

November 2002

Guess where I am?

Don't bother, I'll tell you. I'm sitting in the second floor of my penthouse hotel room looking south into Biscayne Bay. Seems that my cousin Alan is friends with the owner of this joint, so I got the room for free for my first 2 weeks in Miami. In a rare instance of restraint, I decided not to try and find out if this "friend of my cousin's" is also in the olive oil business or something, and moved in as if it was totally normal.

Actually, my room at the Dupont Plaza is directly above the mouth of the Miami River, and the opposite bank is notable for its absence of any modern construction. How did this corner of prime waterfront real estate (isn't that a sick term for "land"?) escape the omnipotent gaze of progress, you ask? Well, actually, there WAS a building there not long ago, but when they tore it down to build the Marriott or Starbucks Southern Beachhead Corporate Headquarters or Bank of America Downtown Miami Tower #3 (there are 2; I'm not kidding) or whatever it was gonna be, some pesky archeologist snooping around beneath the rubble discovered a circle of pillars dating back, oh, to about the same time when that revolutionary jew was still just a revolutionary jew flipping off the Romans in Aramaic. So this "Miami Circle" is still, as far as I can tell, largely unstudied, and nobody has any idea who might have made it, since there weren't SUPPOSED to be people here back then. Maybe it was the dolphins.

Or the pelicans. Can I just mention briefly how majestic that bird is? They are friggin HUGE, and watching them drop off a pier and then, as if they're thinking "ho hum" they spread out their massive wings, catch the wind, and swoop upward just in time to avoid crashing in the water. Wow.

I'm working at a marine lab on Virginia Key, connected to the mainland by the Rickenbacker Causeway, and the other day, when I was getting to leave work, I walked in to say goodbye to some folks and they said "you're not going anywhere, didn't you hear?" I hadn't, so I glanced out the window thinking "Hurricane?" Nope. Clear as Gabriel's trumpet. "What's the deal?" "A boatload of hundreds of Haitian refugees landed on Virginia Key this afternoon, and the Coast Guard shut down the Causeway while they're trying to round up the escapees." This I gotta see. So I walk down the road, and, sure enough, there's a huge line of cars and the Key Biscayne police officer at the front of the line tells me that he heard that there was a Haitian in the woods nearby, and that he was purported to be coming this way. So the cop says to me "I hope you're gonna help me catch him," to which I replied "I'm definitely NOT going to help you try to catch him, see ya later," and kept walking towards the bridge. On the way, I talked to a lady on the beach who told me that she was there when "scores" of Haitians started swimming up to the beach and asking her for food. She said she declined, cuz it was her last bag of chips.

As I walked, two massive Coast Guard helicopters kept passing overhead, and I later learned that they have heat sensor equipment to be able to find the refugees hiding amongst the mangroves. It turns out that the walking path across the bridge was open - the only reason they shut down the Causeway was because some of the refugees had

tried to get rides into Miami, and they wanted to search all of the cars to make sure nobody got away. When I got to the top of the bridge, the scene on the other side came into view. Sirens and flashing lights as far as the eye could see. As I approached, I saw a pair of wet, abandoned shoes on the path, and then started to hear chanting.

A group of Haitian activists had gathered in front of a police line, demanding that the authorities let their people go. So I joined this group, and just as I walked up, the TV cameras were interviewing this one Haitian woman, and she was seriously pissed and brilliant, and she was saying that she had been there when two city commissioners had come by to assess the situation: Commissioner Morales (a Cuban-American) and Commissioner Despinos (a Haitian-American). Morales was let right in, but Despinos was detained for 5-10 minutes while they "assessed the situation." The interviewee pointed out that this was a perfect parallel with the refugee situation: when Cubans land in Florida, they are almost always released, and, in fact they are even often given subsidized housing, etc. By stark contrast, Haitians are placed in detention, and almost always sent back to Haiti.

Standard procedure when a refugee hits land is that the INS conducts an interview to determine if the refugee has a "credible fear" of persecution if they were to return home. This INS decision predates the actual hearing in front of a judge to determine status, and so if there seems to be any indication of credible fear, then INS policy is to release the refugee into the community pending their hearing in front of a judge (which often takes many months). The above policy applies to every refugee in the world EXCEPT Haitians. I'm not exaggerating at all. Even after demonstrating "credible fear," Haitians are kept locked up. In fact, there are hundreds of Haitians who have been in Miami's Krome Detention center without access to lawyers for over 8 months, many of whom have demonstrated "credible fear." Needless to say, this is totally fucked.

So the tempers are running high. Some folks commented that one good thing that might come out of this is that maybe the fact that it's right before the election might end up galvanizing folks to boot Governor Jeb Bush (Dubya's brother, equally moronic and scary) out of office. I also remember a 16 year-old Haitian girl being interviewed reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with tears in her eyes: "...with liberty and justice FOR ALL.' Come on now, people, where's the justice??" Well, eventually four busloads of refugees drove past, with darkened windows, en route to "The Krome." Welcome to the USA!!

The protestors moved to the INS headquarters, conveniently located in "Little Haiti," for continued demos into the night.

Tonight, I just got back from the Haitians Roots Music Festival, right around the corner from the hotel. Given the synchronicity with the refugee situation, there was a lot of that talk going around, and Al Sharpton was even on hand for a short speech that got the crowd really riled up. Then, during intermission, a spontaneous jam broke out in the back of the crowd, drums, trombones, dancing, chanting, felt like a street party. The band after the intermission was an outstanding group called "Azo"; tons of percussion, singing, call and response chanting, and the audience was getting seriously into it, old

and young. The front of the crowd saw some variation on slam dancing, Haitian style, and the energy in the place was electric, felt like a match could have set it off.

Then, back to the Dupont Plaza, and into the empty elevator which always has a really really strong smell: all manner of perfumes, body lotions, sun screen, colognes. Once, the previous occupant had apparently just farted, and the penthouse is a long ride up. But I remember thinking that it actually smelled better than some of the perfumes on previous occasions...

These contrasts between the mundane and the intensely real seem to characterize Miami in a way I can't quite put my finger on yet. There's this odd combination of ugly superficiality and vibrant neighborhood street life which is difficult to reconcile. Maybe I'll have it all figured out when I write you next.

On Tuesday, I'm off to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands in search of the elusive, tiny, brooding lamp urchin, *Cassidulus carribearum*. I'd love to hear anyone's tips on cool places to check out in the region. I've only been to Puerto Rico once before, and that was with Jesse on the cruise. I got bit by fire ants which gave me some strange allergic reaction that caused me to unconsciously scratch the top of my head furiously for several hours. But that's another story.

peace y'all, and here's hoping the monorail passes
love bug