

Nature Girl

Carl Hiaasen

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Extract

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One

On the second day of January, windswept and bright, a half-blood Seminole named Sammy Tigertail dumped a dead body in the Lostmans River. The water temperature was fifty-nine degrees, too nippy for sharks or alligators.

But maybe not for crabs, thought Sammy Tigertail.

Watching the corpse sink, he pondered the foolishness of white men. This one had called himself Wilson when he arrived on the Big Cypress reservation, reeking of alcohol and demanding an airboat ride. He spoke of ringing in the New Year at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino, which was owned by the Seminole tribe on eighty-six acres between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. Wilson told Sammy Tigertail that he'd been sorely disappointed not to find a single Indian at the casino, and that after a full night of drinking, hot babes and seven-card stud he'd driven all the way out to Big Cypress just to get himself photographed with a genuine Seminole.

'Some dumbass bet me a hundred bucks I couldn't find one,' Wilson said, slinging a flabby arm around Sammy Tigertail, 'but here you are, brother. Hey,

where can I buy one of them cardboard cameras?’

Sammy Tigertail directed Wilson toward a convenience store. The man returned with a throwaway Kodak, a bag of beef jerky and a six-pack. Mercifully, the airboat engine was so loud that it drowned out most of Wilson’s life story. Sammy Tigertail heard enough to learn that the man was from the greater Milwaukee area, and that for a living he sold trolling motors to walleye fishermen.

Ten minutes into the ride, Wilson’s cheeks turned pink from the chill and his bloodshot eyes started leaking and his shoulders hunched with the shakes. Sammy Tigertail stopped the airboat and offered him hot coffee from a thermos.

‘How ‘b-b-bout that picture you promised?’ Wilson asked.

Sammy Tigertail patiently stood beside him as the man extended one arm, aiming the camera back at them. Sammy Tigertail was wearing a fleece zip-up from Patagonia, a woolen navy watch cap from L.L. Bean and heavy khakis from Eddie Bauer, none of which would be considered traditional Seminole garb. Wilson asked Sammy Tigertail if he had one of those brightly beaded jackets and maybe a pair of deerskin moccasins. The Indian said no.

Wilson instructed him not to smile and snapped a couple of pictures. Afterward, Sammy Tigertail cranked up the airboat and set out to finish the swamp tour at the highest-possible speed. Because of the cold weather there was practically no wildlife to be observed, but Wilson didn’t seem to mind. He’d gotten what he came for. Squinting against the wind, he gnawed a stick of dried beef and sipped on a warm Heineken.

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Sammy Tigertail took a shortcut through a prairie of tall saw grass, which flattened under the airboat's bow as neatly as wheat beneath a combine. Without warning, Wilson arose from his seat and dropped the beer bottle, spraying the deck. As Sammy Tigertail backed off the throttle, he saw Wilson begin to wobble and snatch at his own throat. Sammy Tigertail thought the man was gagging on a chunk of jerky, but in fact he was trying to remove from his doughy neck a small banded water snake that had sailed out of the parting reeds.

The creature was harmless, but evidently Wilson was in no condition to be surprised by a flying reptile. He dropped stone-dead of a heart attack before his Seminole guide could get the boat stopped.

The first thing that Sammy Tigertail did was lift the little snake off the lifeless tourist and release it into the marsh. Then he took Wilson's left wrist and groped for a pulse. Sammy Tigertail felt obliged to unbutton the man's shirt and pound on his marbled chest for several minutes. The Indian elected to forgo mouth-to-mouth contact, as there obviously was no point; Wilson was as cold to the touch as a bullfrog's belly.

In his pockets the Seminole found the disposable camera, \$645 cash, a wallet, keys to a rented Chrysler, a cellular phone, two marijuana joints, three condoms and a business card from the Blue Dolphin Escort Service. Sammy Tigertail put back everything, including the cash. Then he took out his own cell phone and called his uncle Tommy, who advised him to remove the dead white man from the reservation as soon as possible.

In the absence of more specific instructions, Sammy Tigertail wrongly assumed that his uncle meant for

him to dispose permanently of Wilson, not merely transport him to a neutral location. Sammy Tigertail feared that he would be held responsible for the tourist's death, and that the tribal authorities wouldn't be able to protect him from the zeal of Collier County prosecutors, not one of whom was a Native American.

So Sammy Tigertail ran the airboat back to the dock and carried Wilson's body to the rental car. No one was there to witness the transfer, but any casual observer – especially one downwind of Wilson's boozy stink – would have concluded that he was a large sloppy drunk who'd passed out on the swamp tour.

Having positioned the corpse upright in the back-seat, Sammy Tigertail drove directly to Everglades City, in the heart of the Ten Thousand Islands. There he purchased four anchors and borrowed a crab boat and headed for a snook hole he knew on the Lostmans River.

Now a single coppery bubble marked the spot where the dead man had sunk. Sammy Tigertail stared into the turbid brown water feeling gloomy and disgusted. It had been his first day working the airboat concession, and Wilson had been his first customer.

His last, too.

After returning the crab boat, he called his uncle Tommy to say he was going away for a while. He said he wasn't spiritually equipped to deal with tourists.

'Boy, you can't hide from the white world,' his uncle told him. 'I know because I tried.'

'Do we own the Blue Dolphin Escort Service?' asked Sammy Tigertail.

'Nothing would surprise me,' said his uncle.

At about the same time, in a trailer not far from the