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The Kind of Land People Get Lost In

The view on the Florida highway from West Palm Beach to Belle Glade is reminiscent of Africa, especially the grasslands of Zimbabwe and Namibia. The skies are vast and wide, the clouds luminous and tinged with color from the sun's path across the sky, a sundial to show the passing of time. Time moves slowly out here; sawgrass and sugar cane extend endlessly, miles and miles of head-high leaves, stiffly blowing, a low whisper, the kind of land people get lost in.

Explorers in the nineteenth century described the empty skies and far-reaching glades: "All around us reigns a death-like stillness unrelieved by any sound of animal life of any description. The croaking of a frog, the hoot of an owl, or the bellow of an alligator would be a relief." This big stillness caused in them a feeling of "depression we cannot avoid."

In a car, I can distract myself from the unexpected emptiness by turning up a radio or by traveling seventy miles per hour on a stretch of highway called Highway 80. Highway 80 runs thirty-five miles from the southern end of West Palm Beach due west, where it dead-ends into Chosen. It is here that you choose your own adventure: the highway trails off into a two-lane road, straight ahead toward Chosen, and a sign for Pahokee points north.

This time I have gone south past barbed wire fences and tall guard posts of the Glades Correctional Institution. 'Welcome to Belle Glade' is spelled out on a sign adjacent to the institution. I have passed through the Gateway to the Everglades.

Belle Glade's first settlers arrived around World War I, its first settler a draft-dodger. William C. Clark and his wife arrived in the fall of 1916 after Clark decided *he'd rather be a farmer in the Everglades than a soldier in France*. Laurence E. Will, a self-ascribed Florida cracker, Belle Glade settler, and hurricane survivor, pieces together a pretty impressive history of Belle Glade in his 1968 book, *Swamp to Sugar Bowl: Pioneer Days in Belle Glade*. As far as I've researched, Will's book is the only one specifically about Belle Glade in existence, although written by a white man tending toward overt racism who, in the narrative, calls Belle Glade's black children "jigaboos." Will's research on its white settlers, however, is helpful. He notes that little was known about the Everglades or its farming potential. An 1882 expedition from Kissimmee down to Lake Okeechobee reports to Congress:

Very little can be known of the North Glades. They are uniformly saw-grass, and it is impossible to penetrate them with canoes in high water, and in low water they are so generally boggy that it is impossible to explore them by foot.

Still, American entrepreneurs saw potential within those seas of muck and sawgrass, appealing to the lure of easy money for a simple, average man and his family. The North Glades were first named Glade Crest, and first settlers like Clark were lured in by lush promises that this land was fertile. "Just mow off the sawgrass, then plow the ground with a hand plow...frost has never been known to damage the tenderest vegetation..." The salesmen

even claimed that there were no mosquitoes.

The land's description was marshes with jungles of "cypress, rubber, pop ash, and cabbage trees as thick as they could crowd." Sawgrass as far as the eye can see. The soil was rich, loamy, and black, and "could raise the most stupendous vegetables, solid and delicious, and without a pound of fertilizer." The land boasted giant, lacy ferns, green moon vines, Everglades gourds, and stately Cypress trees. The Everglades seemed too good to be true: an undeveloped Garden of Eden.

The sun is setting as I head west onto Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd and dimly make out unfamiliar stores and grimy parking lots, a more familiar Taco Bell, and finally Dixie Fried Chicken packed with patrons and smelling like a farm kitchen. I am struck by a strange combination of nostalgia and fear as I drive cautiously across streets lined with strolling people crowding close to my car as if a parade had just passed. I later learn that a parade, in fact, had passed by earlier that evening before the sun set. It is Homecoming Week, and the legendary Glades Central High School football team, the Raiders, would demolish its competitor that very night. The Raiders' strongest rivals are the Pahokee Blue Devils. Meets between the rivals can draw up to 25,000 spectators in an event called The Muck Bowl.

In 2001, *The New York Times* reported that small, rural Glades Central had produced more National Football League players than any other high school in the U.S. that year. The title of the article, "A Town Where Football is the Glue and the Hope."

I take a left past the concrete block funeral home on the corner and make my way to the home of two people who have made Belle Glade home.

My two contacts, Kate and Mia, live in a small cinder-block house with a nicely-kept yard lined with blue plumbago evenly spaced on each side of the center door with its step. A 'Welcome' sign hangs over the door, and despite the darkness, the windows are cracked open to let in the cool breeze which has finally arrived in November. I knock and enter. There is a muffled "woof," and I meet Belle, their seven-month-old black and tan coonhound puppy. She is being trained, and like anxious mothers, they force her to heel until I've gotten acclimated and put my bags down. Don't be afraid of her, they say. *She might try to bite, but it doesn't hurt that badly. Beeeeelle.* The warning signals come as she approaches me. *Beeeeelle.*

This house is simple and homey with wooden decorations bought from thrift stores and yard sales. Personal items like photo albums, DVDs, and books share space with more practical items: Costco-sized boxes of potato chips, a small bookshelf filled with books and toys and games, a round table in the kitchen with mismatched wooden and blue metal folding chairs.

I join them in the living room, and we catch up. I haven't explained fully why I'm here and admit that I want to write about their experience out here, that Belle Glade has been on my mind for quite some time. They seem weary, as if tired of being curiosities. Visitors lured by the reports that Belle Glade experiences the same conditions as a Third World Country, I learn, come and go.

And 'Third World' isn't even pc anymore, Kate explains. 'Developing' is the word. And Belle Glade is not underdeveloped. That's insulting to the people who live here, who have

lived here for their entire lives. She smiles at me. *What have you learned?*

I offer the most fun piece of research I have found. The first mayor of Belle Glade, Walter Greer, had a wife named Fay Tina and grew potatoes. *Fay Tina!* we crow.

Mia comments, *Hmm. Greer. Must be related to Commissioner Greer.* Kate nods. They look at each other. Kate and Mia moved out here with the support of their church. They are Wendy Darlings for Belle Glade's Lost Boys. They run after school clubs and cook breakfasts on the weekend, dinners during the week. When asked about what sparked the idea to move out here, Kate looks out the window. *I don't know why, exactly. I just knew that I needed to be out here.* The politicians, religious leaders, businessmen, and neighbors have differing opinions about Kate and Mia's presence in Belle Glade. There have been several storms brewing lately. People are territorial, it seems. Belle cautiously sniffs me.

I tell them about the Hurricane of '28, a hurricane with 150-mile-per-hour winds that killed an estimated 2,500 people in the Glades region.

Kate nods. *That's what Zora Neale Hurston wrote about in Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Hurston's words are, "It woke up old Okeechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed."

I read my notes. *By the time Belle Glade got wind of the strength of the hurricane, there was no escape. Cars and boats couldn't escape the rising waters. Three fourths of the people who drowned were black laborers from the Bahamas. More died in the hurricane of '28 than the sinking of the Titanic or the Lusitania. Caskets were piled 'like cordwood.' For years, 'farmers clearing new land discovered skeletons in the sawgrass.'*

Black laborers from the Bahamas, Mia repeats. *They're Jamaican and Haitian now.*

Belle Glade and its surrounding towns became an apparent harbinger of opportunities for Caribbean workers. After the Big Freeze of 1927, Belle Glade became a bean-picking town. Hurston describes the bean pickers who work "all day for money and fight all night for love."

A year after the old monster rolled out of bed and killed thousands of laborers, *The Everglades News* announced, "Negro women picking beans are making as much money as a union brick layer in a big city, \$8 to \$12 for less than eight hours." Belle Glade had become a land of opportunity. During World War II, an estimated 16,000 workers were employed on Glades farms, of which three-fourths were migrants here only for the harvesting. Will writes, "This caused a whopping increase in Belle Glade's negro population, which at one time outnumbered the whites here two or three to one."

In Will's 1968 world, sugar and molasses brought \$110 million to the Glades each year. In 1923, the first successful mill began to operate. At the time, Florida was only allowed to produce less than 1% of the nation's sugar needs. When Fidel took over Cuba, the sugar business was allowed to expand, employing 13,000 in 1968, grinding more than 1 million tons of cane which produced 113,312 tons of raw sugar and more than 7 million gallons of molasses. Will writes, "All cane is cut by imported labor from Jamaica under contract with the British

government” with laborers earning more than three times in Belle Glade than they could in Jamaica.

Today, earning a living is difficult. Household and family incomes are nearly half of the median income of households and families in the state of Florida with the median household income just reaching \$22,000, and the average income just broaching \$11,000. Nearly 33% live below the poverty line. The median income in Palm Beach County, skewed heavily by incomes on Palm Beach, is over \$110,000.

Thirty-five miles to the east sits Palm Beach, gilded and untouched by the kind of disease or poverty or crime seen out west. The island boasts of its own entrepreneurs, most famously Donald Trump, but its inhabitants are strange and varied, from Jimmy Buffet, to an Astor [and Titanic survivor], to defamed Bernie Madoff. The island boasts business tycoons and heirs: the Kennedys; founders of Slim Fast, Revlon, Estee Lauder, and Netscape; the owner of both Manchester United and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers; and a Post cereal heiress.

When Kate and I return from Winn Dixie with eggs and milk, three girls aged nine, ten, and eleven are sitting at the round table. Kate makes light and delicious chocolate chip pancakes while I scramble a pan full of eggs. The girls introduce themselves politely and continue playing their game. They are cute, dressed only as girls their age dress, wearing Tweety Bird jackets and stylish leggings, tightly braided hair that catches white fluff swirling in the air. The girls have bright smiles and intelligent eyes, and as they become used to the stranger in Kate and Mia’s house, talk about their lives, the streets they live on, about Mia picking them up in her car, about how Mia is strict. Kate is not. After we eat, the three eagerly try the paddle ball game in my trunk, keeping at it until the ball goes into the street for the hundredth time, and the air warms enough for bare feet.

As they play, Kate tells me about the girls’ backgrounds. One of the girl’s parents are Haitian, married and living together. One is adopted, and the third lives with a mother who works long hours.

Some parents leave for months at a time, Kate tells me, hired as day laborers in Georgia for harvest. They won’t be back for several months. They can’t keep up with their kids. In the beginning, before we moved out here, we used to come around on Saturdays with a van, and parents would let their kids get in the van and just wave at us. They didn’t know who we were or why we were there but trusted that white women in a van meant no harm. Kate and Mia are uncertain about the girls’ futures, but hopeful. The Wendy Darlings are there to help.

Historically, Palm Beach has also been home to artist and novelist William S. Burroughs, author James Patterson, the son of Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov, musician John Lennon, and briefly, Michael Jackson, who returned home to Neverland Ranch after just two years. As far as I know, not one Muck Bowl player-turned NFL success story has made Palm Beach home.

A Never Land of sorts lies to the west, and its people live behind the miles of sawgrass and sugar cane fields.