

## The Mean Green

by

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Fannie Goldstein was wrist deep in a box of sunglasses when Rita arrived. “It’s about time you got here,” Fannie said without turning around. She pulled a pair of red glasses with rhinestone rims out of the pile, put them on, and looked at Rita, “Hah! I’ve been trying to get my hands on these for years.” Fannie took a mirror out of her leopard print handbag and examined herself. “I can’t believe Mildred’s kids didn’t keep these.”

Rita coughed up something yellow into a handkerchief and pushed Fannie out of the way with her large, spandex covered rear. “Quit bein’ such a hog. Some of us still got husbands keeping us from our business. I swear that old man’s never gonna kick the bucket.”

Side by side, Fannie and Rita looked like two large tropical birds. Rita, who was about twice the size of Fannie, wore a different colored hat every day, and her short brown hair stuck out on all sides. Fannie always wore the same green plastic visor, and its neon reflection gave her white hair an eerie glow. Her fondness of leopard print had earned her the nickname “Feral Fannie,” although she was unaware of it.

Fannie took her red glasses and moved toward a table that had plastic buttons and clip-on earrings portioned into little plastic baggies. Rita, who was now wearing black sunglasses that covered half of her face, soon joined Fannie. “Six dollars?” Rita said. “This is highway robbery. There’s no way Mildred paid six dollars for some plastic earrings.”

“Most of this stuff’s junk anyway,” Fannie said. “Come with me into the bedroom, I’ll

bet that's where she kept all of her good stuff." A group of women who had just arrived stared, as Fannie and Rita walked past them to the back of the wood paneled house. Rita bumped into a table and ignored a plastic vase full of dusty, wilted roses that fell to the floor and rolled across the room.

The bedroom was barely large enough for both of the women, and Rita had trouble maneuvering around the large, vacant hospital bed and intravenous unit that sat together in the middle of the room. She instinctively reached for the price tag that dangled off the bed's metal arm. "Twelve hundred dollars! Mildred was in this thing for nearly four years before they moved her to the hospital. I'll bet it doesn't even work anymore."

"Come on, Rita. Help me look. There's a chance it could still be here," Fannie said and then stuck her white head under the bed. When she came up, Rita was digging through the closet.

"Where are all the darn hats?" Rita said, her backside moving side to side across the width of the closet.

Fannie pulled open the drawer of a maple night stand. "Hah! Found it." Fannie held a gold glasses case with a clip top. Thin black lines ran across the width of the case where the gold had worn off, and the silver clasp had turned to a tarnished bronze.

"Let me see," Rita said and threw the purple straw hat she was clutching onto the floor.

"Wait, wait, wait." Fannie pressed the metal clasp between her thumb and forefinger, and the bag opened with a slow click. Fannie stuck a bony, wrinkled finger in and pulled out a plastic tube with a green top. Rita leaned her head in closer and lowered her sunglasses. "The lucky bingo dauber," Fannie whispered.

"The Mean Green. There's no price tag." Rita said. The two women looked at each other.

Fannie carefully placed the green dauber back in the glasses case and slid it into her leopard purse.

“Let’s get out of here,” Fannie said.

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That night, Fannie sat alone at her kitchen table with the red glasses and golden case in front of her. She pictured Mildred with her small round face and soft grey curls, sitting in the first row, directly beneath the preacher, who called the numbers at New Birth Methodist church every Thursday night. Fannie and Rita sat alone one row back, and watched as Gladys, the preacher’s wife, and several other women complimented Mildred’s shade of lipstick and how it perfectly matched her nail polish, and asked when Mildred’s next party was going to be. Fannie saw herself wince night after night at the sound of Mildred’s high pitched squeal and the inevitable “Bingo!” that followed.

Fannie reached for the golden case. She pulled the slender, white tube out and rolled it around in her tiny palm. She took the cap off and held the spongy, green pad up to her nose. Then she stuck the tip of her tongue to it. Hmmn, it doesn’t taste lucky. She picked up the glasses with her other hand and walked over to the kitchen sink. She put them on and stared at her reflection in the small, curtain-less window. She carefully removed her visor, held up the green dauber, and whispered “bingo” to her cold reflection.

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A yellow street lamp flickered outside of the New Birth Methodist church. Rita stood beside the entrance and fiddled with her tiny maroon hat. A taxicab pulled up, and Fannie got out with a multi-colored, sequin bag in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Fannie walked right

past Rita and on through the church entrance. Rita grunted, picked up her black, patent leather bag and waddled after Fannie.

Fannie counted eighteen women and four men, a good turnout. Only a few tables were open, including the one two rows back at which they usually sat. Mildred's chair was empty, giving them an unobstructed view of the preacher, who sat between a regulation size American flag and a small metal cage full of bingo balls that resembled a hamster wheel.

"I would like to dedicate tonight's game to Mildred Green, who, sadly, passed away last week," the old man's voice squeaked through the static filled microphone. "A moment of silence." He took off his gold beret and pointed the top of his bald head at the audience. Fannie unraveled her leopard scarf and took her usual seat. The other women watched as Rita struggled to get comfortable on the tiny, plastic chair.

"You got it, right?" Rita said when she was finally seated.

"Of course I got it." Fannie pulled the green bingo dauber from her sequined bag along with a five dollar bill that she placed on the end of the table. A woman dressed in hot pink from the crown of her puffy hat to the bow on the end of her shoes approached the table with a pot of coffee in her hand. She turned over the porcelain mugs sitting on the end of the table and filled them with the steaming, black liquid.

"Lovely to see you ladies," she said. Then she took Fannie's five dollars and handed her a stack of blue and red sheets of paper with the letters B, I, N, G, O printed in gold across the top.

"Gladys," Fannie nodded her head and forced a smile.

"I see we're still working on that little problem my husband discussed with you last week." Fannie followed Gladys' gaze down to the pack of Virginia Slims sticking out of her

shining bag. She quickly zipped the bag shut and held it in her lap. Gladys moved a couple of steps over, lowered her gold spectacles and looked at Rita. "Give Edward my best."

"Floozy," Rita mumbled under her breath, as Gladys walked away. "I don't trust a woman who wears that much pink." Fannie unzipped her bag and pulled out a silver flask. She unscrewed the cap and quickly poured a healthy dose of translucent, brown liquid into her coffee mug.

The bald preacher cranked the lever attached to the spherical metal cage, and the clank and whirl of tiny, plastic balls filled the room. He plucked one out and held it up to his left eye, examining the ball as though it were a precious stone.

"B-Four," he announced. Rita leaned over and watched Fannie squish a green circle of ink onto the card.

"O-Seventy." Fannie looked cautiously around the room and then marked the square.

"I-Eighteen." Rita stopped paying attention to her card and scooted her chair closer to Fannie.

"Get back," Fannie said and knocked Rita's hat sideways.

"N-Thirty-two." The woman across from them peered over the table at Fannie's card as she marked yet another square.

"This is it Fannie," Rita whispered, "It's finally going to happen."

"G-Fifty."

"BINGO!" Fannie jumped up and Rita fell to the floor. "Bingo, I tell you." Fannie ran around the room waving the card in the air.

"Looks like we have a winner," the preacher announced. Fannie ran up to the stage and

handed him the card. He checked it with careful scrutiny and handed it back to her. Fannie snatched the card greedily and looked around the room. Rita stood up and began to clap, but when the other women turned to stare she sat down too quickly and almost fell out of her chair again. Fannie stood clutching the winning paper in one hand and the Mean Green in the other, until the whirl of hollow, plastic balls began to fill the silence.

“Please take your seat.” Fannie looked over her shoulder and saw that a pink blur was holding her by the arm. Fannie shrugged Gladys off and sat back down next to Rita.

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Rita and Fannie stood in the pale, yellow lamp light outside of the bingo hall.

“Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty.” Fannie placed half of their winnings in Rita’s outstretched hand.

“Four rounds, do you believe it? That’s nearly half. I’ll tell you one thing, Eddie’s not getting his hands on a dime of this money. It’s going straight into my hat fund.” Rita jammed the bills into her floral bag and shoved her body into the blue Volvo station wagon that had just pulled up. “See you next week Fannie,” Rita said and slammed the car door. Fannie stood alone in the empty parking lot smoking and watching the tail lights fade into the distance. Her hair glowed green beneath the dim, yellow light.

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When Fannie got home, she threw her multi-colored bag onto her bed and began digging through her closet. She found a dusty, cardboard box and set it on the kitchen table. Inside, was an antique serving tray with a gold fern leaf heavily engraved in the center, and a quadruple, silverplate tea set. She had gotten them as a wedding present over forty years ago, and hadn’t had

an occasion to use them until now.

She carefully polished each piece until the glow of her green visor shined back at her in the smooth, silver finish. Then she took the winnings, the silver flask, and the Virginia Slims from her sequin bag, and brought them all into the kitchen. She poured the brown liquid out of the flask and down the sink, she threw the single pack of Virginia Slims, and a carton she pulled from the freezer, into the trash, and she put the money into the silver tea pot. Then she made a list: tea, lemon cakes, napkins, invitations, decorations, red nail polish.

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Fannie was sitting alone in the front row, directly below the preacher when Rita arrived. She looked a little confused, but shuffled in and sat next to Rita without question.

“New hat?” Fannie mumbled to Rita.

“You bet your life. Isn’t it eccentric?” Rita ran her finger gently along the large purple and green peacock feather that stuck out sideways from her hat.

“It’s ridiculous,” Fannie said.

“You can borrow it sometime. I see you’ve finally gotten rid of that hideous green visor?” Fannie didn’t answer, but adjusted her red glasses and examined the dark cherry paint on her fingernails. Gladys, who wore her pink a shade paler this time, approached the table and filled the coffee mugs.

“I’ll check to make sure my husband doesn’t mind you two sitting here. He’s sensitive to offensive odors,” she looked at Fannie, “and flashy colors,” she looked at Rita. Fannie kicked Rita just as she opened her mouth and took the stack of bingo cards from Gladys.

When Fannie yelled “Bingo” this time, she did so with measured composure. She walked quietly up to the bald man, handed him the card, took a deep breath, and reached for the microphone. The preacher stood up and made a little noise in the back of his throat, but he sat down again when Fannie began to speak.

“I’ll make this quick,” she said. “I’m having a party tomorrow and you’re all invited. I know this is usually Mildred’s department, but she’s gone now, and I thought I’d try my hand in it. I’ll leave invitations with details by the door.” The ping and whir of tiny balls followed her off the stage.

Rita sat with her mouth hanging open, until Fannie finally handed her an invitation:  
Friday, 7pm, 503 Cedar Street, tea and cake.

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Fannie was tying metallic balloons to the mailbox when Rita arrived. She pulled herself out of the Volvo, her purple sequined beret shining brightly beneath the yellow street lights. Fannie wore black from head to toe, with the exception of the red glasses and nail polish. Inside, gold streamers hung over the kitchen entrance, and black star confetti covered the silver serving tray. Fannie and Rita sat at the tiny, kitchen table and poured themselves two cups of tea. “Sugar, please,” Rita said.

“Sugar? Oh, balderdash.” Fannie’s gaunt, wrinkled face and beady eyes were more visible without her green visor. She left the kitchen and returned shortly with two individual packs of sugar left over from a trip to McDonald’s, and a box of dominoes. They played two games of Five-Up, and then Fannie looked at the clock with a heavy sigh. She got up and pulled

open a wooden drawer. She removed the Mean Green from the golden glasses case and handed it to Rita.

“Here,” she said. “Why don’t you try your hand at it. Maybe you’ll have more luck than I did.”

“Who wants to hang out with that New Birth crowd anyway?” Rita took the dauber and squished a pale green circle onto a napkin– it was almost out of ink.

“I have a confession,” Rita said, and she pulled a pint of Kentucky Deluxe out of her purse. Fannie smiled, went into the bedroom, and returned with her sequined bag. She pulled out her green visor and a fresh pack of Virginia Slims. They sat alone at the kitchen table playing Dominoes, drinking whisky, and glowing green and purple beneath a cloud of smoke.