

Sunshine state

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The flight into Orlando was uneventful. I don't recall what meal option I chose, or what movie I sat through. I do recall a group of passengers in floral shirts ordering endless rounds of drinks from the trolley cart. I regarded them with the sort of mild trepidation with which, in happier times, my fellow long-haul passengers might once have regarded me. I pulled the cowboy hat I was wearing down over my eyes and tried to get some rest.

Guidebooks warn travellers not to visit Florida in the months of July or August. But I hadn't read any guidebooks. In fact, I hadn't done much of anything in a while. My mental health had taken a serious knock the previous autumn and hadn't really recovered. I'm not going to talk about what happened. Suffice to say it was an experience that left me feeling anxious, vulnerable and extremely paranoid.

I was, in any case, a veteran of road trips in the American South. Every year, my young niece travelled from Dublin to Savannah, Georgia, where she spent time with her father. This time, my sister had accompanied Lola on the outward leg of her journey; my job was to bring the child home. With ten free days at my disposal before that, my half-formed plan was to visit the most southerly point in the continental United States: Key West, a beach community closer as the crow flies to Havana than it is to Miami. Who knew? Maybe a week of hammocks, beach balls and margaritas would pull me out of the black hole into which I felt myself slipping.

At the car rental desk, a long tailback of holidaymakers were either sitting on their suitcases or sprawled out scowling on the floor. The franchise had run out of cars. Most of the staff were hiding out in the break room, leaving one junior employee alone to man the desk. In the clammy heat of a packed airport concourse, I removed the black cowboy hat from my head and set it down on the carpet. It was a souvenir I'd picked up in New Mexico a year earlier. I never saw it again.

Eventually, I was handed the keys of a white Ford Focus. I steered the vehicle out of the parking garage and into the blinding light of midday.

Central Florida was terror in technicolour. I sensed panthers' eyes blinking in the palm trees as I tore along an insane eight-lane highway, with testy truckers and pick-up drivers zipping past my wing mirrors at close quarters on either side. My destination that day was St Petersburg, about a hundred miles west, on the far side of Tampa Bay. Partly, I wanted to visit the city's Salvador Dalí museum. Mostly, I just wanted to put some distance between myself and the theme-park hordes.

The car's onboard GPS wasn't working. But St Petersburg is one of the largest cities in the state. It was bound to be well signposted. I figured I'd sit tight in the slow lane, on the right, and wait for my exit to appear. But when the exit for St Petersburg did materialize, the sign directed me to a ramp splitting off to the left, which gave me about five hundred metres in which to cut across four packed lanes of high-speed, high-strung traffic. At one point, when no clear opportunity to change lane presented itself, I simply hit the indicator, paused a beat, then swerved hard left. The enormous eighteen-wheeler closing in hard behind me, honking its horn, appeared in my rear-view mirror like a whale gliding in to swallow a piece of plankton.

Having missed the exit, I managed to type 'saint petersburg' into Google Maps on my phone. But several times in the endless spaghetti junctions, the phone's screen locked, and I had to re-type the PIN code with clammy fingers, while simultaneously keeping the car between the lines at 80 m.p.h. At one

point, an elderly African-American motorcyclist, dressed like a cross between a matador and a Hell's Angel, whom I'd presumably cut off while changing lanes, pulled up alongside my window waving his fist and yelling abuse at me. I pretended not to notice him. When, finally, I came to a stop in a Walmart parking lot in Pinellas Park, on the outskirts of St Petersburg, I sat shaking in the driver's seat for a couple of minutes before alighting from the car.

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That afternoon, I went for a stroll on the boardwalk at St Pete Beach. A group of grey-haired retirees were sitting under palm trees playing bridge, canasta and shuffleboard. On the other side of the walkway, a lone pelican was hunched over a mooring post. Below him, bone-white sands stretched down to meet the Gulf of Mexico. I wandered into a little beach shack called Felix's Aquarium. The owner was a laid-back local, dressed in a khaki vest, shorts and flip-flops. He told me he made a good living selling tropical fish to tourists. Business was slow that day, however, and he seemed happy to chat.

This was the off season, he said. Lots of the retirees who winter in St Petersburg head back north in summer to avoid the heat. He made us both espressos. Then he gave me a tour of the shop. He showed me Torpedo Skates, Guitar Fish, Horse-Killer Eels, Mud Fish and West Indian Scorpionfish. He plucked one fearsome-looking customer, whose name I didn't catch, out of its tank and thrust it toward me in jest. I told him I'd encountered characters far scarier on the Florida highway system that morning. Felix laughed. He listened to my laundry list of complaints about Florida traffic with good humour and conceded that getting to grips with those vast frenetic highways can take time for an outsider. But he assured me I'd get used to it.

What about the insane speeds people drive? 'Well, I'll grant you that,' he said. I told him that, at first, I assumed I could slow down and drive at my

own pace. But any time I slowed down, and allowed even a sliver of a gap to open up between myself and the vehicle in front of me, some maniac with a death wish would weave right in between us. And, if I didn't immediately speed up again, another maniac would weave in behind him. And another.

And if the internet was to be believed, I added, at least one of them was likely to be a meth addict with an alligator in the trunk.

Felix took a sip from his espresso. He wasn't smiling anymore.

That was a Florida Man joke, I said.

'I get that,' he replied.

Florida Man was a hugely popular Twitter account that recycled, for comedic purposes, colourful headlines from the state's local press in which the words 'Florida man' had been used as shorthand for any member of the public who had fallen foul of the law. The account's greatest hits included 'Florida man tries to pick up prostitute while driving school bus', 'Florida man arrested for murder after pocket-dialling 911' and 'Florida man charged with assault after throwing alligator through Wendy's drive-thru window'. For fans of the account, the humour lay in pretending that these were not random, unrelated local crimes, but rather the work of a single individual.

By that summer of 2018, however, the joke didn't seem quite so funny anymore. Commentators didn't have to dig deep to discover that the true stories behind these lurid headlines were mostly sad human tales of addiction, mental illness and – surprisingly often – alligator abuse. What bothered Felix wasn't just that these jokes tended to punch down. He resented the damage he saw them doing to Florida's image around the world. 'Ten years ago,' he said, 'when you thought of Florida, what did you think of?' Space shuttles, theme parks and sandy beaches, I answered. 'Whereas nowadays?' Shirtless sex offenders with face tattoos. 'Exactly,' he said.

What was worse, he claimed, was that this perception wasn't even well deserved. Under Florida's unique Sunshine Law, police incident reports were made available to the public without restriction, which completely skewed

the way the state is portrayed in the press. He seemed to be suggesting that people shouldn't take everything they read on the internet at face value.

Well, that was a thought.

3

Okay, none of that last section is true. I didn't take a stroll down St Pete Beach. I didn't meet a man named Felix who showed me some exotic fish and helpfully got me up to speed on cultural discourse surrounding the Florida Man meme. I actually just read a bunch of online articles cited on the Florida Man Wikipedia page, while lying on my bed at the Tampa Bay Red Roof Inn. As I was reading, I could hear three inebriated men on the footpath directly outside my window conspiring in low voices. Initially, I was concerned they might be planning to steal my car, which was parked directly outside. Only later, it occurred to me the greater danger would be if they broke through the flimsy wooden door separating us and entered my motel room.

I listened to them plotting for hours. Then I fell asleep.

4

Sometimes, the best thing about flying blind on holiday is not feeling obliged to see all the must-see local attractions. Other times, it's stumbling upon them quite by accident. I left St Petersburg next morning intent only on getting the hell out of central Florida. On previous trips, I'd felt most at home among the green fields, blue skies and open roads of Tennessee and the Carolinas. Poring over Google Maps, I decided that the vast wilderness of the Everglades in southern Florida might offer a similar experience.

I got on I-275, heading south out of the city – and then suddenly found

myself skimming like a stone across the clear blue water of Tampa Bay. The Sunshine Skyway Bridge is a spectacular five-mile-long, cable-stayed structure not dissimilar to the Pont de Saint-Nazaire over the river Loire in France, which my father had driven us across on a family holiday once when I was a child. One moment, I was riding so low over the water I could practically reach out the driver's-side window and scoop fish from the water. The next, I was a hundred metres up in the air, eyeballing a helicopter pilot and his passengers, who were enjoying an aerial tour of the bay.

Over breakfast at a roadside diner in Manatee County, two older couples – one white, the other African-American – were chatting to an African-American waitress about an incident that occurred a few days earlier, in the nearby city of Clearwater. Apparently, an old man had gotten into a dispute with a young man over a disabled parking space. When the young man refused to back down, the old man produced a gun and fired a shot at him. 'Just goes to show,' the white husband said, ruefully. 'When you pick a fight with a stranger, you never know who you're going up against.' The others nodded their heads in apparent agreement.

I couldn't help but smile. The previous evening, I'd let some (possibly rogue) Wikipedia editor convince me that Florida Man jokes were a baseless slander against a blameless state. Hours later, this doozy of a riposte to that argument had just landed in my lap. Florida pensioner shoots motorist in argument over disabled parking space? The tweet wrote itself.

I pulled out my phone to learn a little more about this story. Unfortunately, the unabridged version proved considerably less hilarious than the imagined Florida Man headline. It seemed this racially mixed group of elderly strangers, whom I'd overheard making polite chit-chat across the counter at a roadside diner, had got some of their facts wrong, and hadn't seen fit to mention some pretty key details about the shooting. The shooter was not an old man; he was only 47, a white guy called Michael Drejka. Also, he hadn't just taken a shot at the younger man. He'd killed him.

His victim was an African-American man named Markeis McGlockton. As per the *Tampa Bay Times*:

At about 3:30 p.m., Markeis McGlockton stopped by the Circle A Food Store at 1201 Sunset Point Road near Clearwater. His girlfriend, Britany Jacobs, parked in a handicap-reserved spot outside the convenience store and waited in the car with two of the couple's children – 4 months and 3 at the time. McGlockton, 28, went into the store with their third child, Markeis Jr., who was 5.

Michael Drejka, 47, pulled into the parking lot and approached Jacobs, who was 25. He asked Jacobs why she had parked in the spot if she didn't have a handicap-designated plate or placard. The two started arguing. It escalated to the point that others in the parking lot started paying attention.

One of the witnesses entered the store and reported what was going on. McGlockton stepped back outside, walked up to Drejka and shoved him to the ground. Drejka pulled out a .40-caliber Glock handgun and shot McGlockton once in the chest. McGlockton was taken to Morton Plant Hospital and pronounced dead shortly after. The entire incident was caught on the store's surveillance video.

Since the shooting, other motorists had come forward with stories of similar run-ins they'd had with Drejka. In one case, Drejka was alleged to have racially abused and threatened to shoot an African-American truck driver outside the very same convenience store. The store owner described Drejka as basically a crank who routinely picked fights with people over parking spaces and said he'd had to call the cops on him before.

I pulled the CCTV footage up on my phone. In the video, McGlockton emerges from the convenience store, sees Drejka aggressively confronting his partner, and pushes Drejka to the ground. Drejka gets up onto his knees

and aims a gun at McGlockton, who then turns around and appears about to walk away when Drejka fires the fatal shot. It was, on the face of it, about as open-and-shut a homicide case as you could imagine – but the local county sheriff didn't arrest Drejka at the scene, citing Florida's notorious 'Stand Your Ground' law. At that time, he was widely expected never to face justice. (Eventually, Drejka was charged, tried, convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to twenty years in prison.)

I paid for breakfast and hit I-75 south. The highway was empty. About 150 miles south of St Petersburg, near the city of Naples, the road veered sharply to the left. I was now entering the Everglades. Dark clouds were gathering overhead, but I put the hammer down and blundered on into the swamp.

4

It was shortly before lunchtime when I pulled up at the Collier County Rest Area on the Everglades Parkway, also known as Alligator Alley. The sun was peeking out from behind the clouds and the foliage was humming with the sound of a thousand exotic insects. The humidity was intense. But it appeared I might, for now, have just outrun the storm.

I got out of the car to stretch my legs. An old soldier was sitting by a table in the shade. The fatigues he was wearing had seen better days. The Marine and Army-branded T-shirts and baseball caps he was selling were clearly knock-offs. The woman ahead of me, who handed him a couple of bucks, didn't ask for anything in return. The only thing about this guy that looked legit was his military I.D., which was prominently displayed. This was something I'd noticed in the United States. Panhandling is permissible. Bootlegging is tolerated. But posing as a military veteran, if you haven't earned those stripes, is strictly prohibited under a federal law called the Stolen Valor Act.

The taboo against 'stolen valor' isn't just enforced by law. A YouTube

search reveals thousands of videos of impostor soldiers being called out by vigilante members of the public. In the videos, the impostors rarely come across like master criminals. They are usually harmless attention-seekers whose worst crime was accepting a cup of coffee from a stranger under false pretences. Their tormentors, by contrast, often appear aggressive and self-righteous. In many cases, these vigilantes seem like bullies.

I was indoors now, pissing into a bizarrely oversized porcelain urinal. In my determination to remain hydrated, I'd consumed three one-litre bottles of mineral water in the car that morning, and the process of voiding my bladder was taking a little longer than usual. Eventually, the motion-activated overhead light went out. I was shooting in the dark. I froze. The urinal was the world's largest bullseye and I was firing at it from point-blank range. But I couldn't take the shot. I was afraid that my aim might be off. I was afraid that some of that piss I'd been bursting to let go of might spray back and hit me.

In the car park outside, an enormous black bird was standing on the tarmac directly in my path. At first I thought it might be a turkey. But when a couple more of his mates swooped down from the sky to join him, I had to revise that opinion. Soon a dozen of these malevolent-looking creatures were standing between me and my parked car. I went back to the soldier at the table in the shade and asked him what they were. 'Turkey vultures,' he said. Are they dangerous, I asked? He shrugged. 'They'll slash tyres and pull out windshield wipers,' he said. 'But they don't usually attack humans. Not adults, anyway.'

I strolled back to grab another large bottle of mineral water from the vending machine. Those vultures could move on at their own leisure. I wasn't going to disturb them.

There had been no gas pumps at the Collier County Rest Area, or anywhere else along Alligator Alley, and the fuel gauge was flatlining by the time I chanced upon the Miccosukee Service Plaza, still in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't much traffic on the highway, but there were at least two or three vehicles backed up at each of the twenty or so fuel pumps. When my turn came, I stepped out of the car. The sky overhead was dark and cloudy, but the air was hot. Rainwater about two inches deep was covering the entire forecourt, but I hadn't witnessed a single drop falling. An eerie calm prevailed as I pumped the gas. The German national flags that for some reason festooned the place were barely fluttering. (These, I later learned, were the colours of the Seminole nation.)

After filling the tank, I headed inside to pay. Stepping through that muddy rainwater in sandals felt like sloshing around in a warm bath. The shop had a deli advertised, but it was only selling corn dogs and other fast food. Down the back there were stuffed alligator toys on a shelf. I considered buying one for my nephew at home. But I tugged a little at the stitching and decided it wasn't worth the price they were charging. I paid for my fuel, got back in the car and pressed on.

I turned on the car stereo. Conservative talk radio was ablaze with discussion of the Clearwater shooting. Callers were seething. It was an outrage. It was unacceptable. It was symptomatic of a deep-rooted societal problem that needed to be addressed. The host fielded call after call from angry listeners unanimous in their denunciation of Britney Jacobs for having parked briefly in a handicapped parking space. And if you think I'm joking about that, then you haven't spent much time listening to American conservative talk radio.

The host did briefly acknowledge reports that Michael Drejka had a history of racially abusing African-American motorists. He admitted that, if true, this would put quite a different complexion on the case. But that point

immediately died on the vine.

When a representative of the Clearwater police department called in, the host demanded to know why officers arriving on the scene hadn't issued Britney Jacobs with a ticket for illegal parking. The police representative replied that since Jacobs' children had just witnessed their father being shot dead, issuing their mother with a \$25 city ordinance fine might have been deemed insensitive in the circumstances. The host seemed genuinely stumped by this response. He paused a moment to consider it. Then he conceded the cop might have a point and moved on.

One caller was a bit uncomfortable with concealed-carry gun permits. He was an old-timer who told the host, 'In my day, those two gentlemen would have had a fistfight, then shaken hands and wished each other a good day.' The show then cut to an advert for erectile-dysfunction pills.

Further down the highway, a succession of electronic roadside signs advised motorists to 'Move Over For Stopped Emergency Vehicles'. The previous summer, I'd driven a thousand miles across Texas and noticed similar signs warning motorists not to leave small children or pets in parked cars. Those Texan warnings made sense at least, even if the frequency with which they were offered seemed like overkill.

Driving in Alabama and Mississippi, the summer before that, signs had warned 'Bridge Ices Before Road'. I was at least two days chewing over those four words before I worked out what they meant in that particular order. But 'Move Over For Stopped Emergency Vehicles' was a conundrum on a whole other level. Did Floridians really require regular reminders not to ram their cars into parked ambulances? On the evidence of what I'd seen so far ... the jury was out.

I wasn't far from Miami now. With about six million inhabitants, Miami is technically Florida's most populous metropolis. Culturally, however, the self-proclaimed Capital of Latin America is in a whole other hemisphere. I had planned to find a hostel or a motel somewhere in the Everglades. But now I decided to make a break for the border. *Vamos a Miami* ...

Then the skies opened. By the time Alligator Alley collided with the Sawgrass Expressway, it was like all the spaghetti junctions of Central Florida had reunited for one insane gala encore performance in the rain. The golf-ball-sized knot of stress in the back of my neck, which had been in abeyance since I crossed the Sunshine Skyway Bridge that morning, was now back to bursting point.

I'd seen monsoon rain before, in Asia and Africa. But never from the wheel of a speeding car on a crowded twelve-lane highway. The rain wasn't just pouring down. It was bouncing back up off the ground. It was being spat backwards by the tyres of vehicles in front and sprayed sideways across my windscreen by vehicles passing on either side. For once in Florida, I was glad to be driving a hatchback. The larger trucks and lorries in front were visibly swaying in the wind. Beyond them, I could make out palm trees thrashing from side to side.

I got off the Expressway, thinking that might improve things. It wound up making them a thousand times worse. The Expressway was up on stilts. It drained easily. Heading through Westview on Florida 924, water was gathering in enormous pools on both sides of the road. It was still six-lane traffic, but now there were lights and crosswalks to negotiate. Conditions were rapidly deteriorating. I felt like I was in one of those old black-and-white B-movies where the protagonist is driving but there's no budget for scenery, so the director just has stagehands pour enormous vats of water down the front of the windscreen to simulate heavy rain.

There were about six inches of floodwater on the road. In the blink of an eye, that became a foot. Odds were that driver of the pick-up truck in front of

me was a native Floridian. Even if he wasn't, he had to know better how to cope with these conditions than I did, since I had no idea. Therefore, I would copy whatever he did. If he drove forward, I'd drive forward. If he stopped, I'd stop. And if he abandoned his vehicle, I'd do the same.

It didn't take long to identify the flaw in this plan. The pick-up I was following was a couple of feet higher off the ground than my hatchback. What was safe for him wasn't necessarily safe for me. Heading into the next intersection, the road took a dip and, based on the water levels against his tyres, it appeared as though the surge was now closer to eighteen inches in depth. The pick-up in front of me plunged forward into the flood. I looked around wondering what to do next. Simultaneously, there was a blinding flash of light, a low rumble and a very distinct thump on the roof of my car.

My car had just been struck by lightning.

The car was now stopped dead at an intersection in north Miami. I patted myself down. Incredibly, I seemed to be okay.

Most of the other drivers had stopped too. It was time to make a decision. I peered out the driver's-side window. Frankly, I wouldn't have been surprised to see a cow float by on a cabin roof. I could just make out a bowling alley about a hundred metres away. The rucksack containing all of my possessions was lying on the back seat. I figured I could grab the bag, open the driver's-side door and wade to the sanctuary of the bowling alley. But I didn't want to be too hasty. I had no idea what the financial repercussions of abandoning a hire car at a busy urban intersection might be. I took a deep breath and counted to thirty. Then it stopped raining.

Ten minutes later, I was driving on the Julia Tuttle Causeway across Biscayne Bay. The sky was blue and the road was bone dry. It was as though

the storm had never happened.

That evening I took a room at Red, a boutique hotel on Miami Beach. After dropping off my bag, I wandered down to a small Cuban restaurant in the Art Deco district and asked for a table. The waitress handed me a menu, showing pictures of about a dozen traditional Cuban dishes. I pointed at the menu and asked if there was any particular dish she'd recommend. She exhaled loudly and went back into the kitchen to find someone who could speak English.

Already, I was wondering if anyone at home would believe the story of the day I'd just had. While I waited for my food order to arrive, I scrolled backwards through my phone's camera roll. I had photos of the black turkey vultures surrounding my car and of the petrol station forecourt under water. I had video of myself driving through monsoon rain on a heavily flooded road in the outskirts of Miami. (Foolhardy on my part, I suppose. I was like one of those tourists on a balcony who takes a video of the incoming tsunami, not realising their hotel is going to be smithereens in about seven seconds.) What I didn't have was anything to support my contention that my car had been hit by lightning.

I contacted my cousin in New Mexico. He isn't a mechanic or a meteorologist. But he lives in Las Cruces, which qualifies him as an expert on electrical storms in my book. I told him I'd been in monsoon rain in busy traffic, on a road covered with at least a foot of floodwater, when the incident occurred. Every time a vehicle overtook me on either side, a large volume of water would hit the side of my car, cascading in a rolling wave from back to front. The lightning bolt that hit me made a distinctly different sound. This was a single, unmistakable thump, equivalent to a plastic football bouncing off the roof of the car. It happened at precisely the same moment I heard a roar of thunder and saw a blinding flash of light. And nothing, subsequently, had fallen down off the roof. On that basis, I had concluded that my car had been hit by lightning.

My cousin was sceptical. He asked whether the car's electronics were affected. I said they weren't. They continued to work as before. He also asked me if there was any visible damage to the roof of the car. There wasn't. 'If you don't have any burn marks or functional problems with the car,' he said, 'then you probably didn't get hit directly. It probably hit next to you or somewhere close by.'

8

I couldn't sleep much that night. When I did sleep, I had bad dreams. In the most vivid of these, I was at the airport in Savannah with my niece. I'd lost her passport and we couldn't board our flight. Her grandparents and Homeland Security were all pretty pissed off with me. But Lola had faith. She kept looking up at me with hope in her eyes, like she knew I was going to produce the passport at the last moment and prove the naysayers wrong. But I didn't. The passport was gone. I couldn't account for it.

I woke up yet again with a start. It was a few minutes shy of 7 a.m. I wasn't getting back to sleep now. I got up, dressed myself and threw a hotel bath towel into a plastic bag to sneak it past reception. I took the elevator down to the lobby and wandered across the road to the beach. It was a Wednesday morning: a working day for locals. The tourists, also, must have all been sleeping off hangovers from the night before, because Miami Beach, one of the most famous beaches in the world, was completely deserted. There literally wasn't another human as far as I could see in either direction.

I undressed, arranged my clothes into a neat little pile and plunged into the ocean. I swam fifty or sixty metres out to sea, then I turned back towards the shore and sloshed around. It was an unforgettable sight. The beach was lined with palm trees and, behind them, I could see the tops of all of these beautiful old-fashioned hotel fronts. I turned over on my back and wiggled

my toes in the air. This, I told myself, is what Key West will be like. All of the stress and the self-doubt that had been crippling me for months would finally dissolve in that warm ocean water. Even still, I kept a sharp eye back toward that neat little pile of my clothes on the beach to make sure no one made off with them.

After spending the better part of an hour in the water, I headed back to the hotel, where I figured they'd be serving breakfast by now. On my way, I stopped at an ATM and withdrew \$200. The machine dispensed it in \$20 bills. It annoyed me that, for all the time I spent in this country, I still had extreme difficulty telling the denominations of the banknotes apart. In America, no one gives a shit about your accent. It's when you squint at their currency that they make you for a tourist. Breakfast cost \$15. I paid with a twenty and was handed five singles in change. I left two as a tip. I had a quick shower in my room, read a while and watched a little breakfast TV. Then I headed back down to the beach.

It was after 9 a.m. now and the lifeguards had arrived to take up duty. There were red flags flying from every lifeguard tower. Sunbathers had arrived in force, but the water was closed to swimmers. I approached the nearest tower and asked the tanned lifeguard what the problem was. 'A shark,' he said, matter-of-factly. 'There's a great big shark out there.'

Later that afternoon, the *Miami Herald* posted aerial footage of a large shark marauding close to the shore of a deserted Miami Beach. The footage had been filmed, presumably, around the same time I'd been in the water. The forty or fifty minutes I'd spent swimming that morning – more or less the only time during my visit to this state in which I hadn't been terrified and in fear for my life – had actually been spent treading water in very close proximity to an enormous man-eating shark.

I returned to my hotel room, packed my rucksack and returned downstairs to the lobby. I handed the valet the ticket for my car. I plucked the three one-dollar bills I still had left from my breakfast change out of my wallet. Valet

parking had cost me \$29, so I figured \$3 was about the right tip. I held those three notes in the palm of my hand so I could slip them into his, the way they do in movies. But the valet informed me that my car was being held off site, so it would be at least fifteen minutes before he could retrieve it for me. I put the notes back in my wallet and took a seat in the lobby.

Key West wasn't going to happen. I wanted out of Florida ASAP. When the valet returned I scooped the three crisp banknotes out of my wallet and pressed them into his hand. He thanked me profusely. Then I got into the car and drove due north on I-95. It was a couple of hundred miles before I had to stop for gas. I reached into my wallet for money to pay, and the first three banknotes that came out were three single dollar bills. I'd tipped the valet \$60.

I got back into the car and drove with even greater urgency for the Georgia line.