

## The Hoover

It started out as a pretty typical day, though some are better than others. I manage a small hotel at NW 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue and NW 16<sup>th</sup> Street in Miami. It only has 32 rooms, mostly dark, dingy and damp, with the lingering odors of stale cigarettes and soiled carpeting. We're only two blocks away from the industrial part of the Miami River. Not the section that the tour boats will take you to see, but the boatyard and shipfitter section of the river, that smells of diesel fuel, brackish water, and rust. I never knew rust smelled until I came to Miami five years ago.

I'd been down on my luck at the time, having been disgorged from the Army after three tours in the sandbox of Iraq. I hadn't wanted to leave, but after surviving two close calls when IED's blew up the road I was patrolling, I sustained damage to my hearing and started to hear voices in my head that I began to talking back to, so my C/O freaked out and signed the papers for my immediate discharge. There went three square a day, and a cot, hello Greyhound Bus from Dallas to Miami.

I could have stayed in Texas, but my ex had married a small-town sheriff in a hoe-dink town north of Austin and swore if she ever saw me around, she'd make sure her new bed-buddy found me an opening on a chain-gang in Huntsville. It seems I endear myself to folks that know me. So, figuring Texas wasn't big enough for both of us, I looked at a map and decided the south end of Florida was far enough away from Sheriff Billy Bob, or whatever his name was, and I rode into hot, sweaty Miami on the old dog trolley.

Looking for a cheap place to flop, I stumbled onto this fleabag and after a couple of weeks, cut a deal with the ancient owners to do repairs on the place in exchange for my rent. They liked my Mr. Fixit position so much that they turned over the keys, thirty-two of them, promoted me to manager, and drove off in their old Caddy for greener pastures in LA. I haven't seen them since, as all communication is done through their equally ancient attorney who shows up once a month to make sure the hostel hasn't burned down.

It works for me since I don't have anyone looking over my shoulder all the time, and the patrons of this establishment aren't real picky about where they crash for a few nights and don't mind so much when I talk back to these faceless people in my head. Don't get me wrong, I get some looks for sure, but they just hand over their money, try not to look me in the eye and hurry to the room number on the brass key. If I'm lucky, that's the last I'll have to interact with them during their hopefully short stay, and with good fortune, they'll never return. I guess I'm not really what you'd call a people person, more an I'll-tolerate-you-for-a-short-duration kinda guy. Hotel management suits me well.

The old auberge, aptly named, River Breeze Hotel, was built back in the 30s and from what I can surmise, the builders conveniently used salty sand from the beach in the brick mortar, which over time dissolves and leaves the brick free to leave its assigned space and give itself

over to gravity. The brick façade was covered in stucco sometime in the 60s, most likely in an attempt to hold the bricks in place, which worked for a few decades, but now they occasionally push through the cracked plaster and plummet to the ground, making the sides of the building an unfriendly environment for the local drunks.

Once a week, I drag out the old aluminum extension ladder and replace the fallen clay projectiles, but only as far up as the first two floors. A couple of years ago I laid the ladder down in the parking lot to do something, and the Coca-Cola vending truck drove over it, so it doesn't stand up straight and slides off the building if I get up too high. Now the top two floors have an ever-increasing amount of empty spaces where bricks once were placed, making the exterior of the building resemble some I'd seen in war zones. The old building had needed a fresh coat of paint twenty years ago, and was still waiting for that to happen, but with the diesel soot from the river traffic, combined with mildew from the humid environment, the old structure had taken on kind of a camouflage pattern, which hopefully caused many potential customers to just drive on past, without seeing it or stopping.

My day starts with rousting the sleeping boozers off of the front stoop so the paying clientele can vacate the premises without tripping and falling, thus delaying their departure. Then I pick up the empty cans and bottles, and sweep the cigarette butts off the steps, to create a barely welcome presentation for the next unlucky temporary patron. Since I'm both the day and night manager, unable to dupe another soul into working more than one shift without quitting for greener, or cleaner pastures, I'm more than ready for a caffeine boost at this point. Thankfully I don't have to go far, as Rosa's coffee wagon is just one block down, serving up a deep, dark Cuban blend, that's hot enough to melt steel, so I can sip at it all morning, trying not to dissolve my lips and gums.

With a nuclear beverage in hand, I head back to start the daily chore of vacuuming the hallways and unoccupied rooms. I managed to hire a couple of hard-working Haitian women to change and launder the bed sheets and towels, but they refuse to vacuum, telling me that the old carpet gives off an odor that reminds them of a road-killed iguana that has baked in the street for a couple of days, something we have a lot of in the Magic City. So, I take on the task and usually finish it before I'm required to go up on the cracked and blistered asphalt roof to kick-start one or more of the prehistoric A/Cs into belching barely cool air for another steamy day.

On this particular morning, I plugged in the vintage Royal vacuum that was as old as the hotel, and had just started running over the threadbare flooring in the lobby when it burped, and belched and shot flames out of the motor, reminiscent of an artillery barrage. Fortunately, there wasn't anyone downrange at the time, or there might have been casualties. I quickly pulled the plug and ran for the fire extinguisher, which quashed the flames before a 911 call was necessary. I stood looking at the old beast, and finally just kicked it, as if that would fix the terminally ill machine. Realizing that was a futile gesture, I dragged it out back and pitched it into the trash dumpster, sealing its fate.

Faced with the immediate dilemma of not being able to remove the topmost layer of crud from underfoot, I realized it would behoove me to replace the old dust sucker before any prospective clientele were more offended than usual. Certainly not willing to go out and pay big bucks for a new machine, I decided to visit my friend Mr. Chen who has a repair shop on NW 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue where he fixes toasters, vacuums, and microwaves and carries parts for the same.

He was the only one I could always count on to get new belts for the now diseased Royal. I was hoping he might have a suitable replacement.

Leaving a note on the front desk informing whoever that a responsible person would return shortly, I took off on foot for the seven-block hike to Mr. Chen's shop. For July in South Florida, it was an unusually cool day, with the trade winds briskly blowing the palmetto bugs out of their nests high in the coconut palms. Ten minutes of swift walking brought me to the front door of Chen's Appliance Repair Shop, and when I entered, I was greeted by Tommy Chen, the proprietor's eighteen-year-old son.

"Hey, Mike. How can I help today?" Tommy inquired.

"Hi, Tommy. My old Royal vacuum cleaner took a dump on me this morning, and I was hoping your dad might have an inexpensive replacement."

"Geez, Mike. Dad's out doing service calls, and I don't expect him back until late this afternoon. But you can look over the used ones here and pick one out if you like it," he said, leading me back into the room where they kept all the repaired appliances that no one came back for, or couldn't afford to pick up.

I looked over several much newer vacuums that would work for a small apartment, but they wouldn't hold up to the punishment I would put them through on the long hallways and numerous hotel rooms.

"Tommy, I just don't think any of these are tough enough for the job. I need a heavy vacuum that can hold down the old wall-to-wall without pulling it up. These new jobs are just too light for the task."

Tommy rubbed his chin, considering my problem until his eyes lit up as if the solution to my predicament had been discovered. "Mike, I just remembered, dad has this very old Hoover in the back that's maybe a hundred years old, or close to it anyway. He told me never to sell it because it had some quirky issues, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you took it and tried it out. He doesn't have a price tag on it, but I'll bet he'd be happy with twenty bucks, just to get it out of the way."

"Shoot, Tommy. That's right in my price range. Why don't you show it to me?" I elatedly told him.

Tommy ducked into the back room where all the fix'in took place and reappeared dragging a monstrous beast of a vacuum.

"Wow, Tommy! That's just what I was hoping for, can you plug it in and let me hear it run?"

Unwrapping the heavy cord from the big steel ears that held it, he pulled off a few feet and pushed the old two-prong plug into the wall socket. I took hold of the handle and thumbed the switch down into the run position. The big motor started winding up slowly, like the radial engine of an aircraft, and gradually built up speed until it was roaring with power. Two big lights on either side of the motor glowed brightly like powerful eyes, looking for the smallest speck of dirt to capture in the massive canvas bag.

Shouting over the clamor, I told Tommy, "I'll take it! This will do the job nicely."

Flicking the switch off, the engine slowly wound down, as if it didn't want to stop just yet. Tommy unplugged it and replaced the cord on the handle. Pulling an Andrew Jackson note out of my pocket, I handed it over with a smile.

"Thanks, Tommy. You tell your dad I'm thrilled to find a machine to replace that old Royal. They sure don't make 'em like they used to, that's for sure."

"I'll tell him, Mike. I know he'll be happy this old girl found a good home. You take care now."

I reached down and grabbed the solid handle, feeling the weight of the big motor come off the floor. I guessed that this old unit probably weighed forty pounds, something you'd never find in a new machine in this day and age. Walking out of the shop, I pointed my ratty flip-flops east and down 16<sup>th</sup> Street Road.

About every half a block I had to switch hands, as the machine tried to pull my shoulders out of the socket. I just smiled, happy as a clam that I had found just what I wanted. Moving slower with the burden, it took me twenty minutes to get back to the River Breeze. I found guests waiting when I got there, so it took me a while before I could get back to housekeeping.

When the decks were finally cleared, I plugged the Hoover in and took off. As if she couldn't wait to do her job, the big beast sucked up more than one layer of dust and dirt as she pulled me along from room to room, and floor to floor. In half the time as the Royal would have taken, the Hoover cleaned up the place as I'd never been able before. It might have been a trick of the light, but I thought the old rug looked newer, and fresher like it had been gifted new life.

Quite proud of my accomplishment, I stored the Hoover in the broom closet behind the front desk, and spent the rest of the day checking in guests, and fixing broken door locks, and other things on my never-ending to-do list. It was after 11:00 p.m. when I was finally able to get my head down and shut my eyes.

I woke up a couple of times during the night, thinking I heard the vacuum running in the floors above, but just chuckled to myself and fell back asleep, thinking the excitement of having a new toy to play with had gotten the best of me.

It took me over an hour the next morning to clear the front stoop of overnight drinkers and hit Rosa's for my usual molten potation before I could saddle up the Hoover, and start sucking sand and dust from the flooring. Once again, I was surprised that the old faded colors in the carpet seemed to come alive. Something else I noticed was that the ever-present voices in my noggin seemed to quiet down while I ran the Hoover. It was soothing to feel the steady vibration of the big motor in my hand.

I'd just finished the fourth floor and was heading to the elevator, pushing the Hoover on her big wheels when Cloe, one of my hard-working maids caught me in the hallway, "Mr. Mike," she said, "The man in room 413 seems to have checked out, but he left all of his stuff behind, including his wallet and door key. The room was locked when we knocked on it, but no one was there when we went inside."

"Well, that's kind of crazy," I replied, "maybe he just went out and forgot to take his key with him. I'll check the register when I get downstairs and see how long 413 is staying. Could be he booked for more than one night. Just leave everything in the room until I can figure this out."

When I stepped off the elevator on the first floor, I was surprised to see Mr. Chen pacing the floor in the lobby, visibly distressed. “Mr. Chen,” I said, “I’m glad to see you. I’m very pleased with the Hoover vacuum I purchased from Tommy yesterday.”

With a very worried look on his face, Mr. Chen replied, “Mike, Tommy should never have sold that old Hoover to you. I’ve been meaning to take it apart and throw it away, but just haven’t taken the time.” Looking down at the vacuum I’d been pushing, he continued, “You should let me take it back, Mike. I’ll find you another to take its place. I’m afraid this vacuum has some very serious problems.”

“Mr. Chen. This vacuum does a better job than that old Royal ever did, why look, the carpet under your feet almost looks brand new. And I’ve only used it twice.”

“I don’t know, Mike. The people that dropped off the old Hoover told me some very strange things had happened to them after they bought the vacuum at a garage sale. They begged me to destroy it, but I’ve just been too busy and never got around to it. Are you sure I can’t convince you to let me trade it out for another machine?”

“No, Mr. Chen. I’m very happy with this Hoover. If anything happens, I’ll let you know. Thanks for coming by, and you might want to order me some replacement belts in case these wear out. The engine runs just fine that I can tell you.”

Mr. Chen left, still shaking his head. I put the Hoover away and checked the guest register for room 413. Not surprisingly, it had just been rented for one night. We rarely had anyone who wished to spend more than a single night in this old dump. I went upstairs and told the ladies to pack up all of room 413s luggage and toiletries and bring them downstairs. Maybe the guest got sick or something and couldn’t return to get his things.

Later, before the evening rush of arriving guests started, I got the ladder out and took it outside to replace displaced bricks, but for the first time I could remember, there weren’t any laying on the ground. I walked around the whole building, and for some reason, it looked like some of the empty places on the third and fourth floors had been filled in, though I know that wasn’t possible since no one could reach those heights without a stable ladder.

I slept well that night, although when I got up to pee one time, I thought I heard the Hoover running again, and laughed myself to sleep thinking how ironic it was that I now heard the old vac, instead of the voices in my head.

Morning arrived, and I felt remarkably rested, and went down to clear the front stoop of the usual suspects, but found not only the stoop empty, but clean, as if someone had swept and washed the area. Not even the normal bird droppings were visible, as I walked the path out to the street. I turned and looked back at the old hostel, and the early morning light must have been just right to make it appear that all the bricks had been replaced, and the stucco patched and painted. I just laughed and headed for Rosa’s for my morning beverage, then hustled back to get the vacuuming done early.

I was buzzing from a caffeine overload, and pride in the fact that the carpet I was rolling over seemed so plush and vibrant this morning. I caught up with the maids, Cloe and Frances on the second floor, unheard of in the past with the Royal, but now with this Hoover, my chores seemed cut in half.

Cloe came out of room 303 and waved me down, “Mr. Mike. I hate to cause you any grief, seeing your so happy, smiling and all, but we got another missing guest here in 303. Just like 413 yesterday, all the belongings are inside with the room key. I can’t explain it.”

Frances joined her as I considered the possibilities, then replied, “I don’t know what to say, Cloe. Just bring it all down and put it behind the front desk. I’ll try calling the phone number they signed in with.”

“That won’t do no good, Mr. Mike.” Frances chimed in, “Their cell phone is sitting beside the bed, and so is their wallet. Everything is there except the guest.”

I couldn’t understand it, but then I had two more floors to vacuum, and that was more interesting to me than a missing guest, so I told them, “I’m sure there’s an explanation. I just don’t know what it is right now. Pack the stuff and continue cleaning. I’ve got the carpets to do right now.”

“Mr. Mike,” Cloe said, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the carpets smell fresher today. I can’t smell the old cigarettes, or musty odor anymore. What are you putting on the carpet? It almost looks brand new.”

I just smiled and switched on the Hoover and moved likkity-split down the hallway, humming a tune, not talking to voices. Cloe was right. I had subconsciously noticed that the rooms looked brighter and smelled crisper than ever before.

That afternoon, for the first time ever, almost every guest asked for multiple nights when they checked in. Some even booked ahead for rooms months in advance, which I’d never done before. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I even felt better about my job than I’d ever felt before. I truly perceived a change in myself, and the grand hotel as well, and dealt with the guests with more confidence.

The next day I dressed in a suit and tie, and ironed a white shirt and replaced my old flip-flops with freshly polished dress shoes and clean socks. I stood in front of the mirror in my room, and surveyed my countenance, nodding in satisfaction at the image looking back at me. The stoop was empty and clean every morning, and the vacuuming just took a quarter of the time it used to, before the Hoover. We seemed to be having at least one guest leave unexpectedly every night, but our rooms were now fully booked, and for multiple nights, which was an unprecedented phenomenon in the years I’d been here.

The first gentleman that approached me in the lobby was handing me his business card even before he introduced himself, “I’m Ralph Peters with the City Building Code Enforcement Department. It appears you’ve been doing some substantial improvements to your hotel, and I have no record of any building permits being filed. What do you have to say about that?”

“Why Mr. Peters, I don’t understand.” I said, shaking my head, “We haven’t been doing any improvements, nor hired any contractors.”

“What do you mean, sir! This carpet I’m standing on looks brand new, and the exterior façade appears to have had the bricks replaced, and the stucco patched and several fresh coats of paint. You should have applied to the city building department before doing any such repairs.”

“Mr. Peters. I assure you that this carpet has just had a good vacuuming, and no one has done any work on the exterior façade. It seems to look better to me as well, but I think it's just the way the light is hitting it in the morning.”

He stood there looking me in the eye, then replied, “I’m not sure I can accept your word on this, but I’m going to ask around, and if I find out you’ve been hiring contractors or doing improvements, you’ll be hearing from me again, and the city attorney as well.”

With that, he turned and stomped out, as new guests filed in, smiling and laughing and exclaiming their good fortune at booking rooms at our establishment. The day went well, with future bookings taking us into the next year. I gave the maids a raise and was surprised to have several people come in and ask for employment opportunities, so I hired a bellhop and a desk clerk to help me during the day.

Before going to bed that night, it dawned on me that I’d never emptied the bag on the Hoover, despite having used it for over a week, or checked the condition of the belt that drove the brushes, so I decided to take a few minutes for some proper maintenance on this wonderful machine.

To my complete surprise and wonderment, the vacuum bag was empty, and when I checked the belt underneath, it appeared brand new. The only surprise was on the rollers on the ends of the brushes, where I had to clean out what looked a lot like matted human hair, and lots of it.

Although I questioned its origin, I was so enamored with the Hoover that I didn’t dwell on the possibilities. Instead, I rolled the old vac back into the broom closet and went to bed, looking forward to the new day tomorrow. I know now that I’ll hear the Hoover running upstairs in the dark of night, and that another guest will probably vacate their room, leaving all their luggage and possessions behind, but none of that is important, as long as the Hoover continues to provide good service, and the River Breeze Hotel gathers the energy from the machine to renew itself, I know I’ll be happy here.

....and right now, that’s all that matters.