

Swamped

by Leigh Lundin

I was drying glasses and wishing a new CD would drop in the dance floor jukebox when the door slammed open, hot daylight searing through the gloom. For a moment, everything went silent, even the music, as we all took in the figure with the sun at his back. I couldn't make features out except a broad brim hat and what looked like a ... cape. No, not a cape exactly, but a long open poncho of some kind, hand cured leather and canvas in a camouflage pattern.

It took another moment or two to realize he moved on one foot and handmade crutches, which I supposed explained why he shoved the door open so hard. A few giggles sprang up from the handful of biker wannabees we had been getting recently.

His leggings fascinated me. Crudely hand-stitched out of alligator belly skin, they reminded me of knee-length moccasins. On his one good foot, judging from what I could see of the leather curving up from the heel and toe, it appeared soled with hide from the back of a gator. I couldn't think of anything much tougher or thicker than the ridged tire-tread skin of an alligator back.

He pistoned over to the bar, hoisted a hip on a stool, and set a wrinkled brown paper bag on the counter near his crutches. Everything about him looked older than old, looked ancient,

weathered though not withered. I gathered my breath, a defensive habit I developed from years of dealing with street bums and their body stench.

But the man had no bad odor; he smelled as he looked, saddle oil and outdoors. His leather hat and handmade poncho appeared utterly impractical in South Florida until I realized it was perfect for an outdoor man unused to air conditioning. I couldn't see his eyes, just his lower face, also seemingly made of rawhide. He even husked a leathery voice when he quietly asked for a glass of wine.

One of the trikers behind him guffawed.

"Red or white?" I asked.

Another snigger. "Wine's a wuss drink," said a junior biker.

"Red. Dry."

I set a glass on the counter and got out my best jug of Ernest & Julio. "Sorry about the cheerleaders," I said.

"Wine's a pussy drink," repeated one of them, coming over to his elbow. The man touched his fingertips to the base for a few moments, then turned his hand over and cupped the glass with the stem slid between his fingers. I noticed his wrists were scarred with deep gouges and looked more like gnarled cypress than human flesh.

"Christ, boys, look how a pussy drinks."

I fished for a defusing repartee, something cool and witty like, "Gee, you dudes wouldn't know pussy if it bit you," when the wannabee made the mistake of touching the man.

The room dropped deathly still.

Uh oh.

Precisely, swiveling his head like a gun turret, the stranger took a full ten seconds to lock his stare onto the biker kid. Once caught in the man's sights, the wannabee froze. It was a trick of the neon or something, but under the hat brim the stranger's eyes *emanated light*, glinting like the naked steel of sword points.

Wineglass whipping, slashing across the eyes and nose of the triker, splintering slivers of glass and bone and flesh and...

Jesus, holy mother of God, Christ.

For a moment, all of us in that frozen stillness of the taproom, each single one of us—stunned into silence—envisioned the outdoor man’s arm arcing like lightning, striking as a copperhead in an unretractable moment of horror.

I shivered, pushing the image away.

“Jesus,” blanched the wannabee, backing away, palms held out in a placating, push-away motion. “No harm meant, man. I mean, chill dude, peace. We’re cool, right? Okay?”

The man at my bar just as slowly rotated his head back. He took a sip and said, “You started to help... thanks.”

“S nothing.” I shrugged and let out a breath I forgot I’d been holding.

He studied the wall behind the bar as the wannabees scrambled to pay up. I keep my plaques and awards mounted back there. I closed my register and turned back to him.

“You were a cop?” he said.

“Once.”

We didn’t move for a while in that companionable way quiet men have as they gauge respect for the other. Nearby, motors, neon transformers, and occasionally compressors cycled on and off.

“Why did you quit?”

I swatted a fly with my towel. “Long story.”

His saddle grain lips parted in what might have passed for a smile. “I got time.”

Usually, the barflies do the talking and I simulate listening. I poured a tumbler of wine for me and tipped the last of the Gallo into his glass.

Finally, I said, “Politics, maybe. Futility, definitely. Absolute absurdity.”

“Absurdity”?

I sighed. “For sure. I reckon the turning point came with a crazy old judge a few years back. Old Judge Everhart, if you remember him. The madman that was always in the newspapers citing folks left and right for contempt?”

He nodded. “I met him a long time ago.”

“Crazy, egotistical fool. A real insanity case. They used to call him Judge Ever-fart when he wasn’t listening. Let his position go to his head. He’d get mad at someone in a restaurant, the old bastard would cite them for contempt. Once, he jailed a cop who pulled him over on a DUI. Old judge was an arrogant sucker or probably senile. Nobody seemed to want to deal with him or the situation. Judges, always protecting their club, afraid they might get axed next if someone learns they ain’t infallible.

“It was ’cause of him, we lost two prisoners in my custody and almost lost two cops, one my boss, one of them my best friend.”

“How’s that?”

“I don’t know if you recall that long ago, but a juror stood up to that old bastard once. It was all over the news for weeks. It was a case when Everhart ignored the jury’s recommendation on a simple manslaughter that should have been at the most second degree. The damned judge thought he was Roy Bean or something and told off the jury, shouted at them the case was obviously felony murder and he was eyeing the death penalty. Probably would have been readily reversed as so many of his cases were back then, but it wasn’t justice, and only a fool would trust Florida to back off a death penalty case, not when we got governors competin’ against each other seeing who could off the most on death row.

“I wasn’t in on it at the beginning, but I heard it floating around the offices after the judge tongue-lashed the jury. The jury foreman, a professor they said, history professor I think, or... No, I remember: it was anthropology or archeology, that Indiana Jones stuff, but local, you know. I’m trying to remember what his obituary said. Anyway, he stood up and spoke his mind to the judge about ignoring the facts, the law, the will of the jury and abusing his authority.

“Whew. We was all delighted someone tweaked the judge’s nose, but the jerk-ass judge cited the poor putz for contempt. I reckon tempers flared, because the juror was still arguing when the bailiff came up to take his arm. The old judge went ballistic and cited the man for resisting arrest

and assaulting a court officer, which even the bailiff wouldn't testify happened. But that damned judge was going to make his point. He slammed that juror in jail for something like a total of 67 days or so if I recall near enough. Juror probably still be there if he hadn't gotten himself killed."

"Killed?"

"Every few hours, the judge hauled the prisoner out and demanded an apology, one the man refused to make. Finally, it all came to a head. Some folks started comparing the vindictiveness versus stubbornness to the Susan McDougal case, you remember, that woman in the Whitewater scandal who kept telling Ken Starr what he didn't want to hear, that the Clinton's didn't do nothing wrong except lose themselves a bunch of money. You may not like 'em but you got to respect someone with guts like that.

"That's when everything sank into a media circus. The news focuses on personalities, you know, and that's what they did at the time. Back then newspapers used fancy words, describing the professor as this intense Harrison Ford type, unconventional, principled, all them big words. I remember hearing he ran in 5K and 10K charity events and marathons. The professor was popular, taught this supposedly great course on Living History, did field trips, digs, campouts, this-is-how-our-ancestors-lived stuff. Used to be a campus poster, '*Before football, before gambling, the Seminoles got game...*' His students loved him, started protesting, stickers and posters everywhere saying *Have a Heart, Everhart* and *Free the Prof, Jail the Judge*. Man, it got that old magistrate really pissed after that."

I rested my palms on the bar, rolled my shoulders to ease my stiff neck, and thought back. I never before had a man die on my watch. Vowed I never would again.

Slowly, I started to unwind the story.

#

My first day back from vacation up north, and it started out slow. Slow tends to change real quick, and sure enough, we got radioed about a transport escape, a handful of prisoners on a bus. Dispatch routed us out to a tourist camp above 41 in that swamp between Okeechobee and the 'Glades, that wasteland some people for reasons good and bad call the kidneys of Dade County. Tourists, they come in here asking where Lake Okeechobee is, I like to tell 'em it's easy to spot

on a map: it looks like a hole punched in lower Florida for a key chain. That's a pun, you see. Oh, sorry; reckon I ain't talking to a tourist.

The camp looked typical: a few dozen RV sites, a coffee shop, a souvenir store, three or four docile alligators that the owner's son-in-law 'rassles' every couple of hours. When we got there, three airboats were tied up at the end of a dock with a couple of crackers grunting and cussing over the engines. From there, the swamp stretched for miles and miles, just bogs and grasses and forests with the roots of almost everything under water.

Everybody there was super worked up. My partner Chuck and I first headed down to the pier. One of the men looked up, and said, "This here 'un be refueled in a minute. The bastards took the magneto leads from the others. You can still catch the weirdo in the canoe."

"The weirdo?"

"The guy that wrote a check on a napkin and then took a canoe instead of an airboat."

"What are you talking about?" My partner bit off each word as former Northerners do.

With exaggerated patience toward a Yankee, the man explained. "This van pulls in, three Cubans get out waving guns, then run into the gift shop. Then this here pale, lean white guy gets out, blinking like he ain't certain what to do, and then he drifts into the gift shop too. I'd say he was skinny, but it's more like those ropey muscles bike racers got.

"Them *Marielitos* make everyone lie on the floor, taking cartons of cigarettes, booze, candy, and all, but the white guy picks out was a Swiss Army knife, matches and a lighter, a Dolphin's cap, plastic trash bags, a toothbrush, lots of salt packets, and the cheapest watch we got."

"Cheapest?"

"Yeah. A wind-up Mickey Mouse, a watch with hands. Asked for a waterproof wind-up specific; said he didn't want no battery watch. And a salt shaker of all things."

"What then?"

"The Cubans yell at him to hurry, but he waves them on. While they was down startin' an airboat and disablin' the others, the crazy white guy asks Marie to ring up his stuff. He takes a napkin, and writes it out like it's a check: name, bank, everything. You ever hear anything so stupid?"

“Stupid, maybe, but legal,” I said.

“What you mean, legal?”

“You can cash it, if he’s got money in the bank. If he goes to that trouble, I’d say he prob’ly does. Then what?”

“No kiddin’? You sure? I never heard nothing like that.”

“What then?”

“The white guy says, ‘How much to buy one of the canoes?’

“The cashier looks at him like he’s crazy til the one Cuban stickin’ behind yanks a gun in her face and says, ‘De man axed you how much a canoe?’

Marie says three hundred maybe and the guy adds that on the napkin and runs the hell outside after the Cubans.

“Anyway, they rushes down to the dock, and the other *Marielitos* are getting ready to shoot up the airboats they’re not taking. This guy tells them, no, people run this place need to make a living. He says all they got to do is take the magneto wires. The dude tells them go ahead and leave without him, he wants the canoe.”

“A canoe?”

“Yeah, just a canoe, fiberglass, green. We use it around the camp here. He gets barely a hundert yards off the dock, ’fore their airboat blows out of sight. You could still see him in the channel ’fore you showed up.”

I looked out across the channel cut by the government through the thousands of acres of morass, a swamp bigger than some countries. If we were going to find an airboat and a weirdo in a canoe, we had to get a move on.

My partner nudged me. “Uh oh, look who’s pulling up.”

We turned and watched an arriving H2 Hummer, and we both simultaneously groaned. “Oh, crap.”

Our police lieutenant stepped down, clad in the latest L. L. Bean. The lieutenant, he figured he was the reincarnation of the Great White Hunter with a Rolex. Probably had four, maybe five

hundred dollars of gadgets in his fancy safari vest pockets. He let a couple of hounds out of the back and took out a rifle.

“Snap to it, boys. I’ve got a fund raiser dinner tonight.”

Chuck fired up the only working airboat, while I radioed for a chopper or a spotter plane to assist.

We were getting ready to cast off, and the lieutenant takes over and announces he was going to pilot the thing. We rolled our eyes at each other, and sure enough, Dale Earnhardt took off like he was in NASCAR, wiped out a couple of moorhens first thing. We figured by the time he was done, we’d maybe paint a handful of coots and an egret on the hull. The only lucky part was he ran down the Cubans—literally.

We were flying down one of the corridors cut through the marshes, and when the lieutenant whipped into an intersecting channel, showing off, we piled on top of the stalled Cubans ’fore we could stop. They’d run out of gas, didn’t know they’d grabbed a boat needing fueling. The boat was dead in the water.

The lieutenant was furious, swearing at the Cubans, at us, at the dogs, blaming everybody but his self for wrecking the boats. The radio had gotten broke in the smash, something wrong with the transmitter.

We disentangled the twisted metal, and spent a hot hour and a half under a tropical sun cobbling together enough parts to get one airboat started. The lieutenant was already styling his story how these desperate *Marielitos* tried to run *him* down. He didn’t want two airboats coming out of his budget.

We could have limped back if the lieutenant had bothered to note what direction we’d come from. With the sun straight up, we had no way to tell which way was which. All we could see was miles of swamp grass, mangrove and cypress forests, and an unlikelihood any ground we might find was above water and solid. And man, those mosquitoes sucked. How did those Indians stand them? Still, we knew we’d come from the east, and that would become apparent in the afternoon as the sun moved across.

“Damn,” I remember saying to Chuck. “I go on vacation for two weeks and all hell breaks loose. What the hell brought this on?”

“It’s old Judge Everhart again,” said Chuck quietly. “He is still havin’ fits ’bout taking on that stubborn FSU instructor. You remember, the archeology guy in those wilderness retreat ads; the ones that say, *‘Spend your vacation with the Seminoles, no reservations required.’*”

“Him! How could I forget?”

“It’s been comin’ to a head because it made the papers on Sunday and the crap hit the fan. *The Herald* carried a sidebar explaining the professor’s plans to train for the marathon were put on hold. Admirers said the professor was unfairly dealt with. The students’ protests were growing and many already signed up for his field courses. That worked up a lot of sympathy.

“It didn’t help that the damn judge was draggin’ the professor in for an apology every couple of days, even ordered him dumped into solitary from time to time. Radio stations said the man was being punished for simply telling the truth about disorder in the court.

“The Judge told a reporter he were damned right it was punitive, that jurors had to learn a lesson and the guy would rot in jail until he begged the judge to let him out. I got to give that prof credit, he was one defiant son-of-a-bitch; never gave an inch.”

“So what the hell has happened?”

“’Bout two days after you left for vacation, this professor guy intervenes in a jailhouse rape, saves some black kid from the old bed sheet and soap trick and one of the perps gets his self stabbed. Guards shove everybody into lockdown, and next day the judge starts making noises that instead of the professor being a hero, he might a’ incited the stabbing, fomenting riots and all, suggesting maybe even he caused the stabbing himself to get attention. It was all bull, but the judge tells the DA he wants an investigation, like he wouldn’t anyway. But get this: he calls the DA *and* our idiot lieutenant in, directs them to focus on the professor. Says he doesn’t want to hear it was somebody else.”

Chuck didn’t smoke much, but he was thumbing his cigarette lighter. Sweat beads hovered right at the hair tips of his crew cut. “Right after, *Inside Affair* runs a segment about the professor, and the judge gets real upset ’cause a *Sixty Minutes* producer starts callin’ around. Judge Everhart

orders the professor humped to a different jail location every day so's he can't be found and interviewed."

I could tell my buddy Chuck was disgusted. Cops and prosecutors do that, move a prisoner from jail to jail when they don't want someone in the system found. He wiped sweat out of his eyes and continued.

"During the transfer this mornin', the transport driver gets bored with the whole affair, or rather he was engaging in his own affair, bagging a little cutsie along the way. Who knew he had a habit stopping at a coffee shop to see a girlfriend. That's how we end up here after the driver got a wee careless with the Cubans."

"Terrific." I swatted mosquitoes on my arm.

Chuck, me, and the rest of us, we sat in that damn hot muggy swamp, watchin' the birds: ibises, blue and green herons, shovelers, and spoonbills. The unhappy Cubans found it funny when an anhinga, one of those snake birds, surfaced next to the lieutenant, damn near giving him a heart attack.

Truth be told, it was one of the Cubans who got the engine started again and he was better in a pinch than our own shop mechanic. Made sense though; the boy had got busted for hot-wiring cars. I hear in Havana they got whole fleets of 1950s Detroit models they somehow keep running down there.

We sputtered vaguely in the direction we thought we'd come from. Within minutes, the lieutenant pointed, "Look, there's our spotter plane." He heeled the boat and headed where the plane was circling.

That half-land, half-water environment can grow indescribably eerie, working your inner ear overtime. You never know if something might come up out of that muck at you. When you're boating in open water, you know your world is liquid and that's that, but this was like another planet. When you float among rushes and cypress boles, you have a queasy illusion of land because it looks like real ground should be there but it ain't. Your brain fights itself because you can see grasses and weeds, and you can't see the water unless you look right straight down. Solid ground can be right next to you or only a foot or two below your boat but miles away in any other direction. It can make you dizzy as hell if you let it.

We swept into an open area, free of grasses and weeds, wondering where the plane got to. A handful of packages floated in the water and several more, plastic-wrapped, floated farther on.

Chuck hooked one, dragged it against the gunwale. Plastic over burlap cover, tied with binder twine. He peeled away a corner to reveal sealed plastic over a white caked compound.

“Crap,” said Chuck. “Cocaine. Get the hell out of here. That was no spotter plane.”

With a crippled boat and three prisoners, we weren’t in a position to take on drug runners. Because of that detour, though, we came across the professor’s canoe.

In his hurry to scuttle our butts out of there, the lieutenant crashed through walls of tall grasses and repeated his new crash-test-dummy talent by nearly running over the fugitive silently slicing through the weeds.

We lost a couple of minutes picking up one of the Cubans who had remained unattached to his seat and stupidly unconvinced of the lieutenant’s lack of driving ability.

When we spotted the professor again, he was slipping through stands of mangrove saplings our airboat couldn’t penetrate.

The lieutenant shouted for him to halt and fired off a few rounds, scaring those chicken-like gallinules, but not the professor. The man melted into the shadows under the Spanish moss, disappeared among the trees.

We chugged around the shoreline for an hour until we realized we were circling an island. Since it had nothing resembling a beach and the visible ground looked iffy, we put in at a colony of hillocks where the cattails ended and sand had built up.

One of the Cubans stepped ashore and tied the painter to a dead tree trunk. While we struggled off the boat, the man started to climb one of the belly-high hillocks. His first footfall collapsed to powder. With a surprised expression, he tried again with the same result. Chuck said later he looked like a grinning kid trying to flatten a snowdrift.

When I looked up, the boy was pounding the soil flat and took a high-legged step far up the side until he was up to his waist, laughing.

“Oh God,” I said. “Get him out of there.”

It was too late. With a cry, the man went down like a linebacker tackled him. The worst part was we could still see what was happening to him. Within seconds, the man's face collapsed into pain, and from pain into terror before it turned a crawling black. Chuck threw him a line, but the man flailed his arms in such agony, he couldn't hardly catch it.

I yelled at the Cubans still on the boat to dig out the ASK from the medic's kit. The lieutenant stood by with his rifle ready, not understanding what was happening.

"Don't touch him," Chuck yelled as the Cuban groped toward us. "Get into the water and strip," he told the man. "Quickly, get your clothes off, now man, *rápidamente*."

The poor fellow sank to his knees and fumbled with the jail suit drawstrings. Black masses pulsed over his face and torso, literally burning holes in his body with formic acid. It was going to take more than an anaphylactic shock kit to help him.

Chuck sponged him down and forced him to swallow antihistamines as I popped open an epinephrine injector. The man started vomiting before I got him jabbed in the hip. We spread cortisone ointment over him, even as his skin bulged and blistered rapidly across his face.

"Jesus," said the lieutenant. "Don't they have fire ants in Cuba?"

"*Florida* didn't used to have fire ants, not these kinds of ants," I said, "not until they came in by ship from South America. Man, I had heard about mounds this huge but never seen anything the size of these."

"Come on, Angelo," whispered one of his friends.

The Cuban started shivering uncontrollably, gasping for air. We could see hundreds of bites on his chest, possibly a few thousand overall, until hives covered him completely, puffing his lower eyelids closed.

I popped another injector, but it was too late; Angelo died before I could plunge it in his arm.

We backed away, each of us grappling with what just happened. I focused on Chuck, who had been my partner for years. Well over six foot with a blond crewcut, he looks like your worst Marine tough guy nightmare. Sometimes though, when I look at him just right, I see what his wife must see, a glimpse of the little boy he once was. Right then, I saw a sickened, scared-silly-brave little kid. We hadn't known the Cuban very long, just long enough. He was still a *niño*, no

doubt guilty of something, but undeservingly dead for nothing more than stepping on the wrong patch of soil. When I looked up, Chuck was on his knees along side the Cubans, hands folded, lips moving in prayer along with Angelo's pals saying the rosary.

That was our lesson: *We were no longer in civilization*. We'd naïvely waded into a primeval world with its own laws as alien as its terrain.

We fell silent in awe. A herd of those Jurassic Park brachiosaurus creatures could have waded by, completely at home. We were the ones out of place.

The lieutenant looked away from all of us. "Come on, come on. Let's get a move on."

Thinking we were leaving, Chuck and I started to heave the body onto the craft.

"No," said the lieutenant. "That bastard's still out there and I want him."

Chuck rubbed his eyes with his oversized paw. "That professor? Look, the fellow was in jail for tellin' a mad ass judge to shove it up his robes. Everything else is trumped up. This guy was just a juror, for Christ's sake, in a personality conflict with a crazy judge."

"Doesn't matter," said the lieutenant coolly, "Consider: A death that results from a felony—such as an escape— is itself a felony, even punishable as a capital offense." He beamed at us as if he'd recovered some small victory out of this mess. "Felony murder rule. That now makes this a capital case, and you know that judge wants him anyway. Everhart will lock him away forever. Cuff the Cubans and let's go."

"Get some perspective," mumbled Chuck, but we formed up, expecting us to go together on the hunt. Of course the lieutenant had other ideas.

"Go left, Chuck. You," he pointed to me, "go straight ahead, and I'll go this way," jerking his thumb at the flat stretch to his right. "Chuck and I'll take the dogs; maybe we can pick up a scent around the perimeter."

"Lieutenant, we shouldn't separate..."

"Just get going."

I eased past the ant mounds into the heavy afternoon sun, feeling the ground trembling like gelatin beneath my footsteps. I realized I wasn't walking on soil at all, but a hummock of decayed

vegetation, a floating mass of prehistoric peat moss. I wondered how many visitors wandered this way since the Seminoles took sanctuary in the 19th century.

Within yards, the way became marshy and I slogged to higher ground, filling my Bluchers with mud. What a stinking mess. If I donated my shoes to Goodwill, they were sure to throw them away. I wondered how the professor could make it on foot in his thin prison slippers.

The insects were maddening, the murderous half-inch long mosquitoes being the least of them. My eyes and nostrils felt as if they were filling shut. I discovered I was walking in a cloud of noseeums, the Florida cracker label for an insect too tiny to see but clogs your eyes and nostrils with their sheer numbers. Florida's got 68 variety of mosquitoes and every single one sampled me. Plus we got black flies, horse flies, sweat bees, and little yellow jackets; they had their first taste of human flesh and they found it remarkable good.

A muskrat ambled across my path, startling me, but I tell you it earned my gratitude a moment later when I spotted the sinuous red and yellow bands casually threading after him. I held my breath as I dredged up the rhyme about coral and king snakes: '*Red to black, friend of Jack. Red to yellow, kill a fellow.*' That, in a package hardly bigger than a foot long hot-dog, held North America's deadliest venom.

I trod a lot more careful after that, thinking about black bears and panthers, water moccasins and all the other carnivores still calling the swamp home. It was when I stopped to get my bearings that I heard a distant scream, then baying. Chuck?

I beat my way back toward the shore, wishing I wielded a machete. I thanked God for the hound's whining, or I would not have had a chance of locating them. And then the hound fell silent.

"Chuck! Chuck," I shouted.

No response. I stumbled on.

It must have taken close to a half hour, but I heard a whimpering, and found Chuck and the bloodhound flat on the ground. Four or five sticks were planted in the mud, smoldering smoke. One of Chuck's pants legs was cut off at the knee and tied around his calf. I thought he was unconscious, but he stirred when I knelt down beside him.

“What happened, buddy?”

“It was a moccasin, huge sucker.”

“You’re okay. You done a great job dressing the wound.”

“I didn’t dress it. It’s our damned professor. Forced me down on my face, tied a tourniquet on me, cut the punctures open, sucked out the venom. Professor said water snakes are aggressively nasty.”

“No shit?” I shook my head. “What kept you here?”

“He told me not to exert and I’m dizzy as hell.”

I glanced about me. “What’s with the incense?”

“The professor, he broke off cattails and lit them. Said it keeps mosquitoes away. The bastard apologized he didn’t have time to set me up with a mangrove smudge pot.”

For the first time since we had arrived, I realized we weren’t plagued by bugs. The professor had something there.

I unwrapped the dressing. His skin was bruised and badly mottled with twin punctures in the fleshiest part of his calf, but it was not turning black. A surgically precise slit bridged the two punctures. Chuck bore a number of odd marks on his legs, shaped like little flowers.

“They’re from those damn leeches got on me. Professor was calling them *demersal*, whatever the hell that means. The prof, he takes out a salt packet and salts them. Suckers let right loose. Said I could do the same thing with a lit match, but told me don’t pull them straight off or they’ll infect. He said use heat or salt, otherwise their jaws stay locked in the flesh.”

“He’s a regular Mark Trail guide.”

“You can tell he’s a damn professor; he can’t stop teaching. Probably what pissed the judge off, being lectured by a juror smarter than him. Help me up. Get me back before the boss dreams up some new disaster. Damned lieutenant’s crazy as that judge.”

“Which way we go?”

Chuck pointed to an arrow drawn in the mud. “Professor again. Funny guy: he looks at his watch in the sunlight, turns a little, and says, ‘That way.’ He calculated direction using his watch.”

“How the hell could he do that?”

I helped Chuck to his feet. He pointed to a strange tall tree in the distance. “Don’t know; he just did. Clocking the sun or something, I figure, or making a sundial. Look at that weird tall tree. Professor said something else about finding our way; he said Indians planted those long ago in a perfectly straight line running up through the state. The Seminoles roamed through Florida, keeping them in sight like interstate markers.”

The lieutenant was pacing when we got back. “Where the hell have you two been?” he said nastily, not waiting for an answer.

The two Cubans chained to the propeller shroud hunched in misery, tortured by clouds of insects.

I helped Chuck on board and waited for the lieutenant.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked the lieutenant. “We’ve a couple of daylight hours and a fugitive to catch. I want the bastard.”

“Jesus,” said Chuck to me. “He’ll kill another of us yet.”

I broke off a handful of cattail stalks and left them with Chuck and the Cubans. The lieutenant snapped the leash on the remaining dog and I shouldered the medic kit. I was learning.

We tramped in silence back over the path, the late afternoon sun in our eyes. Past where I found Chuck, the terrain opened unevenly. Two-foot high mounds of dried mud and sticks dotted the flats. Not fire ants, I noted gratefully. Twice, I spotted turtle eggs where the lieutenant’s boots kicked clods loose. Sidling against our legs, the hound whined nervously. The lieutenant handed me the leash and unslung his rifle, pointing to shoe prints weaving among the mounds.

He stepped off, swinging his gun in an arc like he was in a World War II movie. I tugged on the leash and the dog unwillingly followed, dragging back on me. We all sensed something—something watching. Waiting.

A stick snapped liked a gunshot.

With a growl, the hound leaped up on a mound, ears flattened, snarling into the forest shadows off to our right. The scene felt even more reminiscent of Jurassic Park. If you let it, it was too all easy to imagine a million years had slipped away, too easy to imagine an ancient reptile in the fringe of trees searching out a snack.

The lieutenant pivoted back and cocked his rifle.

And we heard the hiss from hell, a sound like an old-fashioned boiler steaming, a hiss so primal, so feral, the hair on the back of my neck prickled straight up on end. Our eyes strained for movement, but when it came, nothing could have prepared us for it.

Camouflaged, it came up off the ground a few yards in front of us and charged. Videos show them shuffling ponderously, bellies dragging the ground, elbow-like knees bent like badly manipulated puppets.

This monster had not bothered watchin' *Disney's Animal Kingdom*.

This prehistoric creature ran high off the ground, legs straight, and it charged, rushing, all teeth and armored scales. The lieutenant screamed and tumbled backwards, scuttling away. I might have done the same, but the leash was still wound around my wrist.

The gator opened its jaws and oddly I noticed the interior was a soft delicate pink, almost pretty. Noted for only a second. The jaws clamped shut around the hound and simultaneously, the monster lashed the lieutenant with its tail, bowling him yards out of the way.

The mound the hound occupied crumbled and the gator collapsed on top of it, jerking the leash and of course me flat on my face.

We lay like that forever, me two feet from one of the world's remaining dinosaurs, maybe a third of a ton and the length and breadth of a 15 foot canoe. I was looking into the biggest eye I'd ever seen, yellow and slit like a cat's. As the minutes ticked one every week or so, I noticed the lid blinked upwards like a bird's and after a while I saw it also had a transparent eyelid. I had lain beside my wife— my *ex-wife*— for years and hadn't noticed as much detail.

Insects buzzed around us and sweat ran in rivulets from my scalp to the backs of my knees. Every now and then, the dog's body gave a dying spasm, and the beast's jaws closed a little

tighter in response, crushing the last stubborn sparks of life. I could hear the bones snap. I noticed some kind of gland under the corner of the alligator's jaw, and I offhandedly wondered if I would live long enough to learn what it was for.

I had no idea where the lieutenant fled; he sure hadn't stuck around defending me. Chuck should have taken the Cubans and gotten out of this hell hole.

The alligator croaked, just like a frog, at least an 800 pound frog. It croaked again, whether in contentment or triumph. Maybe it had taken her dinosaur brain that long to figure out she was still queen of the hill.

Without seeming to move anything, the beast started sliding toward the water. As it slid off the collapsed mound, I saw eggs inside. Mama gator. What else could we have done wrong?

She continued gliding, towing me after her while I tried to avoid its hind claws. As she neared the water's edge, I raised my left hand to grab the leash above the loop that held my right wrist, praying for slack. The alligator froze, rotating that yellow eye to look at me.

I froze too and again we lay like that, carnivore and carnivee. Eventually, some wattage kicked on in her brain, and she started sliding again. I pulled as steadily and stealthily as I dared with my left hand, to ease the loop over my other wrist. My right hand felt entirely numb and drag more than muscle finally allowed it to slide free.

I released the leash, and again the she-gator froze, rotating that eye over me like a searchlight beam. Finally, she powered up again, gliding into the water to stash her meal for another day.

Quickly, I backed away and stood up, rubbing my wrist. Yards away, the lieutenant lay sprawled on the ground. When I got near, I saw his ankle was caught in the jaws of a trap. Who the hell— poachers? Smugglers?

I tried to open the mechanism, but the spring resisted, awkward and stiff from rust. It had a bracket to accept something like a jack handle. I had to do something because the lieutenant kept fading in and out with pain. The trap's jaws had crushed the bone and scissored through the flesh with every effort I made to open it.

The rifle. It lay beyond the lieutenant. I was afraid of other buried traps, but I eased over and snatched it up. The lieutenant faded back to consciousness as I stood over him with the weapon.

“Jesus! No, no,” he rasped. “I don’t mean to be a bastard... Christ, pal, c’mon...”

“Oh, shut the hell up,” I said, and levered the barrel of the rifle into the bracket. It released the ratchet. But damn, the pawl would not stay open. I reached for my wallet and took out my only Visa card. Again, I levered open the jaws and slipped the credit card under the pawl. Perfect, although it didn’t leave much of the plastic remaining. When I pulled the jaws back, his ankle flopped out. I tied his web belt below his calf. What a fleshy mess; it would be a while before the lieutenant would again dance at his fancy political soirées.

I stood to re-orient myself and reconnoiter. A few yards away lay a second trap sprung up from the mud. It too was covered with blood, recent blood, not the lieutenant’s. Some unknown party had buried traps under the sand with vicious effect.

The second trap looked grisly with more shreds of flesh and gore than the lieutenant’s. Its teeth held tatters of an inmate’s distinctive uniform, just like the professor was wearing.

I took out a Bonnie Bag, a zip-lock evidence pouch, and turned it inside out. Using it as a mitten, I collected the shreds of flesh and remnants of cloth. Sealing it, I knelt and studied the gouges in the ground as the lieutenant began to stir.

Every pound was going to count, so I stripped off the lieutenant’s shoes, his fancy hunting vest with knives and darts and fire-starters and GPS locators and God-knows-what-all in the pockets, and piled them on a stump. Collecting the rifle and medic’s kit, I set them on top, bullets too, and as an afterthought, added my own handkerchief for no very good reason.

Bending down to the lieutenant, I heaved him up in a fireman’s carry. More clutter fell from his pockets: knife, coins, gum, pocket junk, Snickers bar, a chrome Zippo. Crap. I saw I hadn’t picked up my own billfold when I pulled out the credit card. To hell with it; he was on my shoulders, there was only two bucks in my wallet, and I left the junk where it lay.

I stumbled back through the gathering dusk. At one point, the lieutenant stirred and said, “Where’s my rifle?”

“You want me to carry the rifle or carry you?”

He fell silent after that or, more likely, passed out again.

It had grown so dark I could have missed the boat, save for the men smoking and talking quietly. When I shouted, the Cubans shuffled the boat about and lifted the lieutenant from me. My muscles breathed prayers of thanks.

“We’ve got a problem,” said Chuck in the darkness.

“What now.”

“That collision... it damaged our fuel tank. It’s been leaking and we don’t have enough left to fill the carb bowl.”

“Terrific.” I was quiet for a moment, listening resignedly to croaks and huge bellows in the dark, just like eight hundred pound bullfrogs, maybe. What else could happen?

Click.

Click.

Click, click, click. Lights snapped on left, right, and before us, scalding our eyes. Them mechanical clicks weren’t Rice Krispies.

“Looks like you boys out a your depth.” The voice was deep, so deep, it sounded like that mama gator. Behind the blinding searchlight, I glimpsed a forearm the thickness of my thigh. There wasn’t much to say, so we didn’t.

“You boys runnin’ drugs? We don’t much like drugs.”

“No,” Chuck said. “We’re cops.”

“We don’t much like cops, neither.”

“Don’t look like no cops, Max.” A new voice, younger. “They look like crap.”

“Shut up, boy,” said Max. The light held by the young voice snapped out, pouting. “What ’bout them Cubanos? They run drugs?”

“Them?” said Chuck. “Nah, no drugs. One of them hot-wires cars. No drugs. The other cut up his sister’s boyfriend.”

“Okay,” said Max approvingly.

With typical bad tact and timing, the lieutenant came to. “You, I demand you assist us.”

“Why would we want to do that?” I could hear crude amusement in Max’s voice.

“Because we got one prisoner dead– maybe two, a man snake-bit, and me with a chewed up ankle.”

“Alligator?”

“Traps,” said the lieutenant between obscenities.

The voice that had been chastised picked up again. “You mess with our traps?”

“Shut up,” said Max to one side, then to us, “You hear *that* out there? You see *that*?” He shown the spotlight beyond our boat, illuminating the water to our port.

Dozens and dozens of floating lamps starred the water.

“Them’s eyes, and under them eyes is gators. Now *we* don’t got to *do* nothin’, ‘cept come back in a couple of days and see if the skeeters, and the varmits, and the gators left anything of you. I tells you that, so’s you ’preciate your position.”

“You got that right,” said Chuck.

Max gave us a moment to let that sink in. “You got an empty fuel can?”

Chuck shook his head.

“You got fifty bucks?”

We all started digging. The lieutenant started swearing when I pulled his wallet from his pants.

“Got three twenties.”

“That’ll do.” That arm the size of my thigh handed over a red tank.

“After we leave, you look careful to the east, you see a red light miles off ’n the distance. That’ll be a radio tower. Steer ten to the right and you gets back where you come from. Course the deal is we don’t see you out here again.”

“You got no right to...” The lieutenant oofed to a halt when Chuck’s elbow slipped.

“We’re much obliged,” I said.

The lights snapped out. We didn't hear a thing, but when the blue spots faded from our eyes, nothing— no one— was there. Off in the distance, we spotted a red light winking above the horizon.

#

I stopped talking and it grew quiet in the cool gloom of the bar. Finally, the stranger spoke.

“What happened to the lieutenant?”

“Saved his foot— barely. Done a lot of television interviews and became a hero. Got promoted to captain. Took a desk job for a while, then quit to become a movie consultant. 'Scuse me, a *film consultant*, he calls his self. When he shows up slummin', it's all 'Clint this...' and 'Sean that...'”

“Your friend, Chuck? How's he doin'?”

“He's a Metro-Dade sergeant now. Gaggles of kids. I'm a godfather eight or nine times over. Oh, and the judge, he was retired. Forcibly, if the rumors was true. He'd become a complete embarrassment to the bench.”

“You know anything more about the professor guy?”

“Well, most people figure he's dead. The lieutenant, 'fore he was completely back on his feet, he gets himself promoted to captain, like I said, and first thing he does is send what you would call a posse out in to that swamp again. Trackers, hunters, boats, and lots of dogs, big reward money. Four, maybe five weeks of hunting, they come draggin' their asses back one afternoon. Would not believe their story.”

“What was that?”

“They find a shack— you know, a thatched *chikee*— got an old Indian woman livin' in it. She been getting medical treatment, see, and they figured the professor was helping her. They set up an ambush. Sure enough, they spot this guy coming through the trees. He senses them somehow and takes off again. The boys get a shot off, but then the story gets weird from there.”

“How's that?”

“Well, most outsiders figure a Doberman got loose but them trackers insist it was a Florida panther, but whatever it was, they all swore *something* set upon the professor. Got a holt of his arm, rippin’ and snarlin’ and they all agreed, be it dog or puma, the professor done had it.”

The stranger nodded. “Dogs go for the jugular, but big cats like that, they clamp on with their teeth, use their hind legs to disembowel their prey. Takes only seconds, very effective hunters.”

“Wasn’t in this case. The boys figured it was all over and the marksmen weren’t about to shoot an endangered species to save a fugitive. But ’stead of the professor trying to jerk lose, he done the opposite. The son-of-a-bitch jams his entire arm down the panther’s throat. Suddenly, the animal ain’t got him, *he’s got it*. The prey done turned the tables on the cat. The man could have killed it that way, but he just struggled with it until the beast went unconscious and then they claim the professor made his escape. Those hunters were in some awe of him after that. He’s like a legend out there now.”

I looked down at my guest’s wrists again, brown and gnarled and scarred.

I said, “Another funny thing. Ever hear of ironwood? What old-timers call guaiac?”

“You mean *lignum vitae*, one of the densest woods on the planet?”

“Yeah, that’s the stuff. Short little tree almost wiped out by the navy during the world wars. Hard as iron.”

“Guaiac is stronger than iron. Self-lubricating too. Can’t be worked with woodworking tools; has to be machine milled.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I never knew of it myself til started hearing about a guy tradin’ antique motorboats and even a couple of old airplanes been salvaged from the swamp. Damnedest thing—bearings and shafts were repaired with parts made of this guaiac wood. You ain’t seen an engine til you seen one with wooden rockers and bearings.”

I dried another glass and held it up to the light, shaking my head. “Swamp folk say this same guy makes black beer from holly, has a hell of a kick. Like to try that some day.”

The stranger tipped the last of his wine down his throat. “Yaupon holly, about the only North American plant containing caffeine. Timocua Indians brewed a potent black tea from it.”

The man nodded with a leathery grimace he might have thought was a smile, swiveled off the stool and onto his crutches. As he headed toward the door, I called out. “Hey, mister, your paper bag.”

He shook his head, not looking back. “Not mine,” he said. “It’s yours.”

He swung out the door and evaporated among the heat thermals sizzling off the pavement. The door swung closed, leaving cool and quiet.

I washed the wine glasses, dried them, lifted them into the rack. Picking up the sack, I opened it. My old wallet complete with my ex-wife’s photo wasn’t wholly unexpected, but the paper napkin brought a twist to my lips. It was written out as a check, probably the value to a penny of the gear I left by the stump.

I never did cash that napkin. Just hung it in a glass frame behind my bar.

