

ONE

A mid-week night's drive down US1 to Key West is always good. Little if any tourist traffic clogged my ride on the mostly two-lane road. A clear sky held no threatening rain clouds. It would've remained a good ride too, if I hadn't had to shoot anyone.

I dropped my friend Lee Fairchild at the Fort Lauderdale Airport so he could catch the late flight back to Ohio. In two weeks of partying, first at Fantasy Fest, followed by Jimmy Buffett's Meeting of the Minds gathering, Lee got to know all the local bartenders as well as I did. He likes his beer. He enjoys coming to Key West to drink it.

After a gas fill up in Florida City, I headed home. The Jeep was new to me, a late '80s model that looked identical to my old white Wrangler some asshole destroyed kidnapping me a few months back.

Just before pulling out of the gas station, I sipped from a can of soda and lit a cigar. I knew from past rides it was a two-cigar trip. Except for the Bimini top and windshield, the Jeep was open and allowed the cool night air to blow through as I sped along the eighteen-mile-stretch. After that, most of the ride home would be at 45mph.

The one thing I added to the Jeep was a multi-CD player and I had a mix of Kristofferson and Waylon howling so I could hear over the wind while I sang along.

The first quarter moon played hide-and-seek with me, sometimes to my right and other times ahead or behind me. The road to Key West goes southwest. If you left Key West and flew straight north, the first

city you'd find is Naples on the west coast of Florida, not Miami.

It's a two and one-half-hour ride, if you don't have to stop. I still ached in places where the punk kid beat me with a rubber garden hose whenever the questioner didn't like my answers. Being a victim isn't fun. They're dead. I'm not. I guess I won. I paid a price for being the winner and that was more wear and tear to my body than anyone should have to deal with.

I stopped twice along the dark road before Marathon, to walk and stretch away the stiffness. Relieved myself in the mangroves too and that probably broke a state or federal law.

In Marathon, I finished the warm coke and lit my second cigar. Someone had pulled in the sidewalks, so I drove on through, sorry I missed Keys Fisheries for a late meal. My arms and shoulders stiffened up as I approached Big Pine. A few miles south of the sleeping village, I pulled over where a dirt road leads into the mangroves and sea grape bushes.

The moon and countless stars filled the black sky, offering a frail light at the side of the road. The shrubby hedge before me turned into mystifying shadows. Two cars passed and then the road ahead looked like a black wall. I rotated my shoulders and the stiffness fought back. With my best effort, I could touch my knees as I bent forward before the pain became unbearable. Not the worse shape of my life, but far from the best.

As a rule, circling the Jeep five or six times while I stretched helped take away the stiffness. The pain I bore, glad because it kept me awake. If I could go without stopping again, I'd be in Key West in an hour, maybe less. I opened the passenger door, got my half-smoked cigar and went to light it. That's when I heard a shrill cry come from the mangroves. The interior light sent a weak beam into the bushes. I couldn't see anything there. I put the cigar back, closed the door and listened.

A rustling somewhere in the dark. A whimper close to the shrouded dirt road. The federally protected Key Deer live in and around Big Pine. These days, the deer are not afraid of people and would've ignored me if I didn't make a loud noise to scare them. I've seen a few Key Deer but never heard one whimper.

Slowly, I walked toward the sound and listened. More rustling off to my right, down into the darkness of the road. If someone wanted to steal the Jeep, they were going to a lot of trouble. I took my Ruger P95, a 9mm semi-automatic from my back. When you carry a gun because you think people are trying to kill you, its paranoia. However, when people have tried to kill you, carrying a gun is foresight.

I slipped off the safety. The black wall stood about ten to fifteen feet down the road. No street lights and only a quarter moon equal impenetrable darkness. I stopped and listened. Nothing was going to get me any further.

Something crawled slowly through the bushes. Whimpering suggested the animal had been hurt. Did gators get lost and live in the shallow waters on the other side of the mangroves? Possible, I told myself. A patch of blackness seemed to push itself forward, toward the road. Low to the ground. Sobbing. Did Key Deer sob? I stayed in the dimness of the moonlight. Murkiness covered everything around me, even US1 seemed to dissolve.

The shadowy image moved into the grayness. At the edge of the dirt road it stopped, sobbed loudly and gradually stood upright. I moved a step or two back, keeping my finger on the trigger of my Ruger.

When driving through the darkness the only thing I heard was the wind howling and my CDs playing. Outside seemed still and silent. Now, surrounded by the night, the silence became loud. I heard wings flap and guessed an owl or hawk had found a field mouse. Splashing sounds suggested large fish had come into the shallow mangroves to feed on the smaller fish. I didn't want to think of gators this close.

Before I saw the headlights, I heard the hum of the semi's diesel engine moving steadily south bound on US1. I kept my eyes on the dark image, now standing still less than thirty feet away. The semi's lights brightened to my right and it quickly moved passed and for a moment highlighted the image that concerned me. I had to look twice to accept that the image fading back to black was a woman. She stood facing me and then turned to the darkness of the dirt road.

The semi's engine hum and bright lights were swallowed by the night.

“Are you okay?” She didn’t answer me. Maybe because the comment was stupid. I knew she wasn’t okay. The split-second image I saw showed a woman in rags and dirty from crawling through the muck of the mangroves. When I took a few steps forward, she turned to me and moved into the gloom of the dirt road.

Two voices boomed from the night. “There she is,” one said, his accent thick.

“I see her,” the other accented voice answered.

Out of the darkness of the road, the woman ran toward me, sending glances behind her and then toward me as if she was deciding which way to run.

Harsh words, spoken in a foreign language shot out from the road. The woman stopped for an instant and then continued toward me. Had she seen my gun? Did it scare her? If it did, the two men yelling scared her more. As she approached, the image turned from a frightened woman into a terrified teenager.

Two burly images burst out of the night behind her. Seeing me, they stopped for a moment and then yelled again and started moving. The teen ignored them and rushed toward me. A few feet away, she stopped. Dirt and scratches covered her face, her hair knotted and unruly, and her dress filthy and torn. She was barefoot.

I motioned her to me. She hesitated until the two men got closer. The Jeep seemed to interest her. She moved and stood behind me.

The two men slowed and separated. They kept coming at me.

“We will take her,” the larger of the two said.

The teenager grabbed onto my shirt and I could feel her behind me. The men scared her. They scared me.

“I don’t think she wants to go.” I raised my gun so they could see it.

With the dim moonlight, I saw that both men were caked with mud also. They had chased her through the mangroves. We were miles from any neighborhood.

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They reached behind their backs and brought out guns.

I fired hitting both in the legs. They went down shooting wildly into the night. I shot them each again in the shoulder.

The teenager let go of my shirt and I heard her bare feet on the dirt as she pulled away. She surprised me by not screaming or showing any reaction to the shooting.

Cries emerged from the two men as they slithered on the ground. I kicked their handguns away.

I turned to walk toward the teenager. She slowly moved away, glancing at the Jeep.

“You’re okay now.” I spoke softly. I stopped, hoping it reassured her as I went to put my Ruger back in its holster.

Something with the ferocity of a moving truck broadsided me. I dropped the gun and hit the dirt hard.

TWO

I hit the rock-solid dirt hard and slid along, my face less than an inch from the hard ground, for a couple of feet. Lights popped off-and-on in my head. When I stopped, I turned over slowly, and spit pebbles from my mouth. A solid kick greeted my side. My eyes blurred. The night got darker.

Above me stood a man the size of a Sequoia tree-trunk holding a machete, ready to bring it down on my head. His sinister grin widened. I crawled backward, using my arms and legs. He laughed and slashed the air above him with the machete. Then he raised it high and grunted.

Death stared down at me and it wasn't pretty. I knew where the saying 'scared stiff' came from and what it meant. It wasn't that I accepted death. I wasn't sure what else I could do. My Ruger lay somewhere in the dirt, no vehicles passed along US1 and I guessed the teenager took the opportunity to run.

My focus stayed on the machete. I held hopes of being able to move sideways, out of its deadly blow, when he swung it toward my head. Then what? I wasn't sure. He would take me in a hand-to-hand, even if I'd been in good shape.

I saw a small circle of blood near the giant's shoulder before I heard the shot. In rapid motion, more shots peppered his upper body, forming bloody spheres along his chest. The machete came down, hitting the dirt instead of me. His stare went behind me to the right. I turned. The teenager stood there, holding my gun in both hands.

The giant growled and then fell, landing on my legs. I kicked myself free, afraid he'd latch onto me in a death grip. I stood. Pain stabbed at my upper body. She held the gun pointed at me.

The teenager looked toward the mangrove bush. I turned. The two men I'd wounded were gone. The man on the ground didn't move. Didn't make a sound. He was dead. She'd saved my life.

"Thank you." More useless words from me. My concern had to do with her still holding the gun in both hands.

I fired it four times. There were fifteen bullets in the magazine and one in the chamber. I hadn't counted the holes in the giant. When I dropped the Ruger there were twelve bullets left. Could she have shot him that many times? If I moved toward her, would she shoot me?

I'd already cheated that bastard death thanks to her and didn't know if she'd shoot or not. What I should do eluded me, but I needed to do something. We had to move, in case those two wounded men had other accomplices.

She didn't respond to my *thank you*. Her gaze finally went to the fallen giant. She stared for a few moments and I began to walk toward her. One hand held the Ruger, pointed downward. I knew how quickly it could move up and shoot, so I continued slowly.

"You're okay." Two steps. "He can't hurt you now." Two more steps.

She didn't respond. It was as if I hadn't spoken. Maybe all she'd been through with these idiots had traumatized her. Jeez, I must have been really tired or the giant's broadside had loosened a few brain cells. Of course, she'd be traumatized! I wasn't sure what she'd been through, but from her appearance and the attitude of the men after her, it hadn't been a moonlit hayride in the countryside.

Gradually, I stretched out my arm, wanting the Ruger. She turned to me suddenly, as if realizing only then that I stood there. Tears left tracks down her dirty cheeks, washing away the caked grime. She turned, walked to the Jeep and handed me the gun as she passed by. Up close, her brown eyes were cold with sadness.

She sat in the seat. I belted her in. Tears still streaked her face.

As I walked behind the Jeep, I released the Ruger's magazine. Four bullets remained. She'd put eight shots into the giant to make him fall. Or maybe she missed a few. I took a loaded magazine from my pocket, put it in the gun and stuck the Ruger into my holster.

US1 remained a wall of darkness. Even so, I looked both ways and then drove into the black womb of the two-lane road. After a while a set of headlights shown ahead. The night lightened for a fleeting moment as

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the car approached and passed. The Jeep's headlights cut a small gray tunnel into the road.

"You're okay now," I said loudly, over the wind.

I slowed and lit the cigar stub. She looked straight ahead. While trying to stay alive, it hadn't occurred to me what would come next. I'd shot two people and she'd killed one. Someone, as the day arrived and traffic picked up, would see the body and report it. Casings from my Ruger littered the dirt. The Jeep's tire tracks might have left an impression. Could they be matched back to me?

Of course, the big foreboding that faced me was how to tell Peggy Naughton I was bringing a teenage girl home. I'd make that call when we were closer to Key West.