Forever Island

By Patrick Smith

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie Jumper stopped the dugout canoe in a pool of black water and watched the fish as it came out of a clump of pickerel weed. He picked up the spear and waited as the gar swam closer, its long snout poking into the decayed matter beneath it. It moved in a slow circle, coming nearer and nearer, until finally the old man smashed the spear into the side of the fish. He flicked the gar into the bottom of the dugout, put down the spear, and poled the canoe to the next clump of weeds.

He muttered, “Must have two gar. Little George might be hungry today.” High overhead, a flight of crows cawed noisily as they winged their way eastward across the swamp. The old man stood rigidly erect, squinting into the still water, then again the spear slammed downward and a gar was brought into the dugout, its blood spilling over the bottom of the cypress canoe.

Once again the old man poled the dugout swiftly across the water, causing little waves to form behind and make rippling sounds as they spread outward into the cypress trees. He was moving deeper into the swamp, and the growths of live oaks, dwarf cypress, and cabbage palms, heavily laced with vines, blocked out the sun and caused the stream and the woods to be bathed with a soft yellowish tint. Ahead of him, the white heron lifted itself from the water’s edge and glided away from his path, and the gallinule and rial scurried away into the grass.

The narrow stream turned and widened out with no visible bank, and at this point the old man turned right, entering an area of dwarf cypress and slimy water. The water mark on the cypress indicated that there was normally two feet of water, but now the water was down to eight inches. The trunks of the trees were dotted with air plants, and scattered throughout the area were clumps of button bush and pickerel weed.

The old man traveled for a half mile across the green water and then turned into a slough covered with water lilies. This led into a pond of about two acres, most of the pond leading again into the dense swamp but the south portion covered by a mud bank. The dugout glided to within thirty feet of the mud bank and then stopped.

Lying atop the bank was a giant alligator at least eighteen feet in length, its body partially sunk into the muck. Aside from its size, it was different from any other alligator because of a scar that ran across the back of its head. Where its right eye had once been there was now a grotesque clump of scar tissue.

The old man and the alligator faced each other, the two eyes locking into the one eye as if in a greeting, then the man said, “You will eat now, Little George. I have brought you two nice garfish.”

When the man threw one of the fish from the dugout, the alligator slid from the mud bank and came forward, his tail pushing him through the water. The fish made one brief chomp with his massive jaws, then the second garfish was thrown to him. When he finished this one he hesitated for a moment, waiting to see if more fish would come from the dugout, and then he turned and climbed back onto the mud bank, his one eye again locking into the eyes of the old man.

“You like it, heh, Little George,” the man chuckled. “Next time I will also bring you a swamp rabbit. I will see you again in a few days.”
The alligator continued to watch as the old man turned the dugout and started retracing his way across the pond and into the swamp.

Charlie Jumper was a Mikasuki Seminole, eighty-six years of age, living in the Big Cypress Swamp, the northern entrance to the Florida Everglades. His wiry body stretched only to five-nine, and his skin, baked deep brown by the many years of the Florida sun, resembled the bark of the cypress tree. His once black hair was now flecked with white.

Charlie Jumper had lived for the past sixty years at the same spot on the bank of Gopher Creek. He could remember once living in a glade deeper in the swamp, and he remembered an earlier life on a hammock in the River of Grass, but before that he was not certain.

When Charlie reached his camp he pulled the dugout onto the bank and began cleaning a black bass he had speared on the way home. Lillie was at her sewing machine on a small raised platform in the cooking chickee.

The Jumper camp was composed of a cluster of three chickees, one for sleeping, one for cooking and eating, and one for storage. Frames for the chickees were dwarf cypress poles, and the pointed

roofs were made of palmetto fronds. The sleeping chickee had a raised cypress plank platform three feet off the ground, as did the storage one. The floor of the cooking chickee was dirt except for the small raised platform at the north end that served as Lillie's sewing area. The storage chickee had three palmetto frond walls, and the other two chickees were open on all sides.

In the center of the cooking chickee there was a large iron grate held up by two walls of limestone rock, and on the grate sat two skillets and a cast iron dutch oven. Under the inside eaves of the structure Charlie had constructed shelves which held the various pots and pans, such staples as coffee, sugar, salt, flour, and cornmeal, and the few canned goods that were purchased at the store in Copeland.

The chickees were built beneath a huge live oak, and the clearing was ringed by magnolia, dwarf cypress, cabbage palm, and wax-myrtle. There was a clump of banana trees that Charlie had planted, and a small plot of ground was used for growing corn, tomatoes, beans, squash, sweet and Irish potatoes, and cucumbers. A flock of chickens roamed the clearing, and off to one side there was a hog pen which was no longer used.

All of Lillie's time when not cooking was spent at the foot-pedal sewing machine, which had been given to her fifty years ago by a white woman who had opened an Indian mission in Everglades City. Lillie made colorful Seminole jackets, skirts, and blouses which Billy Joe sold for her to the souvenir stands along the Tamiami Trail. Her pieces always brought a good price, for she was one of the few Seminole women left who could hand-weave into the cloth the exact designs on the backs of the now almost extinct tree snails. Lillie would spend at least six hours each day on the sewing platform, and her work produced almost all of the cash money available for purchases of staples and cloth.

Most of Charlie's time was spent roaming the swamp and marsh in search of fish, turtles, squirrels, rabbits, turkey, and ducks. It was seldom any more that he hunted the swift deer or the bear. He also gathered the guavas, blueberries, wild grapes, plums, blackberries, and wild orange, and tended the vegetables he grew in the garden plot.

Although Charlie had abandoned the old mode of dress in favor of dungarees, Lillie had not. Her thin body was covered to the ankles by the colorful long dress, and a multi-colored cape was always draped around her shoulders. Her hair was balled on top of her head and held fast by a hairnet, and the silver eardrops came down to meet a dozen strands of glass beads that she wore around her neck. She was extremely shy and quiet, and would not speak to a stranger even in reply to a question. It was

seldom that she said more than a few necessary words even to her husband or son, and it was only the grandson, Timmy, who could make her laugh.

Charlie was joined in his fish-cleaning chore by a large raccoon that jumped onto his shoulder and started clawing his head frantically.

"You stop that now, Gumbo," he said. "Don't I always give you a piece of the fish? Can't you have patience? You will get your share."

He had kept the 'coon as a pet for many years, and it had the free run of the chickees. It often took its meals at the same table with them, sometimes eating from Charlie's bowl. A hunter had shot the animal's mother and left it lying on the ground where it had fallen, and Charlie had named the small one Gumbo because he had found it on the limb of a gumbo limbo tree. The 'coon kept scratching at Charlie's head until he handed it a strip of fish, which it turned over and over in its paws before it began to eat.

The old couple did not have any set meal times and ate only when hungry. There was always food cooking on the grate, and now the smell of a turtle stew made Charlie's nose twitch. He came over to he cooking chickee, put the cleaned bass in a pan, and dished himself up a bowl of the stew. Just as he started eating he heard the rattle of a vehicle coming along the gravel road. An old 1960 Ford pickup turned down the narrow trail leading to the clearing and stopped. Billy Joe Jumper got out of the truck and came over to the chickee, closely followed by Timmy.

"Hello, Pappa," Billy Joe said, taking a seat on one of the cabbage palm stumps used as chairs.

"You want to eat?" Charlie asked. "We have a fresh turtle stew."

"No thanks, Pappa. I'm not hungry."

"Will you take me fishing, Granpappa?" Timmy asked quickly. He always got excited when he came to the camp of his grandfather, for he loved to go into the swamp with the old main in the dugout canoe.

"It is up to your father," Charlie answered. "You must ask him first."

"I guess he can stay," Billy Joe said. "I've got to carry the rent money up to Immokalee. I came by to see if you need anything from the store."

“I need a bolt of the blue cloth and three spools of red thread,” Lillie said. “I have the money here.” She got up from the sewing machine, took a tin can from the overhead shelf, and handed a roll of bills to Billy Joe.

“Is that all you need?” he asked.

“We need a can of coffee and a sack of the plain flour,” she said. “And I have one finished jacket you can sell.”

“It won’t bring as good a price in Immokalee as it would in Naples or down on the Trail. Keep it here and I will sell it for you later this week.”

Billy Joe got up to leave, then he turned to Timmy and said, “You mind your grandfather, you hear? And don’t pester your grandmother. And don’t pull Gumbo’s tail. I will come back for you this afternoon.”

Billy Joe turned the pickup west on the narrow limestone road that lead from the swamp to Turner River Grade, a gravel road that ran north through the Copeland Prairie to Alligator Alley, the Everglades Parkway toll highway. Instead of turning north when he reached the Grade, he turned west again on the state road to Copeland, where he would sell a hamper of tomatoes to the Janes Store. He did not want to take the tomatoes all the way to Immokalee because the intense heat would make them soft, and the price would not then be as good.

When he reached the store in Copeland, which was on Highway 29 three miles north of the Tamiami Trail, he sold the tomatoes and purchased the things his mother wanted. Just above Miles City the highway intersected Alligator Alley, and he stopped for a few minutes and watched the stream of speeding cars heading east and west across the two-lane toll road that connected Naples with Fort Lauderdale.

The hot May sun was causing heat waves to rise from the asphalt, and because of the long drought there was little water in the drainage ditch that paralleled the highway. There had been no rain for almost eight months, and the fields and pastures were burned a deep brown. Even the fronds of the cabbage palms that bordered the highway seemed to be smoking.

When he reached Immokalee he went to the small concrete block building that housed the office of Riles Real Estate Agency. At a front desk he gave the rent money to a secretary, and while she was writing his receipt, Kenneth Riles came in. He was a young man of twenty-nine who had inherited the real estate business when his father died five years ago.

"How are things with you, Billy Joe?" Riles asked, handing a sheaf of papers to the secretary.

"Drought is beginning to hurt bad," Billy Joe said.

"Yes, it's sure bad. We really need some rain. And by the way, Billy Joe, I just received a notice that ten thousand acres of the land that belongs to the Potter Estate in Miami has been sold. That section includes the land where you live. I wouldn't think that the rent price would change, but if it does I'll let you know. Until we learn more about the plans of the new owner, just keep making the rent payments here the same as usual."

"I will, Mr. Riles. And if the rent goes up, I'd appreciate your letting me know right away."

Billy Joe then drove to the office of the Everglades Gazette, which was owned by Albert Lykes. Lykes was also an attorney although he practiced little law any more. He was in his late fifties and devoted most of his time to the small weekly newspaper.

When Billy Joe had purchased the pickup truck from a used car lot in Naples he had been overcharged two hundred dollars on the finance charges. When Lykes learned of this he had recovered Billy Joe's money and then refused to accept a fee for doing so. Lykes was known as a lawyer who would handle legal matters for the Seminoles at no cost, and he counted most of them in the area as his friends. Billy Joe always brought him something when he came to Immokalee.

Albert Lykes was sitting at a desk in his small cluttered office when Billy Joe entered. He did not look up from his work quickly, for in the jeans, faded blue denim shirt, boots, and cowboy hat, Billy Joe resembled any of dozens of other men to be seen on the streets and in the businesses of this cattle center. When he finally recognized who had entered he pushed the papers away and said cheerfully, "Well, hello, Billy Joe. Have a seat. How are things with you?"

"I brought you some beans and some okra," Billy Joe said, handing Lykes a brown paper bag. "It's not much, though. The drought has about ruined my whole vegetable crop."

“Yes, we’re really beginning to hurt everywhere. The fires have already burned thousands of acres in the southern Glades, and some of the fires have burned down so deep into the muck that they say it will take years for them to burn out even after we get rain. What we need is a pure flood.”

“I sure hope the fire doesn’t break out in the swamp. I don’t see how it could ever be stopped there.” Billy Joe pulled up a chair, sat down and said, “Mr. Lykes, they just told me down at the real estate office that ten thousand acres of land out there where I live have been sold. Why would anybody buy that much land so far out in the swamp? Most of the cypress has already been cut a long time ago.”

“Who told you that?” Lykes asked quickly.

“Mr. Riles. He said he didn’t know if the rent would change or not, but he’d let me know as soon as he heard something. I sure hope it doesn’t go up. After this drought killing my crop I’d have a real hard time getting up more money.”

“I don’t know why anyone would want that land, Billy Joe, unless they’re just speculating. It’s an awfully isolated place. If I can find out anything I’ll let you know.”

“I would sure appreciate it, Mr. Lykes. And you come see us. We’ll take you fishing.”

“Thanks for the vegetables,” Lykes said, “and anytime you’re in town, come by to see me.”

As Billy Joe turned back down Highway 29 towards home he was troubled by the news of the sale of the land. He just didn’t understand why anyone would want to buy it.

As soon as his father had left, Timmy dipped a bowl into the turtle stew and began to eat ravenously, although for breakfast that morning he had eaten hot biscuits, corn grits, and fried ham. His mother could not cook the wild game and the turtle as well as his grandmother, and he often slipped off and came down to the chickees to eat an extra meal. His grandmother made the corn bread in a five-inch deep loaf, and he broke off a chunk of the steaming-hot pone and dipped it into the juice of the stew. The turtle meat was sweet and tender, and he licked his fingers after each bite.

Charlie watched in silence for a few minutes, then he said, “You eat like a hungry panther. It is good for you. Make you grow big and strong.”

Timmy had the same Seminole features as his father and his grandmother, the high cheekbones, the deep brown color, the slightly slanted, piercing eyes. But unlike his grandfather, his eyes were searching and excited rather than tired and squinting.

He finished the bowl of stew and said, “Are we going into the swamp now, Granpappa?”

“I have not finished my food. If you are in such a hurry, you go and dig the worms for the bait.”

Timmy jumped up and ran to the storage chickee, took out a shovel, and headed for the area of the abandoned hog pen. He came back shortly with a can filled with worms and put them, along with two cane poles, into the dugout. The poles were equipped with lines the same length as the poles, turkey quills, and small hooks. Charlie used them only when fishing with Timmy for the bream, for when he hunted the black bass and the garfish, he used the spear.

As they started down Gopher Creek, Timmy sat in the front of the dugout and watched his grandfather move them swiftly across the water. He studied each stroke of the pole in his grandfather’s hands. He had always been fascinated by each task Charlie performed, even the seemingly simple things like removing the shell from a turtle or cleaning a fish or carving a bowl from a block of cypress. He had a deep love for his grandfather and hoped that someday he could be like him. He finally broke the silence and said, “Where are we going, Granpappa?”

“We will fish for the bream in the otter pond.”

“Will you take me to the big tree?”

“We will go to the tree first and fish on the way back.”

They moved quickly along a narrow winding stream bordered on both sides by growths of oak and willow and dwarf cypress and wax-myrtle, laced overhead by a dozen varieties of vines. The landscape then changed suddenly and they were in the open area of the dwarf cypress swamp where Charlie had turned right that morning on his way to the giant alligator. This time they went straight ahead, and on the far side of the clearing they found a stream that led back into a dense area of swamp.

After another mile this stream widened out and spread its black water across the entire land; and rising up before them, towering a hundred and fifty feet into the sky, was a giant bald cypress that had escaped the saw when the loggers had ravished the swamp several decades before.

Charlie poled the dugout close to the base of the tree, and when Timmy looked up it seemed to him that the trunk went out of sight into the clouds. Around the base of the tree, which must be at least fifty feet in circumference, the cypress knees grew so thick that the canoe could not pass through them.

Timmy said excitedly, “Can I climb it, Granpappa? Please let me climb it this time. You promised you would let me do it someday.”

Years ago Charlie had built a ladder up the side of the tree, driving the rungs in one at a time with nails, moving slowly upward and driving in the cypress rungs until he had no more, then climbing down to the canoe and going back up with more rungs and more nails, moving steadily upward until finally he had reached the top where the limbs forked outward and upward in graceful curves. From the top he could see above all the other trees, across the roof of the swamp, past the point where the trees suddenly stopped and the great sea of sawgrass began, over the River of Grass dotted with the thick growths of the hammocks as far away to the horizon as the eye could see.

He thought for a moment and said to Timmy, “Not this time. You will climb it, but this is not the time. You must be strong, or your arms would give way before you reached the top.”

“Can you see Forever Island from up there?” Timmy asked.

“No, you cannot see Forever Island. You can see the way, but it is too far. It is many miles to the south.”

“You will let me climb it someday, won’t you, Granpappa?”

“Yes. I promise you, you will climb the tree.”

Timmy sat back down in the bottom of the dugout and the old man poled them off in a westward direction. He left this swamp by a different stream and soon came to a pond dotted with dwarf cypress and pickerel weed. He stopped close to a clump of weeds and said, “We will try here for bream, but you must be very quiet. The bream will run away if they hear a sound.”

Timmy put a worm on the hook, adjusted the turkey quill to a depth of two feet, then threw it out close to the weeds. As soon as the hook had sunk, the quill darted downward and the line became taut. Timmy pulled in a fat bream and dropped it into the dugout. Each time a hook hit the water the same thing happened, and soon they had boated more than a dozen fish.

Charlie wrapped his line back around the pole, dropped it onto the bottom of the dugout and said, “We will quit now. You have all the fish you can eat.”

As Timmy wrapped his line around the pole, Charlie watched a heron pecking at minnows along the edge of the water. The flat was also being worked by wood ibis and water turkey. He pointed to a nearby mud bank and said, “You see the marks there. It is where the otter slides down into the water to play. They have been watching us catch their fish. Would you like to see them?”

Timmy finished wrapping the line and put it down. “Yes, Granpappa. Maybe we can catch one and I can carry it home with me.”

“You will not catch the otter with your hands. He is too fast. Only the alligator can catch the otter, and he cannot do it unless the otter’s mind is elsewhere.”

Charlie picked up one of the fish and threw it to the edge of the water. Almost instantly a brown otter shot down the mud bank, grabbed the fish in its mouth, stared intensely at the man and boy, then scurried back up the bank. The otter paused for a moment more, again staring at the intruders, then he scurried out of sight into the brush.

“Sometimes they will come out and play for you,” Charlie said. “They have even come into the chickees. If we stayed here longer, they would not be afraid. But we must go now. We have fish to clean for your supper.”

Timmy lay on his back and looked upward into the trees and the sky as his grandfather poled the dugout toward home. It made him dizzy to watch the limbs and the vines and the clouds fly by overhead, and hear the rippling of the water as the ancient canoe sliced through the swamp. High up in the sky he could see a flight of white ibis winging its way south toward the marsh country, and, although he could not see it, he listened to the deep-throated croak of a great blue heron. He draped one leg over the side of the dugout and let the water swirl across his bare foot. In a moment he was asleep and was awakened only when he became aware that the movement of the dugout had stopped.

When Timmy pushed himself up he did not see his grandfather. For a moment he was startled, then he looked up a shallow slough and saw Charlie snatching something from the bottom and putting it into his pocket. He soon returned to the canoe and said, “Crawfish. They are for Gumbo. These are for him like candy is for you. He could eat a gallon if you would give it to him.”

When they started to leave, Charlie suddenly stopped the dugout again and walked back up the slough. He noticed a fresh gash cut into the side of a tree, then he waded further up the slough. As far as he could see into the swamp there was a line of fresh gashes cut into trees. He wondered about this for a moment, then he turned and retraced his path back to Timmy.

As soon as the bow of the dugout touched land at the chickees, the ‘coon jumped in and smelled the fish, then he climbed to Charlie’s shoulder and started scratching his head. Charlie put him out of the dugout. “The fish are not for you, Gumbo,” he said. “They are for Timmy. This is what I brought for you.” When he took the crawfish from his pocket and dropped them on the ground, the ‘coon let out a high-pitched yell, almost like a chuckle; then he grabbed one and turned it over and over in his paws.

Lillie was still at the sewing machine when Timmy scampered up the bank and to the chickee. “Can I have some more stew?” he asked eagerly.

“You can have what you wish,” she said, smiling. “There is plenty. It is good for you to eat.”

He dipped a bowl of the stew, broke off a large piece of corn pone, and again ate with relish.

Continue the story of Charlie Jumper who clings to the ancient ways and teaches them to Timmy. When their simple swamp existence is threatened by a development corporation, Charlie decides to fight back. You don’t want to miss the rest of this warm and evocative story of a Seminole who refuses to surrender what he feels is holy: the “river of grass” that is the Florida Everglades.

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