



Miami Blues

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Charles Willeford

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298 pages

Extrait

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Frederick J. Frenger, Jr., a blithe psychopath from California, asked the flight attendant in first class for another glass of champagne and some writing materials. She brought him a cold half-bottle, uncorked it and left it with him, and returned a few moments later with some Pan Am writing paper and a white ball point pen. For the next hour, as he sipped champagne, Freddy practiced writing the signatures of Claude L. Bytell, Ramon Mendez, and Herman T. Gotlieb.

The signatures on his collection of credit cards, driver's licenses, and other ID cards were difficult to imitate, but by the end of the hour and the champagne, when it was time for lunch--martini, small steak, baked potato, salad, chocolate cake, and two glasses of red wine--Freddy decided that he was close enough to the originals to get by.

The best way to forge a signature, he knew, was to turn it upside down and draw it instead of trying to imitate the handwriting. That was the foolproof way, if a man had the time and the privacy and was forging a document or a check. But to use stolen credit cards, he knew he had to sign charge slips casually, in front of clerks and store managers who might be alert for irregularities.

Still, close enough was usually good enough for Freddy. He was not a careful person, and a full hour was a long time for him to engage in any activity without his mind turning to something else. As he looked through the three wallets he found himself wondering about their owners. One wallet was eelskin, another was imitation ostrich, and the third was a plain cowhide billfold filled with color snapshots of very plain children. Why would any man want to carry around photographs of ugly children in his wallet? And why would anyone buy imitation ostrich, when you could get an authentic ostrich-skin wallet for only two or three hundred dollars more? Eelskin he could understand; it was soft and durable, and the longer you carried it in your hip pocket the softer it got. He decided to keep the eelskin one. He crammed all of the credit cards and IDs into it, along with the photos of the ugly children, and shoved the two emptied wallets into the pocket of the seat in front of him, behind the in-flight magazine.

Comfortably full, and a trifle dizzy from the martini and the wine, Freddy stretched out in the wide reclining seat, hugging the tiny airline pillow. He slept soundly until the attendant awakened him gently and asked him to fasten his seat belt for the descent into Miami International Airport.

Freddy had no baggage, so he wandered through the mammoth airport listening to the announcements that boomed from multiple speakers, first in Spanish and then, half as long, in English. He was eager to get a cab and to find a hotel, but he also wanted some nice-looking luggage. Two pieces would be better than one, but he would settle for a Vuitton one-suiter if he could find one. He paused for a moment to light a Winston and reconnoiter a long line of American tourists and diminutive Indian men and women going to the Yucatán Peninsula. The vacationers kept very close to their baggage, and the Indians pushed along large boxes held together with strips of gray duct tape. Nothing for him there.

A Hare Krishna, badly disguised in jeans, a sports shirt, and a powder blue sports jacket, his head covered with an ill-fitting brown wig, stepped up to Freddy and pinned a red-and-white-striped piece of stick candy

to Freddy's gray suede sports jacket. As the pin went into the lapel of the \$287 jacket, charged the day before to a Claude L. Bytell at Macy's in San Francisco, Freddy was seized with a sudden rage. He could take the pin out, of course, but he knew that the tiny pinhole would be there forever because of this asshole's carelessness.

"I want to be your friend," the Hare Krishna said, "and--"

Freddy grasped the Hare Krishna's middle finger and bent it back sharply. The Krishna yelped. Freddy applied sharper pressure and jerked the finger backward, breaking it. The Krishna screamed, a high-pitched gargling sound, and collapsed onto his knees. Freddy let go of the dangling finger, and as the Krishna bent over, screaming, his wig fell off, exposing his shaved head.

Two men, obviously related, who had watched the whole encounter, broke into applause and laughed. When a middle-aged woman wearing a Colombian poncho heard one of the tourists say "Hare Krishna," she took a Krishna Cricket out of her purse and began to click the metal noisemaker in the pain-racked Krishna's face. The injured Krishna's partner, dressed similarly but wearing a black wig, came over from the line he was working at Aéromexico and began to berate the woman for snapping the Cricket. The elder of the two laughing men came up behind him, snatched off his wig, and threw it over the heads of the gathering crowd.

Freddy, who had slipped away from the scene, went into the men's room next to the bar on Concourse D and took the stick of candy out of his lapel. In a mirror he examined the pinhole and smoothed it out. A stranger would never notice it, he decided, but the flaw was there, even though it wasn't as bad as he had thought it would be. Freddy dropped the stick of candy into his jacket pocket, took a quick leak, washed his hands, and walked out.

A young woman slept soundly in a row of hard-plastic airport chairs. A two-year-old boy sat beside her quietly, hugging a toy panda. The wide-eyed child, drooling slightly, had his feet resting on a one-suitcase with the Cardin logo repeated on its light blue fabric. Freddy stopped in front of the boy, unwrapped the stick of candy, and offered it to him with a smile. The boy smiled back, took the candy shyly, and put one end in his mouth. As the boy sucked it, Freddy took the suitcase and walked away. He took the Down escalator to the outside ramp and hailed a Yellow cab. The Cuban driver, who spoke little English, finally smiled and nodded when Freddy said simply "Hotel. Miami."

The cabbie lit a cigarette with his right hand and swung into the heavy traffic with his left, narrowly missing an old lady and her granddaughter. He cut in front of a Toyota, making the driver stall his engine, and headed for the Dolphin Expressway. By this route he managed to get Freddy into downtown Miami and to the front of the International Hotel in twenty-two minutes. The meter read \$8.37. Freddy gave the driver a ten, handed his suitcase to the doorman, and registered at the desk as Herman T. Gotlieb, San Jose, California, using Gotlieb's credit card. He took a \$135-a-day suite and signed the charge slip in advance, then followed the fat Latin bellman to the elevator. Just before the elevator reached the seventh floor, the bellman spoke up:

"If there's anything you want, Mr. Gotlieb, please let me know."

"I can't think of anything right now."

"What I mean . . ." the bellman cleared his throat.

"I understand what you're saying, but I don't want a girl right now."

The bedroom was small, but the sitting room was furnished pleasantly with a comfortable couch and an easy chair in matching blue-and-white stripes, a desk with a glass top, and a small bar with two stools. The refrigerator behind the bar held vodka, gin, Scotch, and bourbon, several rows of mixers, and a split of champagne. There was a price list taped to the door. Freddy looked at the list and thought that the per-drink prices were outrageous. He gave the bellman \$2.

"Thank you, sir. And if you need me for anything at all, just call down to the bell captain and ask for Pablo."

"Pablo. Fine. Where's the beach, Pablo? I might want to go for a swim later."

"The beach? We're on Biscayne Bay, sir, not the ocean. The ocean's over there in Miami Beach. But we have a nice pool on the roof, and a sauna. And if you want a massage--"

"No, that's okay. I just thought that Miami was on the ocean."

"No, sir. That's Miami Beach. They're separate cities, sir, connected by causeways. You wouldn't like it over there anyway, sir--it's nothing but crime on the Beach."

"You mean Miami isn't?"

"Not here, not on Brickell Avenue, anyway. This is the fattest part of Fat City."

"I noticed some shops off the lobby. Can I buy some trunks there?"

"I'll get you a pair, sir. What size?"

"Never mind. I'll do some shopping later."

The bellman left, and Freddy opened the draperies. He could see the towering AmeriFirst building, a part of the bay, the bridge across the Miami River, and the skyscrapers on Flagler Street. The street he was on, Brickell, was lined with mirrored, shimmering buildings. The air conditioning hummed quietly.

He had at least a week before the credit card numbers would be traced, but he didn't intend to stay in the International Hotel for more than one day. From now on he was going to play things a little safer, unless, of course, he wanted something. If he wanted something right away, that was a different matter altogether. But what he wanted this time, before he was caught, was to have some fun and to do some of the things he had wanted to do during his three years in San Quentin.

So far, he liked the clean white look of Miami, but he was astonished to learn that the city was not on the ocean.

2

The VIP Room--or Golden Lounge, as it was sometimes called, after the gold plastic cards issued to first-class passengers by the three airlines that maintained it--was unusually crowded. The dead man lying on the blue carpet was not the only one who was there without a gold card.

Sergeant Hoke Moseley, Homicide, Miami Police Department, filled a Styrofoam cup with free coffee--his third-- picked up a glazed doughnut from the assortment on the clear plastic tray and put it back, then doctored his coffee with Sweet 'n' Low and N-Rich Coffee Creamer. Sergeant Bill Henderson, Hoke's hefty partner, sat on a royal blue couch and read John Keasler's humor column in *The Miami News*. Two middle-aged airport security men in electric blue sports jackets stood by the door, looking as if they were ready to take orders from anybody.

A black airport public relations man, wearing a hundred-dollar brown silk sports shirt and yellow linen golf slacks, was making notes with a gold pencil in a leather notebook. He put the notebook into his hip pocket and crossed the blue-carpeted room to talk to two men who said they were from Waycross, Georgia, John and Irwin Peeples. They glowered at him.

"Don't worry," the PR man said. "As soon as the state attorney gets here, and I've had a chance to talk to him, you'll be on the next flight out for Atlanta. And a plane of some kind leaves for Atlanta every half-hour."

"We don't want no plane of some kind," John Peeples said. "Me and Irwin fly Delta or nothing."

"No problem. If we have to, we'll bump a couple and get you on Delta inside of an hour."

"If I was you," Bill Henderson butted in, taking off his black-rimmed reading glasses, "I wouldn't promise these crackers anything. What we may be dealing with here is a Murder Two. For all I know, this whole thing might be a religious plot to murder that Krishna, with the two crackers in on it from the beginning. Ain't that right, Hoke?"

"I don't know yet," Hoke said. "Let's wait and see what the medical examiner and the state attorney have to say. At the least, Mr. and Mr. Peeples, you've got a long session ahead of you. We'll be wanting to talk to you downtown, and there'll be depositions to make out. As material witnesses to the"--he pointed to the body on the floor--"demise of this Krishna here, the state attorney might decide to keep you in Miami under protective custody for several months."

The brothers groaned. Hoke winked at Bill Henderson as he joined him on the couch.

The other Hare Krishna, the partner of the dead man, started to cry again. Someone had given him back his wig and he had stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He was at least twenty-five, but he looked much younger as he stifled his sobs and wiped his eyes with his fingertips. His freshly shaven head glistened with perspiration. He had never seen a dead person before, and here was his "brother," a man he had prayed with and eaten brown rice with, as dead as anyone could ever be, stretched out on the blue carpet of the VIP Room, and covered--except for feet in white cotton socks and scuffed Hush Puppies--with a cream-colored Aeroméxico blanket.

Dr. Merle Evans, the medical examiner, arrived with Violet Nygren, a blond and rather plain young assistant prosecutor from the state attorney's office. Hoke nodded to the security men at the door, and the two were let through. Hoke and Bill Henderson shook hands with Doc Evans, and the four of them moved to the back of the lounge, out of earshot of the Peeples, the PR man, and the weepy Krishna.

"I'm new on the beat," Violet Nygren said, as she introduced herself. "I've only been in the state attorney's office since I finished up at the UM Law School last June. But I'm willing to learn, Sergeant Moseley."

Hoke grinned. "Fair enough. This is my partner, Sergeant Henderson. If you're an attorney, Miss Nygren,

where's your briefcase?"

"I've got a tape recorder in my purse," she said, holding up her leather drawstring bag.

"I was kidding. I've got a lot of respect for lady lawyers. My ex-wife had one, and I've been paying half my salary for alimony and child support for the last ten years."

"I haven't been on a homicide up to now," she said. "My caseloads so far have been mostly muggings and holdups. But, as I said, I'm here to learn, Sergeant."

"This may not be a homicide. That's why we wanted someone from the state attorney's office to come down with Doc Evans. We hope it isn't. We've had enough this year as it is. But that'll be up to you and Doc Evans to decide." *Revue de presse*

Extraordinarily winning ... Pure pleasure ... Mr. Willeford never puts a foot wrong (*The New Yorker*)

A Graham Greene-like entertainment, but tougher and funnier, softened by neither simile nor sentiment. This is probably as close to the real now Miami as any thriller is likely to come (Donald Justice)

Hoke Moseley is a magnificently battered hero. Willeford brings him to us lean and hard and brand-new (Donald E. Westlake)

Pure pleasure... Mr. Willeford never puts a foot wrong (*The New Yorker*) Présentation de l'éditeur Frederick J. Frenger JR., joyeux psychopathe en provenance de Californie, débarque à l'aéroport de Miami, les poches bourrées de cartes de crédit volées. Importuné par un Hare Krishna, Freddy lui retourne brutalement un doigt, le cassant net. Quelques heures plus tard, le corps du Krishna, mort, est retrouvé dans le salon des VIP. Freddy Frenger vient de commencer sa mortelle randonnée dans Miami, allant jusqu'à voler l'insigne et l'arme du sergent Hoke Moseley de la police criminelle. Moseley, lui, a des problèmes avec son poids, ses fausses dents, le sexe... Et les psychopathes. Freddy est un adversaire à sa mesure.

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