

Matecumbe Night

Christopher and I stand on the end of the fishing pier at the Islander Hotel. It is a black November night and he said that it is so dark that he can't see where the ocean ends and the sky begins. Behind us the darkness is countered by the glow of lights above the hotel and along the length of U.S.1.

The breeze is stiff on our faces. The land behind us is "Old Matecumbe". It's not so much the island of mystery that it once was. It has been sliced and diced with most of the hardwood hammocks gone. It is now a tourist fishing hole with homes looking seaward with hardly a passing thought to its first people, the Indians called the "Matecumbes", by the first Spanish explorers. These island Indians burnt torchwood on wooden canoes to fish on starry nights in the labyrinth of mangroves that cushion the hard edge of the rocky shore. Today there are seawalls and soft sand brought to make beaches for the tourists.

When I was a boy I had landed here by Greyhound bus – a bold journey for a 15 year old alone. My mother was in a fret because I was unable to return home that day and ended up sleeping overnight in a trailer through the kindness of Papa Joe. When I returned home and my mother's anger had subsided, she asked me why I made that trip. I confessed that the name Matecumbe had seduced me. I wanted to know her secrets. "So what is the secret?" she asked. I had no answer. "I'm still looking," I said.

I didn't tell my mother that after I exited the bus I walked across the old Indian midden behind Papa Joe's, I had strayed deep into the mangroves where I sank into the muck to my waist and only saved myself by grabbing the low mangrove branches above my head.

Today, 40 years later, Chris and I walk with flashlights into the same wooded lot and see ancient broken shells peeking from beneath the leaf litter. In the gray wet marsh there are countless footprints of shore birds, and not a single human footprint. We see a hermit crab scurrying across the forest bottom with its greatest prize, a West Indian top shell, long extinct, looted from the nearby shell midden.

We retreat back to our hotel knowing that there is a refuge from where the sky and sea blur the line of certainty, and that tomorrow, Old Matecumbe will be lit again so that we can find our way from the bait shop to the pier.

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