

Escort

Though he's often annoying, I've always considered 87 year old Willard a friend. He's a neighbor, so it's only right that I have from time to time offered my assistance pulling turnips or fixing his ancient lawn mower. But he tries to do everything himself and seldom asks for help, no doubt a reason why his lawn sometimes reaches a foot in height. When I have a problem to solve, Willard is usually the first to offer a suggestion, but his ideas are not always practical. On occasion I've pretended I didn't hear his proposal. Each spring he insists on turning my garden over with an old tractor that's ten times too large for the task. Each year the postage stamp garden I wanted at the back of the yard grows to fifty by fifty feet and I have to tamp the dirt back down and re-seed the lawn.

A few weeks ago the doctor told Willard he needed a procedure. To check out his interior ductwork, the doctor explained that modern medical science had perfected a method of shooting a TV camera up his butt without killing him. The device might produce some discomfort, so Willard would be given sedatives to calm him and erase any unpleasant memories. The drugs would leave him woozy, and the hospital staff didn't allow the patient to drive home afterward. Willard needed a ride.

"I was embarrassed to ask," he told me later.

"Why?" I said, "A colonoscopy is a common procedure these days."

"Well, I never heard of it," said Willard. "It sounded scary and if I asked a neighbor I was sure word would get back to the Missus and she'd worry over it."

"Gee, Willard," I said, "why didn't you call me? I would have given you a ride."

"Like I said," he replied, "you've got a big mouth."

Willard said the hospital refused to consider a taxi for the ride home. Few cab drivers would come up to the second floor and sign the documentation as a designated driver. Senior Citizen organizations weren't of any help. With the high price of gas these days, few people could afford to ferry patients back and forth to their appointments.

"So I called an Escort Service," said Willard.

"You didn't!" I said. "Did you know what they do?"

"I do now," he said, shaking his head.

Willard found the telephone number in the yellow pages under Personal Services, but put off calling until the afternoon before his hospital appointment. He finally dialed the number and a woman at Layla's Carpet Cleaning and Escort Service picked up after ten rings. He hemmed and hawed, as usual, and she probably guessed Willard was an aging amateur who was naive in the ways of the world.

"Are you ready for a woman who'll knock your socks off?" said Layla.

Willard told her he never takes his socks off in company.

"Do you have a safe driving record?" he asked.

"Oh, c'mon you old goat," Layla said.

"Well," said Willard, "safety is very important, as I used to tell my boys in the Scout troop.

"Look, honey," she said "I'm a certified carpet cleaner whose business is a little slow this time of year. You're dealing with a professional in every sense of the word. You just forget your merit badges and remember you're in safe hands with Lady Layla."

"I guess you'll be OK," said Willard. "How much?"

"I call my specialty the Ride Of Your Life," said Layla. "It'll cost you thirteen hundred dollars, and I'll have you back home by Thursday."

Willard gulped. "I just want a ride to the hospital at nine in the morning," he cried. "And a ride back at noon."

"Anywhere you want," she said. "If you're short on time, elevators are OK."

"It's only up two floors," he said.

"Just don't choose a busy office building," she said, not listening..

"I guess I'll need you for about three hours," Willard said.

"That time of day you can have my \$99.95 Morning Matinee Special." She yawned loudly. "And I'll include my famous Feast of Many Dishes."

"No thanks," he said, "I can't eat anything after midnight."

Willard gave me a blow by blow description of his trip to the hospital with Layla. She picked him up at his house the next morning. When he saw the old pink Cadillac coming down the street, he asked his wife to please look in the back hall for his umbrella, and he quickly ran out the front door. Jumping into what looked like a super sized serving of pink cotton candy, he landed next to a buxom lady whose scanty

clothing caused Willard to hope she'd had her pneumonia shot. As they drove away, Layla chattered on about nothing in particular while she snapped chewing gum between the words of her incomplete sentences.

Each time the well endowed woman turned on to one street or another, she leaned back to lift herself off the steering wheel and Willard tried to stare elsewhere. Layla slowly made her way through traffic, waving to one man after another along their route through downtown.

"I cleaned his carpet *real good*," she said after a man coming out of the bank returned her wave with an enthusiasm unbecoming a banker. Willard slid lower and lower in his seat.

"Why the hospital?" asked Layla.

"I guess what I need is too complicated for the doctor's office," he replied.

"It ain't complicated, honey," she said. "You just let Layla-girl be your nurse."

Willard sincerely hoped she would stay in the waiting room and not talk to the medical folks. "Don't worry," he said, "there'll be plenty of nurses for this job."

"Kinky," she said.

At the hospital Willard stayed a few steps ahead of Layla as they walked down the hall to a renovated part of the building an undergraduate intern from the architectural design school had named Gastro Intestinal Plaza. While the crowd of hospital workers and visitors were dressed for a normal morning of work, Willard's escort appeared to have borrowed her outfit from Tina Turner's wardrobe.

They checked in under a sign that read, "You Brought Your Colon To The Right Place!" A look of shock crossed the matronly clerk's face when Layla bent over to sign the required paper. Her halter just wasn't up to the task.

"I don't have enough hands to hold the pen and *everything*," said Layla, as she unsuccessfully attempted to do so.

Willard tried to cover his embarrassment by explaining Layla as "my cousin Esther from Omaha. I'm lucky she just happened to be in town this week."

"Working a convention, no doubt," said the older woman through pursed lips.

A gentleman in the waiting room who had to be eighty looked up as Willard and Layla were finding a seat.

"Wow," he said. "All I could find was my nephew to drive me here."

Layla turned to the old timer with a big smile and said, "I'm available this afternoon, my man."

"Do you give an AARP discount?" he said. "I'm on a fixed income."

Layla put her palms on her thighs and slid them up the front of her body. "I have a *very* sliding scale," she said with lascivious wink.

Willard said at that point he'd had enough. He grabbed Layla's arm and pulled her down to sit beside him and told her to please behave herself. By now Layla realized the obvious. Willard would not be a big tipper.

The procedure went well, as far as Willard could tell. One minute they were rolling him over on the gurney and the next thing he remembered the nurse was telling Layla he should not engage in any strenuous activity for the rest of the day.

"I don't give refunds," she answered.

When Willard dressed and found his way back to the family waiting area, he found Layla getting a signature on a carpet cleaning job from a red-faced hospital administrator. She practically hung on the man, whispering words in his ear he probably hadn't heard from most of the hospital's independent contractors.

"It's those little personal touches," she told Willard as they left the hospital, "that always close the sale."

"I was pretty woozy," he told me later, "when that Layla woman brought me home. The Missus came out on the porch when the pink Cadillac pulled in the driveway. I don't think she ever imagined I'd come home pot-eyed and be dragged up the steps by a show girl."

"How did you explain it?" I said.

"I didn't explain nothin'," he said. "Layla gave her the meds we must have picked up on the way home. She told my wife she'd found me wandering around the drug store, asking for Winston Churchill."

"That's a believable story," I said.

"Didn't work," said Willard. "The hospital had already called to ask if my wife was a rock musician or I'd gone off with the wrong driver."

"Uh-oh," I said. "You could have avoided all that trouble if you'd simply asked me to drive you."

"I know," he said, looking off in the distance and smiling. "But I would have missed the Feast of Many Dishes ... even though I can't remember any of them."

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