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The Fountain of Youth is no place to use a Dixie cup.

JEAN SHEPHERD

• There is plenty of controversy over whether Ponce de León ever really did look for the Fountain of Youth. Actually, he was beating the Florida bushes for what all Spaniards of his day beat the bushes for: gold. He didn't find much, but he sure as hell uncovered the greatest mother lode of mosquitos this side of the Amazon Basin. There is a fragment of text that still survives from Ponce de León's log of his activities in and about the Everglades that reads:

"By my Lorde's benevolence we have this daye encountered such a mighty host of poisonous winged creatures as to becloud the sun and forsooth to bedevil a man beyond the bounds of ye sanity. Night and daye they attacketh like the very breath of the Fiend of Helle."

I kept thinking about de León struggling through the palmettos without so much as a flyswatter as I drove south from Pahokee, that cattish-and-grits town on the south shore of Lake Okeechobee. Route 27 is a two-lane ribbon of concrete that cuts straight through the heart of the Everglades, light-years removed from the world of most Florida tourists. Deep, weed-grown canals line the road, and when those big, dust-covered trucks go roaring past you, their wake is enough to blow a Pinto into 30 feet of murky Glade water. Every few days, the Florida Highway Patrol pulls another one out, covered with lily pads, leaking bullfrogs from the luggage compartment.

"Only way we know somebody's gone in is when some local reports that he seen a few busted palmettos and a coupla tracks goin' off the shoulder." The sunburned state cop sucked at his Dr. Pepper in one of the lonely concrete-block truck stops that squat along Route 27 every 10 miles or so.

"Are there gators in there?" I asked in my most engaging Dumb Tourist manner.

The cop snorted. "Hey Sal, he wants to know if there are gators in there."

Sal, razor thin and wearing a shirt that looked as though it were sprayed on him, carefully removed his green sunglasses and began polishing them meticulously. "Well, let's put it this way," Sal replied. "Most of 'em are under 16 feet, so there really ain't much to worry about." Tight-lipped understatement is a characteristic of true Florida cracker humor.

You have to move fast on Route 27 or some guy carrying a load of radishes will go right over you in a cloud of dust. The only

way you'll ever get a Florida native to slow down to 55 is to shoot his rear tires out. They learn to drive at about their eighth birthday and never stop from that day until they're lowered into the gritty coral sand after a lifetime of burning rubber and grinding valves. Every gas station seems to have a '57 Chevy painted grape purple with a big number splashed in white paint on its bashed-in sides parked off in back of the grease rack among the weeds. It is the pride of Junior, the pump jockey, 230 pounds soaking wet in his Levi's and Pabst Blue Ribbon T-shirt, and he spends his weekends battling other pump jockeys in their grape-colored Chevys for 50 bucks, the main-event prize.

Ahead, a yellow warning blinker suspended over the road flashed mean and hard, like rain on a tin roof: "Dangerous intersection ahead," the sign said. It was another Florida understatement. Route 84, better known as Alligator Alley, cuts across Florida from east to west like a thin belt on a fat man. Where 84 meets 27, at a crossroads

GARY VISKUPIC



called Andytown, some truly legendary crashes have occurred.

"Some days it kinda reminds me of Anzio. My God almighty! The carnage is something fierce," the old codger chuckled before ordering another hamburger. "One Saturday mornin' I was sitting here when all of a sudden I thought they finally dropped that damn H-bomb. Three big sedans, a camper, a VW bus, a guy towin' a 28-foot Chris-Craft and one of them big tankers loaded with maybe 30,000 gallons of refined banana oil all come together at once. They musta all been doing at least 80, and for about 10 minutes I

had the feeling I was right back there in the first wave to hit the beach. It was rainin' tin and rubber all over Broward County for three days." I went back out to my car and headed east toward Fort Lauderdale and the other kind of Florida.

The girl I was with fiddled with the radio dial. The little daytimers dotted here and there about the Everglades in places like Pahokee and Belle Glade were beginning to fade out, but a burst of lush Mancini strings rattled the plastic speakers.

"Dreams come true at Treasure Trove Harbor. Total luxury living high above the sparkling waters of the Gulf Stream, where eternal ocean breezes make daily life a golden adventure—" the strings throbbed richly "—away from the cares and frustrations of modern life. Treasure Trove Harbor is your dream come true: 24-hour uniformed security, plus sauna baths, heated pool and the companionship of people who share your desire for a full, rich, sheltered life. A few choice condominium apartments are still available for the truly discerning. Gold Coast living at its ultimate, for as low as \$87,750." The strings soared heavenward and we segued to Olivia Newton-John.

"Whew. Boy, that sure sounds like hot stuff," I said as my stalwart companion snuggled closer. "My dear, we are fast approaching one of the lushest spots this side of Cap d'Antibes."

"Wow," was all she said. The transition from the wildness of the Glades to the sloe-eyed hedonism of Florida's Gold Coast is jarringly abrupt: one minute gators and loneliness, the next Big Daddy's Lounge and 90-foot Bertrams that purr along the inland Waterway like big golden cats.

I turned left onto U.S. 1, and we were in Fort Lauderdale for sure. "There was some tough Indian-fighting back in the old days right around this intersection." I squinted meaningfully through the windshield, as though I might have been there at the time. "Right around that Howard Johnson, and back over there by the New England Oyster House. There was a mean skirmish all right. Nothing but jungle, of course, then." My golden girl snuggled even closer.

We eased along with the traffic, heading north through the heart of Fort Lauderdale. Cadillacs to the left, Cadillacs to the right; Eldorados behind and Coupe de Villes ahead . . . the Fort Lauderdale Ford. There are more Cadillacs per square foot along Florida's Gold Coast than there are in the General Motors proving grounds. They roam endlessly along A1A, the beach highway, carrying ancient, tightly coiffed, blue-haired ladies and their frail, bifocaled husbands on mysterious errands.

"You really want to see something you won't see anywhere else?" I asked.

"I'd like a Big Mac."

"Believe me, you can do a hell of a lot better than a Big Mac in Fort Lauderdale. For instance, there's—"

"Maybe a Quarter Pounder with cheese,"

she continued in that curiously single-minded way McDonald's freaks have.

"Okay, okay, but there's something you've gotta see." I eased into the left lane and made a quick turn across traffic. We got out of the car and walked toward a big, glassy showroom that looked like any prosperous big-town automobile emporium. Except for the merchandise. Soft, tinted lights played over the sculpted metal. Rare lacquers glowed seductively.

"Wow," she said again.

"Somehow, I just knew you'd say that. What do you think of this?"

We stared through the glass. "What are they?" she asked in a low voice.

"Well, that one over there is a 1934 Ford Deluxe roadster. And that one next to it is a 1937 Pontiac Silver Streak Eight. And take a look at that 1940 Olds business coupe."

"Boy, they look like brand new," she muttered incredulously.

"Baby, they are better than brand new. There isn't a car in this showroom that ever looked like this back in their salad days."

"Do they sell them? How much do they cost?"

"You bet they sell them. This is where elderly gentlemen come to reclaim their lost youth and capture some of the lost beauty of the past. Youth and beauty never come cheap."

The sign over the doorway read Merlin Motors. Merlin, the legendary wizard who taught the young Arthur the ways of the world and Camelot. Merlin, who could make time stand still and turn a prince into a frog. Or an old car into a priceless *objet d'art*. We wandered among the cars in the hushed quiet of the showroom. I asked the tall, aristocratic salesman about the Ford.

"Sixteen five," he breathed reverently.

"The Olds?"

"A mere twelve thousand nine."

"What about that '27 Rolls Sport Runabout in the corner window?"

"I'm sorry, sir. It's been sold."

"How much did it go for?"

"Er . . . the high forties," he murmured discreetly.

Somewhere just a few miles from Merlin Motors, the eternal mosquitos were coming out in gray-black clouds over Route 27. Battered, dust-covered Chevilles, future artifacts, streaked through the night toward Andytown. A parchment-pale ancient slid behind the wheel of a perfectly restored, burgundy-colored 1937 Packard 120 sedan, 35 years peeled away from him in a flash.

Maybe the Seminoles were right after all: There is a Fountain of Youth in Florida. We left the showroom and all around us in the dusk lay the fantasy of the Venice of America—canals, cabin cruisers, arching royal palms.

"Well, what do you say to that Big Mac?"

"No," she answered pensively, "I think I'd prefer a fresh lobster. Or maybe some cold stone crab in mustard sauce." The Gold Coast had got her. ●