



Goodland, Florida

"Hell, I wouldn't go near there if I was you. Specially on Saturday night when they have that dance."

"How come?" I asked in my most innocent Candide manner, which has been often called plain knuckleheaded dumb by those who are not my fans.

"Well my God a'mighty, you ain't carryin' guns, are you?" He squinted down at my Shell credit card as if suspecting hanky-panky.

"What do you mean, 'carrying guns?'"

"Well, they all pack guns in Copeland, and on Saturday they all come to town lookin' for action. I wouldn't go near there if I was you. How 'bout it, Luke? How 'bout Copeland on a Saturday night?"

Luke, a red-faced, beefy bowling team captain peered out from under the grease-rack and hee-hawed meaningfully. "There's not much to do out in the Glades, 'cept shoot and fight. That's about all they do in Copeland."

After years of travel, I've learned one thing: You better listen to the natives or you damn near every time wind up with your backside in a sling. I crossed Copeland off my list.

"M-O-R-G-. . . what kinda car is this?"

"Morgan," I answered, trying to make it sound like some kind of horse so as not to offend anybody.

"I'll be damned. One a them English cars. They sure build 'em low."

"Yep," I answered.

"Hey Luke, c'mere and take a long look at this thing. It's one of them Morgans."

Luke sidled out from under a dusty '53 Catalina that he was working on. "Fergit it. I don't have no fittings fer that." Luke sees all cars as belonging to two classes: the ones he has 'fittings' for and the Others.

He wouldn't give the time of day for the Others. "How much she cost you?"*

**NOTE: There are certain parts of the country where 'How much she cost you?' is a normal question to be asked a stranger. Do not take offense at this. However, answer with discretion. It is a delicate matter. If you peg the price too high you're liable to get a jackhandle on the back of the neck at the next diner. If it's too low they might do it anyway, figuring it doesn't matter much one way or the other. An ill-tempered grunt is often effective, since they then might feel you're a dangerous customer and the car is probably stolen, in which case they clean the bugs off your windshield and stay out of your way.*

"'Bout nine." I lied ferociously, figuring what the hell, if they can pack guns in Copeland the least I could do was lie.

"Whoo-wee! This little bitty ole thing? Luke, this here cost nine thous'n!"

Luke snorted with total derision and gave the cancer-ridden Catalina tailpipe a nasty whack. I signed the Shell credit form and eased back out onto the Tamiami Trail, better known as "41" in these parts, the sun hot and fierce and the heavy singular smell of the Everglades so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Way over on the west coast of Florida the Everglades creep like some vast green flat apparition from another planet. Astronauts have reported while in orbit around the earth that the one thing they can spot with absolute clarity is the 'Glades. It's a spooky drive at night, especially 84 which cuts directly east and west from Fort Lauderdale right through the heart of some of the loneliest country this side of the moon. On one side of this narrow ribbon of concrete is a deep fresh water canal that runs as straight as a die, 30 feet deep, called mostly the South New River Drainage Canal. It is a lonely and wet grave for many a driver. In fact, the State Police patrol 84 looking for tracks that have left the highway, sometimes weeks before. They claim there's a hell of a lot that they never did find. The 'Glades can swallow airplanes, too—just like a big frog suckin' in a fly, without a trace. Copeland is one of a few tiny settlements that somehow squat down there in the middle of the wilderness, for God knows what reason.

With a full tank in the Morgan I pushed on west. Herons skittered over the water. Once in a while a big hawk planed overhead, looking for business. The Morgan is one of the world's great cars for just flat, fast road driving and my Plus 4 gives me the kind of good feeling that only a really FINE road machine can create. I passed a shack that had a sign reading "Catfish Burgers Ham and RedEye Gravy. Conch

Chowder." This was the heart of NASCAR country. South of, roughly, the Mason/Dixon Line the automobile becomes more than transportation. More than even cars. Guys build their lives around them. They race 'em, make love in 'em and often die in them. Practically every roadside gas station and one out of three back yards has a couple of banged up '59 Fords or '56 Chevys with home-made angle-iron roll bars and big whitewashed numbers slapped on the doors.

This is not the Florida of the TV commercials, but a gutty, lonely, masculine tropical wilderness. I've often wondered why it is that so many people really believe that Florida is just the place where Eddie Fisher heads 'The Galaxy of Stars,' and the other idiotic image is the one of little old ladies with blue hair forever playing a hopeless shapeless game of shuffleboard. To those who really know Florida it is one of the truly unique places in the western hemisphere. I know 'truly unique' is redundant. Something is either unique or it isn't. Like pregnancy, you either are or you're not. But, let's face it, men, some places are merely unique. Others are unique! Compared to eastern Florida, the west coast seems like another world. The closer you get to the Gulf the more you smell that heavy, hanging scent of mangrove, Everglade pine, alligators, cottonmouths and bootleg White Lightnin'.

It was just getting dark when I reached the west coast and wheeled into the southern outskirts of Naples. The sun going down over the Gulf puts together a combination of air, clouds, water reflection, light convection that creates a sunset that is equaled only in the Sahara Desert. Anyone who has driven a Morgan for any length of time knows that one vicious characteristic of the beast is that it is a coldly-efficient kidney buster. After the long hard push through the glades I needed a drink. I got it at the Saint George And The Dragon (!) along with a plate of cold stone crabs with crisp mustard sauce. Few people outside of this tiny area on the southwestern coast of Florida have ever heard of stone crabs. I have had sea food pretty much everywhere in the world, but I don't know of anything quite like the Florida stone crab. If you ever get down in that area, *don't* miss them. They are really something else. A little white wine, a couple of chunks of Bimini bread, and you just won't care about the rest of the world, for a while at least.

The next day the sun, as it almost always does on the southwestern coast of Florida, came up blazing. The air like crystal, with a few high, fleecy cumulus clouds floating by like great white ships. I headed



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JULY 1971

out over the new causeway to Marco Island which, by the way, has one of the most spectacular beaches in the world, stretching for miles along the Gulf with porpoises rolling just offshore and great sea birds skimming low, fishing for mullet.

Everywhere I went I got strange long stares. This is not Foreign Car Country. It is the natural home of Detroit Iron, deep-chested, broad-assed, ideal for outrunning the State Fuzz. My '63 Morgan; ivory with red upholstery and in mint condition, usually causes a ripple of interest wherever I go, but down here I could have been riding on a green camel and got less action.

Just off the causeway, turning left, there's a long stretch of semi-paved road through the pines and mangroves on one end of the island. I drove through the heat and watched a great American Eagle glide off to my left. This is one of the last places in the country where this spectacular bird is plentiful. They just soar and glide, and look damned impressive. Everyone should see a wild eagle once in his life. It somehow completes something. In fact, people and wildlife live so close together in this part of Florida that neither one pays much attention to the other.

Anyway, I drove along watching the eagle. The road jogged left and ended at the water's edge. I was in the town of Goodland, which is a fishing village that's been there for a long time. White frame two-story wooden houses that have been baked by so many suns and drenched by so many rains and blown by so many hurricanes that they seem sort of elemental; they belong there as much as the turtles and the pelicans that flap squashily around on the mud flats.

I wandered down to the dock where an old man wearing a Cincinnati Red ball cap was hauling in salt water catfish as fast as he could pull 'em off the hook, re-bait, and cast out again. They were angry, vicious cats with the mean kind of spines that could cause trouble. The old guy snapped 'em off the hook like he'd been doing it for 50 years. I watched as he played another, the line cutting through the water like a hot knife. He landed it, took it off the hook and kicked it back in the water.

"Catfish," I muttered. You don't come right out and talk to a fisherman of that type like you do to a regular human being.

"Yep. 'Don't care what I catch, long as I get action. Just take one home for my cat Fred and catch the other ones for fun." At that point he hooked a pelican that was getting greedy for the shrimp he was using for bait by the wing.

"Goddammit, that's the third one today." The pelican flapped and struggled.

The old fisherman hauled him in. "Now dammit, that'll teach you." He flicked his pole a couple of times. The hook came free. The pelican flopped into the air, looking slightly drunk and making loud belching sounds.

I wandered back to the Morgan which I had parked next to a huge tractor trailer with a big Cummins cab over engine diesel tractor. It was a work of art, the kind of tractor trailer combination that has a functional beauty. I can't explain it but I'm getting to be a truck freak. I always had a weakness for working machinery, but lately it's been getting worse. The cab on this baby towered over the Morgan like the business end of a 747 leaning down sneering at a Cessna 150. It gleamed in the Florida sunshine. Under the window on the driver's side, stenciled in orange paint, was the name 'Wayne.' Sure enough, a tall, thick-necked, round-bellied muscular type wearing a chewed-up ten gallon hat and tight jeans came around the front of the diesel and looked hard at the Morgan.

"Nice little car you got there," he said in that peculiar, distinctive Florida speech which is like no other Southern accent.

"Yep. You Wayne?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Nice truck you got there."

"Thanks." A magnificent Dalmation trotted behind Wayne. There are some dogs, like some women, that you know at a glance are good, really good.

"C'mon, Cat. Le's go, Catfish. C'mon baby." Wayne reached down and gave Catfish's ears a good scratching. Catfish yawned like a dog that knows where it's at and isn't worrying much.

"You own this truck all by yourself?" I was curious. It isn't every man you meet that owns his own first class transcontinental type rig, especially in a tiny fishing village like Goodland.

"Sure do. I just come back from a run out to Vancouver, British Columbia."

"That's a hell of a run," I said.

"Not bad. Made it a couple times before."

"You go everywhere in the country?"

"Wherever I can carry a good money load. Me and Catfish here, we been everywhere. She just sits up there in the cab next to me and we just roll." Catfish lay down lazily in the coral sand, drowsing off a bit.

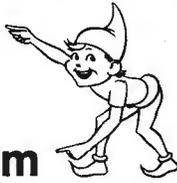
"You know, man offered me a thousand dollars cash for Catfish. I said, Hell no. I wouldn't give up that dog for no ten thousand dollars. I wouldn't sell her for anything."

"You live here in Goodland?" I asked.

"Wouldn't live nowhere else. I can hardly wait to get home after a run. Sometimes

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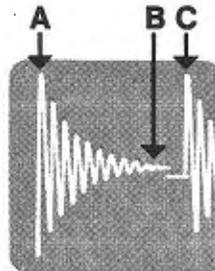


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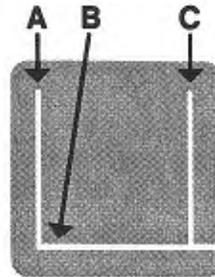
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The reproduction at the right is representative of the wave form observed on the oscilloscope of a visual ignition test device hooked up to a normal ignition system which has been improved by installation of the Igni Imp.



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after seven, eight thousand miles it's good to see it again. Then me and Catfish can go fishin' for awhile."

An old rowboat that looked like it was made of rusty license plates and old oil drums pattered by with the oldest most decrepit one-cylinder museum-piece outboard I've ever seen. Every explosion was distinct and had a curious "putt-ding" "putt-ding" "putt-ding" sound. Hunched in this wreck and wearing what looked like a burlap overcoat and a World War I flyer's helmet was a scrawny leathery citizen of truly indeterminate years, as indeterminate as the Sphinx, for example.

"Who's that?" I asked. Old Wayne squinted out over the blinding waters.

"Hell, that's Seaweed Ernie."

"Seaweed Ernie?"

"Sure. He's a hermit. He lives over there on Mosquito Key."

Putt-ding putt-ding putt-ding . . . Seaweed Ernie's ancient one-lunger chopped away at the warm water. Wayne waved. Seaweed Ernie ducked his head slightly to indicate that he recognized, but barely, the fellowship of the human race.

"Yeah, we got a couple of hermits that live in them mangrove swamps over there."

"You mean real hermits?" I've always heard about hermits but Seaweed Ernie was the first real working hermit I'd ever seen.

"That's 'bout all you can call 'em." Wayne pulled his hat down over his eyes because the sun was getting really fierce. "They don't bother nobody. They just live all by themselves on those mangrove keys. Personally, I don't see how's they do it what with the cottonmouths and the mosquitos, not to mention the 'gators. Old Ernie's lived over on Mosquito Key now for 'bout 15 years, I'd guess, give or take a year or two. Don't know where he come from. I don't ask no questions."

I could see Ernie's boat slowly disappearing in the direction of the low, dark green mass that was Mosquito Key where he lived his solitary life in the Florida darkness, among the cottonmouths.

"Yep. You find almost anything here in the 'Glades, and a lot of stuff nobody even knows about yet. C'mon, Catfish, let's get moving." Catfish got up and yawned a tremendous yawn. "Sure a nice car you got there, mister."

Wayne wandered on down to the dock, followed by Catfish. I climbed into the Plus 4, its seats searing hot, and drove off in the direction of the causeway. Yep, there sure are funny things in the 'Glades. I guess Seaweed Ernie's alone out there tonight. He could tell you about some of them.