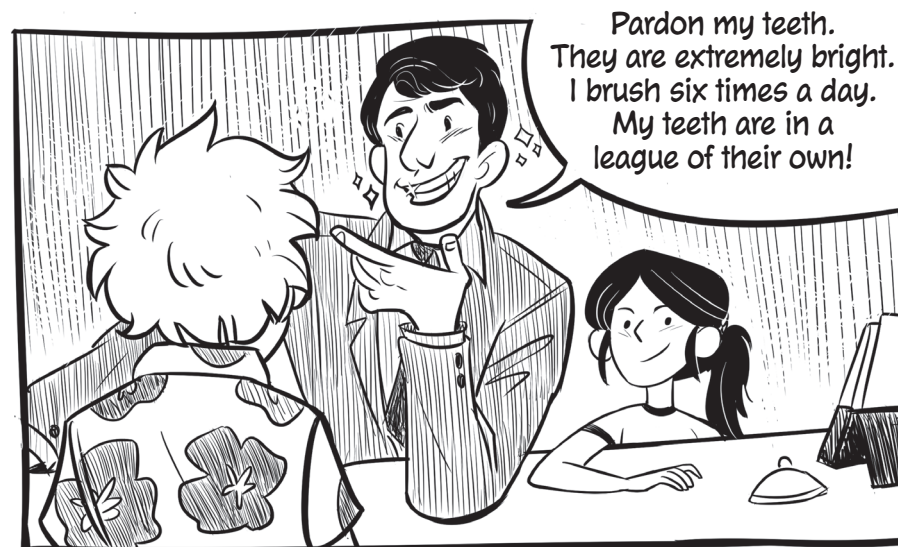
"What? Why?"

"Mr. Pompano is from *the bank*."

Oh-kay. Now I understood.

Grandpa isn't very good at grown-up stuff like banking or staying awake while driving. He's better at turning smiling peanut heads into exotic Hawaiian fruits. Or burping up gross salad gas after guzzling Cel-Ray soda. Or telling stories about how things used to be "back in the day."

While I guarded the lobby, a dad and a daughter came in. I didn't recognize either one of them. They had to be that very rarest of rare tropical birds: paying customers.



“Hi there,” said the dad. “I’m Manuel ‘Manny’ Ortega, new to the sports team at WTSP—Tampa Bay, St. Petersburg, and Sarasota’s channel ten. We’ve got the news you need when you need it. Unless you need it right now, because I’m not on the air until five. Catch me right after Dr. Phil.”

“You do sports, Dad,” said his daughter, rolling her eyes. She looked about the same age as me. “Not news.”

“Sports *is* news. We always step up to the plate. And remember: there is no ‘I’ in ‘team.’”

I was just sort of nodding. Mr. Ortega, who sounded like a smooth radio deejay, talked very, very fast.

“We just checked in,” said his daughter. “I’m Gloria. My dad lost our room key.”

“Fumbled it behind my own goal line,” said her dad.

“He dropped it in the swimming pool.”

“Kudos on that underwater pool-cleaning robot,” said Mr. Ortega. “It gave one hundred and ten percent.”

“That’s mathematically impossible, Dad.”

“Be that as it may, the robot showed us everything it had out there today. Ate the key in ten seconds flat. A new outdoor pool record!”

“Do we get CNBC on our cable?” asked Gloria.

“I think so. Is that the one with the *Today* show?”

“Whoa there, kiddo,” said her father with another blindingly bright smile. “In our family, we only watch the CBS morning news on WTSP—CBS channel ten.”

“Right,” said Gloria. “This week that’s what we watch. Next week? Who knows what channel you’ll be on.” She turned to me. “CNBC is a business news channel. You know, stock markets, financial data, earnings reports.”

“That’s the one with all the numbers and junk, right?”

Now Gloria rolled her eyes at me instead of her dad.

“Riiiiight,” she said. “The numbers and junk.”

“I think it’s, like, channel forty-six. I’ve skipped over it a few times on my way to HBO or ESPN.”

“Oooh,” said Mr. Ortega. “ESPN. The top dogs. The big kahunas. Gotta keep my eyes on that prize. It’s fourth and long, and I’m going for six!”

I pulled open the drawer where we keep the spare room keys. We don’t do those magnetic cards you swipe through a reader. Grandpa prefers the old-fashioned kind with a big plastic fob, a tag that says, “Drop in any mailbox. We guarantee postage!”



guarantee postage!” It does not say, “Drop in the nearest swimming pool.”

“So what room are you guys in?” I asked.

“Second floor,” said Gloria. “Room 233.”

I shot her one of my slyest winks. “You didn’t sneak a bucket of chicken up there, did you?”

“Huh?”

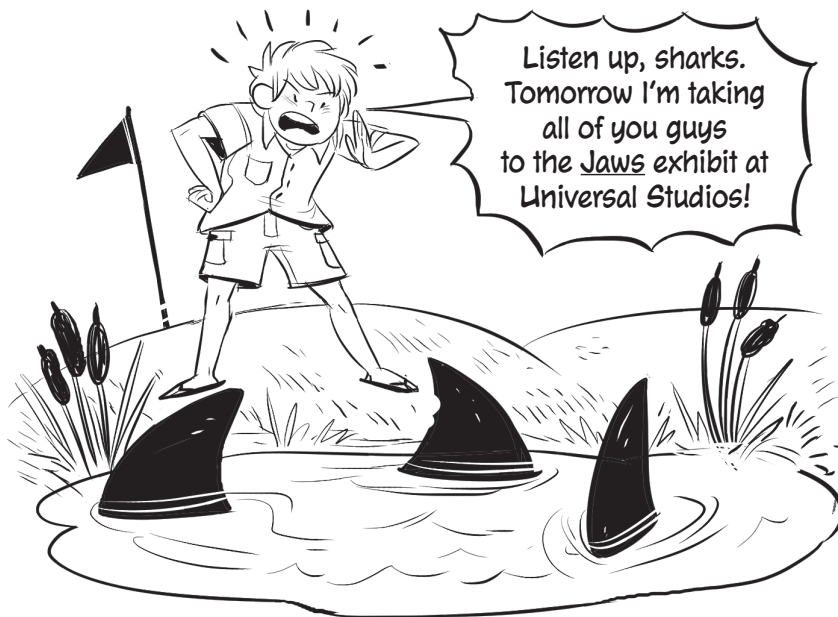
“Never mind. Long story.”

I might’ve told her about the alligator and the laundry cart and how I rode it chariot-style to a nearby golf course. I might’ve even added a few new details, like what happened at the water hazard when I discovered it was infested with sharks.

But I didn’t have time.

I could see Grandpa ambling across the parking lot.

He was making a beeline for the front office.



Happy-Stinky Fruit

“Here you go,” I said, tossing Gloria Ortega a spare key to room 233.

I hopped over the check-in counter and bopped the desk bell to alert Mom that I’d just spotted Grandpa.

“Now, if you two don’t mind,” I said, ushering the Ortegas toward the door, “we need to lock up the lobby so our staff can restock the Coke machine.”

“Seriously?” said Gloria.

“Oh, yeah. There’s a lot of coin counting involved. Have to roll the pennies in those little paper sleeves . . .”

“The Coke machine takes pennies?”

“It’s an old machine.”

Gloria shook her head. Mr. Ortega gave me a jaunty salute.

“Play like a champion today,” he said.

“Yes, sir.” I escorted them both out of the lobby and locked the door.

While the Ortegas climbed the steps to the second floor, I headed across the parking lot to intercept Grandpa.

“Hey, Grandpa, what’s up?”

“Hmmm?”

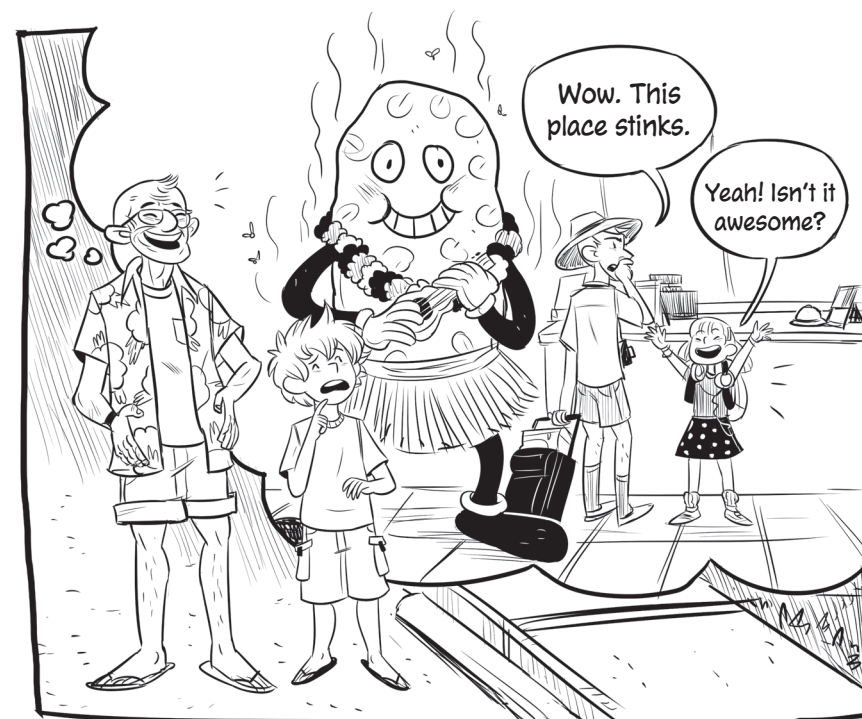
He had that far-off look in his eye, the one he always gets when he’s dreaming up a new “attraction.”

“Wanda?” he said into his walkie-talkie. “Pick up. I have a huge idea! This is bigger than those mer-kids we did in the swimming pool with the windup baby dolls. Wanda? Where are you?”

“Bigger than the mer-kids?” I said. “The mer-kids were huge. What is it, Grandpa?”

He burped. Once again, the scent of celery filled the air.

“P.T., I just figured out the ideal, perfect location for our new Happy-Stinky Fruit! We should put it in the lobby with the cat’s litter box hidden inside so when people check in, the Happy-Stinky Fruit would actually *stink*! It’d be incredible. Disney doesn’t have anything like it. None of their attractions stink. We’re finally going to show the world who’s the top Walt in Florida. Me!”



“Neat idea, Grandpa. But I’ve got an even better one! I think the Happy-Stinky Fruit should go out back.”

“Really? Where?”

“Come on. I’ll show you.”

I took Grandpa by the hand and led him to the rear parking lot, where you can still see a stretch of the narrow railroad tracks for the old ride-on train sunk into the asphalt.

It was about as far from the front office as we could go and still be on Wonderland property.

And that’s exactly where Mom needed Grandpa. Far, far away.



The Good Old Days

You see that pavilion?” I said. “We’re not using it for anything except picnic tables. What if you put the sculpture inside and we called it the Hawaiian Picnic Island?”

Grandpa was shaking his head.

“Nope, nope, nope,” he said as we walked over to it. “Can’t do that, P.T. This is the Wonder World Express Depot.”

“It is?” I said, pretending I didn’t know what the ramshackle shed used to be.

“Back in the day, this is where we’d load up the railroad cars.”

“Is this where you met the lady with the scarf?” I asked, knowing Grandpa would launch into his favorite story—the one about the beautiful blonde in the

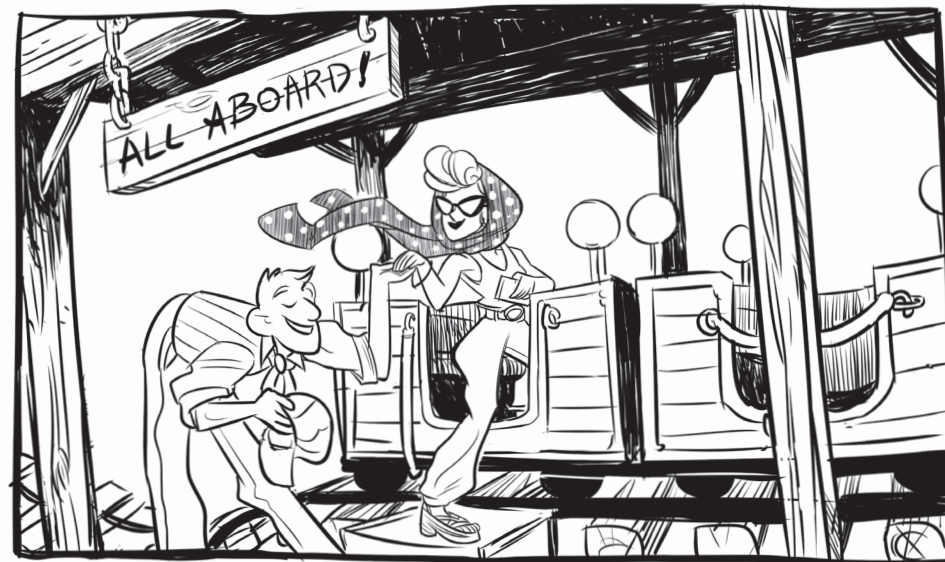
sunglasses and red polka-dot scarf. I’d listen. It would give Mom enough time to finish with the banker.

Grandpa sat down at one of the picnic tables and patted the bench for me to join him.

“This is the exact spot,” said Grandpa. He had a different kind of dreamy look in his eyes. “Of course, this was way back—before you were born. Before your mother was born. It was even before I met your grandmother, may she rest in peace. The year was 1973. Disney World was already open, so most of the glamorous movie stars and Hollywood types were skipping St. Pete and heading over to Orlando. But not my blonde.”

“Was she a movie star?”

“If she wasn’t, she should’ve been. Oh, she was beautiful, P.T. *Beautiful*.”



“She was here for a whole week. Sheila was her name. She must’ve taken a half dozen train rides around the property—one on every day of her stay. She’d say, ‘This place is perfect,’ and I’d say, ‘That’s why we call it Wonder World, ma’am. It is full of marvels to behold and stories to be told!’ My beautiful blond visitor wanted to know everything about every single display. The Mars rocket. Morty D. Mouse. Dino the Dinosaur. She was the first person I ever met who seemed to love Wonder World even more than I did.”

“I love it, too, Grandpa,” I said, because I knew he needed to hear somebody say it. Plus, I do love the Wonderland, the motel that Walt Wilkie’s Wonder World turned into.

“On her last Saturday, after we took our train ride together, she told me she was hungry. Wanted pancakes. That made me smile. I thought I was the only one who liked a short stack of strawberry-banana pancakes for dinner. She headed down the boulevard to the IHOP. I never saw her again.”

Grandpa sniffled a little. I think he might’ve been tearing up.

“I don’t know why she never came back,” Grandpa said with a sigh. “But I will never, *ever* forget her face. Like an angel, she was. An angel with a red polka-dot scarf instead of a halo.”

I nodded.

We sat and didn’t say anything.

After a few minutes, I asked him, “You ever think about running the railroad again? Putting the train back on the tracks?”

“Sometimes. But it would take a lot of work, P.T. *A lot* of work.” He stood up and started wandering off. “First I’d need to overhaul the engine, repaint the cars and the caboose, find my engineer’s cap. . . .”

He was in that dreamy zone again, heading back to his workshop behind the swimming pool to tinker with his oversized toy train.

I bolted to the lobby to unlock the front door.

I didn’t need to.

The man in the dark suit was already seated in his purring convertible. Mom was trying to talk to him over the engine noise.

“We need more than a month, Mr. Pompano,” I heard her say.

“It’s Pom-*PAN*-o,” shouted the banker, checking his reflection, once again, in the rearview mirror. “And you and your motel are standing in the way of progress, Ms. Wilkie. This property could be huge. I mean colossal. Hey, if you have to think, why not think big? Enjoy the rest of your day.”

He sped out of the parking lot.

Mom didn’t look very happy.

In fact, if I didn’t know her better, I’d say she looked like she might cry.



The Bad New Days

But I'd be wrong.

My mother, Ms. Wanda Wilkie, never cries.

That queasy look I saw on her face?

That was just anger. Mom was mad.

"How dare he," she muttered, storming back into the lobby. She was talking to herself, not me. "One month? How can anybody scrape together one hundred thousand dollars in one month?"

She banged the Coke machine in the sweet spot between the Sprite and Fanta buttons. A frosty bottle of diet cola clunked down into the pickup bin.

Mom started feeding quarters into the machine's money slot anyway.

"No more freebies, P.T."

"Okay."

As her coins plunked, one by one, into the

machine, she said, "Now we only have to come up with ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars."

"Why does that man want all that money?"

"Because we owe it to him. Five years ago, Grandpa took out a one-hundred-thousand-dollar loan with a balloon payment. Of course, he never told *me* about it."

"You have to pay with balloons?"

"P.T.?"

Mom gave me the double raised eyebrows. That always means my cute remarks are not currently considered to be all that cute.

"Okay," I said, "so what does a balloon payment really mean?"

"It means that at a certain point in time—let's say thirty days from today—the entire loan has to be paid back in full."

"But what if we can't pay it back?"

"The bank takes over the motel."

"You mean that guy in the suit will be working behind the front desk?"

"No, P.T. If we can't pay off our debt, the bank will sell the Wonderland to somebody else. Probably somebody with 'huge' and 'colossal' plans, like tearing it down so they can put in condos and a strip mall. But I'm not going to let that happen."

Mom stomped into the office, probably to try to

come up with a way to save the only home I've ever known. I never dreamed somebody would want to tear it down and build something ordinary and boring.

Come on. This is the Wonderland.

There's nothing ordinary or boring about it!

At least there won't be as long as my family owns it.