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July 11, 2014

To Whom it Concerns

The author, a former writer and producer with The Weather Channel, has taught at four universities and is currently marketing his first novel, *Piscazzi's Pizza*.

I wrote "Not for Scrutiny" after visits to the Jefferson Davis Monument and Mammoth Caves National Park (both in western Kentucky).

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Don Fred

Following: "Not for Scrutiny"

## NOT FOR SCRUTINY

Last year my supervisor in the Department of the Interior ordered me to make an inspection tour of several national parks in the forty-eight contiguous states. Aware of the dangers and unable to defy the command of a superior, I ordered an unmarked government van from the motor pool and began my tour along the upper East Coast. I did not arrive in the South until the summer was well under way.

A visit to this cabalistic and inhospitable region is a mistake at any time of year, but especially so during the summer, when, in the impossible heat of the afternoon, bubble gum crackles and fries on the sidewalks and dust devils range the cotton and tobacco fields with the regularity of ocean tides.

During the hottest part of one such insufferably hot and hazy day, a fragrance of questionable origin wafted through the windows of my van. It was one of those fresh air smells that simply isn't fresh air.

If I'd had a passenger, I would have either threatened him or kicked him out, but since I had no passenger, I theorized that there was a waste-treatment facility nearby.

In search of an explanation, I arrived at the visitors' center of Mammoth Hills National Park and hailed a ranger as he was about to enter his vehicle. As I approached, he stood beside the cab of his pickup, which, oddly, oozed the odor that I had been hoping to escape.

The ranger, a well-tanned, broad-shouldered bruiser, looked to be in his late twenties or

early thirties and was very tall, about six-foot-three. His ancestry was clearly European, possibly a race of Nordic giants. His uniform consisted of a light green shirt, olive green pants, and a broad-brimmed, olive-green ranger's hat. I stood a few feet in front of him. He looked down at me, smiling.

We spoke a few perfunctory words of greeting. His voice was soft, yet deep and manly. He offered his hand, and my hand disappeared inside his.

The ranger squeezed too long and too hard. I surmised both that he had recognized my Northern accent and that he either played football or wrestled grizzly bears.

Despite my discomfiture, I smiled up at him as we continued to shake.

He adopted one of those condescending looks that Southerners frequently give to Yankees who are off home turf.

I looked him right back with a meaningful glare.

He responded with an expression of mild amusement and increased the pressure of his grip.

You must expect this kind of mental play in this part of the rural South, where, despite the national park, visitors from the North are not a common item. The local inhabitants assume that the Civil War is in a prolonged state of cease-fire. ... The lull could end at any moment.

The ranger epitomized Southern contempt toward the more rational of America's people, smiling graciously as I eyed him with suspicion, sneering when he thought I was looking away. Lean and tawny as a mountain lion, he stood a foot taller and several magnitudes of muscle stronger than I, and he brandished a billy club and a revolver with an air of satisfaction and confidence. His free hand touched these items and skipped to his broad-brimmed ranger's hat, as if to remind me that I was at the mercy of the law, which is not an entirely satisfactory assurance in this perverse region, where the words *Ku Klux Klan* and *Robert E. Lee* are enough to stir horrible chants from a gathering of the Ladies' Auxiliary. ... It was plain to see that the ranger was not in the habit of letting something as unimportant as a Yankee get under his skin.

Wrenching my hand free from his grip, I said cautiously, "Sir, I don't like to complain. But I mean to tell someone that since Missouri I've driven through eighty-five miles of Kentucky and the smell hasn't let up once. It seems to me that the celebrated fine Southern breeding ought to include some lessons about table manners and proper restraint."

"Sir," the ranger responded. He had a voice that was both deep and gentle. "We are sincerely aware of the defamatory character of the air in thisah hyeah part of the state." He smiled patronizingly as a weed danced between his teeth. "But the very soil you're stayndin' on is the cause of the problem."

"*The soil?*" I scoffed. "What has *the soil* got to do with anything?"

He reached into his jeep and produced a pamphlet, which he handed to me. I took it from him. He pointed a finger at the pamphlet, but I didn't so much as glance at it.

He said, "Sir, the Maymoth Hills are, quite bluntly, composed of dung. Why, when the No'thern states were covered with-a ice, thisah hyeah land was swarmin' with maystadons, maymoths, and other vermin. They deposited they'r remains hyeah."

I translated his statement to mean that during the Ice Age – when the Northern states were covered with ice – mastodons, mammoths, and other large mammals went south to Kentucky and crapped all over what has since become Mammoth Hills National Park.

"Well, now," I said, "you don't really expect me to believe that crock of shit? Come on, Jack, you can be honest with me. Which companies are defying the federal statutes and dumping their waste refuse – undiluted, unchlorinated, and unpermitted – on federal lands? I'll have you know, I'm going to get to the bottom of this thing, so you might as well come clean." I whipped out my wallet to display my credentials and added, "That says I'm a federal investigator."

There was a pause of some several seconds, during which time I began to realize that I had somehow scored for the North. I watched, astonished, while the ranger's demeanor changed as quickly and completely as the color of a chameleon. He gripped his billy club. His

posture stiffened. Muscle after muscle tensed, and the veins on his arms, neck, and forehead became visible. His tanned face turned red. His eyes narrowed exquisitely, and he glared at me with indescribable contempt. His grip upon the billy club tightened. It seemed certain he would suffer apoplexy or a heart attack at any moment.

A Southerner's capacity for hiding his emotions is practically unbounded, and so the emergence of this Southerner's repressed rage gave me a distinct advantage.

I stood beneath the scorching sun, and thoughts spun through my mind. My gaze occasionally wandered from the ranger to the rolling landscape and back again.

*Ha! Southern hospitality? ... Bullshit! Here's a creature just as contemptible as any of my acquaintances up North!*

What, specifically, had destroyed his equanimity? ... I considered the possibilities: Was it my arrogance? Perhaps he didn't like being called "Jack." Maybe the accusations got to him. *Let's see, when I referred to the poor breeding in the South, he didn't even breathe harder. When I inferred that he was lying about the source of the stench, his expression didn't change. ... What the hell did I say?*

Just as I was beginning to envision a blazoned trail of infuriated Southerners in the aftermath of my inspection tour, the ranger's anger – the redness in his face, the stiff posture, the glare of hatred – disappeared.

"Sir," he said with enough composure to cower a Frenchman, "Ah suggest you all survey the grounds immediately and report back to me if'n you all see anythin' out of order. Ah must return to mah post and write mah report." Then he bowed slightly, walked to his jeep, and drove off, leaving me no alternative but to follow his suggestion.

Yet, as the ranger's pickup disappeared beyond a turn in the road, I solved the puzzle.

*Of course! I caused the ranger's fit when I told him I was a federal investigator. That's what infuriated him!*

I considered the implications.

It is true that every federal employee south of the Mason-Dixon line must endure certain perils. For example, the revenueur's job is lightly thought of in the South, and many revenueurs disappear mysteriously each year. No one misses them. In order to protect themselves, the craftier federal employees try to pass themselves off as private businessmen or in some other wise remain incognito. Many federal employees quickly learn to speak with a drawl and become pork-barrel granddaddies for the sheriffs, cotton and tobacco planters, highway patrol, and other Southerners with real power. In every case, stringent penalties are applied to those who actually attempt to enforce federal regulations.

Naturally, I realized that my status as a federal investigator running loose in the South put me at some risk. Nevertheless, I negated the threat of disclosure, since my adversary, being a national park ranger, was himself an employee of the federal government. As such, he had undoubtedly received instruction regarding the importance of remaining unbiased while performing his professional duties. Furthermore, he was sworn to uphold the law.

Thus, I was greatly surprised when a caravan of sixteen vehicles bearing cargoes of assorted male townfolk surrounded me near the park's western boundary.

Rifles and shotguns poked through every window, and everyone was fortified with a beer can. The leader, a huge, pot-bellied sheriff riding shotgun in an open-air jeep driven by a scrawny deputy, issued the first order: "Hold your fire, men!"

Obviously, the word on me was out.

"Are you all that Yawnkee-boy we been hearin' 'bout that's causing such a ruckus up-a-hyeah?" the sheriff said.

A ray of hope shone through: Apparently, the ranger had failed to relay an adequate description of the suspect.

In the tradition of the great Yankee generals, I planned a diversion. Clearing my throat, I drawled my deepest Southern accent: "Y'all don't take me fer no kind o' Yawnkee-buoy, nah do y'all? Heets a gal-danged hawker that dunno 'bout 'possums er no kind o' Swaise baink

'counts, no hah. Y'all cain't cawry no frickin' fararms into no frickin' naichunal ainstitooshun if'n yer fixin' to use 'em fer no frickin' reason, er fer no frickin' reason at 'tall, y'all."

I surveyed the vigilantes, and to my satisfaction, not one of them understood me. A few of them snickered; some eyed me wonderingly; others looked from one to another in hope of elucidation. I heard someone murmur, "He's either a hillbilly, or he's from way down South!" Another responded more audibly, "He sounds half crazy to me," winning several guffaws.

I hunched down to improve my disguise, pointed to a clump of pines on a distant hillside, and shouted, "That-a-way!"

Immediately, orders were given, engines revved up, riders readjusted themselves in their seats, and the entire party roared off in the direction I had indicated, disappearing in a cloud of haze and dust.

When they were gone, I continued my inspection, and I must admit that Mammoth Hills National Park is quite enchanting, if also a bit pungent.

Just as today's elephants go to special places to die, yesterday's mammoths went to special places to dump. In millenniums past, Mammoth Hills served as one such special place.

I went in search of the park's most spectacular specimen, the Jefferson Davis Turd. That name – posted on an engraved and polished metal plaque that was four feet high, seven feet long, and fitted onto a huge granite boulder – convinced me that I had arrived at the right place.

The famous fossilized turd stood atop the highest hill in the park, an indication, perhaps, that the donor had occupied a position of considerable status in the mammoth community. The heap was fifteen feet high, coiled perfectly, and petrified in the same shape it had been left.

From where I stood, I could see for miles in all directions.

It seemed a good time to put the day's events into perspective.

Months earlier, before beginning my inspection tour, I had visited the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. That stone obelisk – tall, straight, stretching toward the

unknown heights – symbolized, among other things, the immensity of man’s vision of a grand representative democracy, the United States of America.

Yes, the Washington Monument, celebrating our first president, George Washington, is a fitting memorial.

Yet here in western Kentucky, I stared at a petrified bowel movement, a rank heap intended to honor Jefferson Davis, the first and only president of the offshoot Confederate States of America, one of the most influential white supremacists of the nineteenth century, a man who supported and directed the American Civil War in order to continue slavery, a disgrace to this or any other country, present or past.

Yes, ignorance is plentiful. It is abundant whenever men fight wars, wherever racial pride thrives, every time one group exerts undue control over another. And here in western Kentucky, the enraged ranger, the enervated posse, and the engraved and polished metal plaque were proof positive that, more than a century after his death, gung-ho Southerners still ignorantly worshiped Jefferson Davis and his eponymous turd.

As for me, I could not look upon that wretched, sinister form without imagining a snake coiled and ready to strike.

I turned to talk with an aged Kansas farmer and his wife, who stood together with me. “Something, isn’t it?” I said. We had positioned ourselves about one hundred sixty feet away, upwind.

“We ain’t got nuthin’ like it in Kansas, that’s for sure,” the farmer replied, admiringly. He turned to his wife. “Lambie, how many acres you reckon that would fertilize?”

The woman wore a bonnet to keep her hair from blowing in the wind, and she chewed her words, rather than spoke them. “I don’t know,” she said, looking up at him. “Why do they waste it?”

Her question had merit.

The farmer, after a contemplative moment, shrugged his shoulders and said, “Don’t



make much sense, do it?"

They walked off hand-in-hand, stopping to inspect various features of that excremental landscape. As they surveyed the park, the sun sank slowly in a blaze of red and gold fire.

In the thickness of that muggy Kentucky air, I envisioned the haze as smoke and the reeking heaps as battlements and the Kansas couple, a quarter mile distant, as survivors appraising a battle scene.

They stood near their automobile a long time, that old couple, appreciating the view, both possibly considering the Civil War – a war that perhaps their ancestors had fought – maybe, even, on different sides. Each resting an arm upon the other's backside, they were framed by the sunset. The old woman turned her head and spoke to her spouse. I could not hear her, but I believed that I knew what she was saying: "Will they ever quit fighting the war?"

It seemed the only thought for a woman of her pragmatic mold to express.

In a while, I walked down the hill toward the parking lot and my own vehicle. I drove off, waving at the Kansans, and they smiled and waved back like old friends.

I never saw them again.

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