

# Welcome to Pernosta

By Yasheve Miller

**“Pernosta, next four exits,”** I read the sign aloud as Simon and I zipped past the green and white in a stolen car towards an adventure that awaited us in Miami. Instead of using the more popular turnpike, we chose to travel the infamous highway traveling the west side of Florida, Alligator Alley.

“I heard about that Pernosta place, Machi,” Simon commented, “From what I hear, almost anything goes.”

“Like what?”

“Anything... I guess.”

The both of us sat in silence for thirty seconds to take a minute to mentally illustrate “anything.” It was too broad a concept for me to grasp. The scenery that floated passed my windows did not give me a better image to gauge. There were only tree tops. The Everglades National Park movies I’d seen on the documentary television stations drew themselves into my mind. I guessed, hidden away in the bitter emptiness of a swamp offered anyone free range.

“We should stop and get gas, now,” Simon suggested.

At the first exit, Simon directed the car off the interstate to the ramp. This car had to be returned to the dealership in one week. Everyone would have returned by then from our company holiday. My boss would notice this Rolls Royce missing immediately. Simon’s driving threatened my future with the dealership.

A rush of vehicles crossed our path at the end of the ramp. Six lanes of crowded asphalt had appeared instead of the swamp I expected to see. The trees had hidden the ant farm of activity surrounding Interstate 75. A sign read, “Welcome to Pernosta.”

A red light turned green. Simon drove us right onto the six lanes of pavement. None of the gas station names were anything I recognized. And the prices of the gas exceeded everything we’d bought by at least 25%.

*Loyale's*, a small box building with twelve covered pumps lined in three rows, presented the cheapest prices. Simon guided us cautiously into the gas station. There were so many cars; we listened to two full songs on the radio before parking at a pump.

"This place is busy as hell," I announced as if Simon were blind.

Simon did not comment. He killed the engine and sat back in the seat. I cleared my throat. Scandal seeped through Simon's skin. The last time I saw that look on my only friend's face, I stole the Rolls Royce from my job. And the time prior to that, I had to explain to my parents why the police had given me an escort home.

"How much cash do you have, Machi?"

"Oh! I can take care of the gas this time," full of naivety, I crammed my hands into my back pocket.

"Leave it in your pocket. We'll need all we have for Miami," Simon grinned.

Two years prior to our trip, Simon grinned that very same way. After the grin, my girlfriend had dumped me and her father had his picture taken for the newspaper. He also had to take his photograph along with him as he knocked on everybody's door in the neighborhood. His court orders required him to tell everybody within a certain distance that he was convicted of a sexual offense against children. My ex-girlfriend still has not forgiven me for my participation in that practical joke.

"Open the glove compartment," Simon pointed.

"What the fuck for?"

"Just open up, dude!"

By the push of the chrome button, the glove compartment released. The door eased downward. To my surprise, there was a nickel-plated Beretta and a Smith and Wesson revolver on the inside. I jumped back.

"What the fuck are those?"

Simon leaned over and pulled the guns out of the glove compartment. He admired them. He tossed them from one hand to the other as I stared in horror. A body moved passed my window.

“Put those away!” I whispered as if the person passing by the car could hear me.

“We need them.”

“What the fuck for? Did you steal those from your father?”

“I knew you were going to be a bitch about this!” Simon shook his head. “I knew I should have gotten somebody else in on this.”

“But, what is it?” I sighed. I felt guilty about having doubts about backing up my best friend.

“I brought these along for protection, since we were going to be on the road for a few days. But with these, we don’t need to pay for gas.”

“That’s stupid. We have money.”

“What’s stupid is me thinking that this trip would be a blast with my best friend. I tried to convince myself that you weren’t that square.” Simon spoke in that harsh, abrasive tone I’d heard often from his lips when he wanted to convince me to go along with him.

It always made me feel uncomfortable. But it also tipped me over to following Simon’s every lead. The gun shined in my left eye. There was really no other choice in the matter.

“Just listen,” Simon explained. “All we have to do is go in there and tell the cashier that we want everything in the cash register or someone will get hurt. How hard is that? He will hand me the money as you stand guard. Then, we’ll run out.”

“What if he resists?”

“We shoot the ceiling like they do in the movies to scare everybody.”

“Okay, then what?”

“So, are you in or out?”

Simon’s disgusted tone was back and resonated in my ear.



Simon urged me no further. He handed me one of the heavy guns and bolted from the car. He strolled calmly toward the convenient store. Too afraid of my own shadow, I left the car filling up at gas pump number nine and scurried behind him. I followed his every move. We hid our guns under our shirts until we made it to the entrance.

I bumped into Simon's back as he paused at the door. Clumsily, he bumped into an elderly lady making her way out of the store. The polished silver gun tumbled to the edge of his fingers. He almost dropped it. The gray woman slapped Simon with her purse, paying no attention to the nickel-plated machine in his hands.

Both of our hearts stopped. Simon gathered his world together first. He ran into the store with the gun pointed forward. I froze just outside of the door. People weren't able to enter or exit. I blocked the door unknowingly.

"Machi!" Simon screamed for me.

I stumbled into the store. The clerk's hands stretched over his head. This maneuver changed the plan. Simon suggested that I pick up the money from the open register while he held the gun on the cashier.

Two deep breaths and I ignored the curious eyes of casual shoppers. My mind gripped the reality that I needed to do this quickly and get the hell out before this whole scheme got out of hand. I scurried behind the register and scooped cash in wads.

The video camera above the register caught my eye. Frozen as a supermodel in a studio, I stared back into the lens. Things had already gotten out of hand. There was nothing in my magical power arsenal that could reverse time.

"Machi!" Simon's shouts jolted energy back into my nervous hands. I emptied the register. The nerves drained to my feet and pushed them past the cautious shoppers and my best friend. Fear of consequences landed me in the driver's seat of the Rolls. I drove off before Simon made it out of the store and almost ripping the hose from the gas pump. He ran me down before I got out of

the parking lot. I stopped the car long enough for him to get in and that was it. Reaction pushed the accelerator to the floor.

The Rolls skipped the curve, swerved right and caused two cars to almost collide into one another. I drove forward frantically. Simon giggled as he counted the money. Fear held me so tightly, that I could not pull over and punch him in the face.

Half an hour later, I'd made another right turn that led us into the fallen sun. The lights of this darkened city had erupted. We were lost. The idea of going back two left turns, led us deeper into the city.

"This is what I imagined hell might look like in an illusion to get free spirits to come in," Simon chuckled.

We drove slowly on the street as lanterns brightened our windows. People walked along the sidewalks entering glitzy clubs dressed in weird costumes. Far off in the left window there was a bright oval glow as if the moon had fallen behind the buildings. And a train whistled by on the monorail above our heads. We were in another dimension. There was no way that the trees of the swamp had hidden a metropolis of that size.

"Where should we go?" I asked.

"Let's crash at this hotel on the right."

I steered into the hotel parking lot. *Carl's Motel* had maybe five other cars. After I maneuvered the car into a parking space, I noticed the money in Simon's lap. His erection became obvious as well. The excitement of being a fugitive had affected him physically as well.

My own hesitation in leaving the car was because I also had an erection. Fear caused mine, not excitement. And the unknown before us released no tension. Simon had only stayed away a short time as he secured us a room.

We rested in the room for an hour before the both of us became restless. I grew bored with staring at Simon's stiff bulge in his pants. And I grew even more nauseous at the anxious mask of desperation hiding my friend's face.

"Let's get out and see what this city is all about," Simon said.

"Okay."

Simon adjusted himself before he directed us to the door. We traveled on foot because of the activity we observed in the immediate area. We considered eating at one of the cafes or delis that we'd never heard of. There were no other fast food restaurants familiar to us in walking distance. Then, a place called *The Pink Plaza* beckoned us with neon signs and the promise of girls and food.

*The Pink Plaza* exposed me to an immorality that my parents had warned me to stay away from all my life. The bartenders didn't ask for any identification and the girl's cared less about our hairless faces. Wherever money was accepted, we were welcome. At least until Simon ran out of money and had already requested a private dance.

Before the bouncer broke both of his legs, I paid for our meal and the table dance with our Miami Beach travel money. The bouncer accepted my charity. Still, he led us to the back door and slammed it in Simon's pleading face.

The alley, bare and dismal, showed no signs of any exits in either direction. The sounds of our breaths magnified one thousand times in the relentless quiet of the alley. Cautiously, we ambled forward not sure if we were heading towards the street or not. Simon's eyes widened to see before him. I hoped he wasn't as scared as I was at that moment.

Further in the alley, something rustled next to a dumpster. We paused. Curiosity eased Simon forward. He grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. The dirty hair of a woman peeked out from underneath some boxes and newspapers. Then, echoing moans bounced off the walls beside us and continued forever throughout the alley way.

"It's a real live bag lady," Simon laughed.

"So."

"Do you have your gun?"

"No. Why?"

"Stay close," Simon ripped his father's gun from inside his pants. Simon ran forward. Fear of being alone in the alley stomped my feet together behind him. He stopped just before the battered boxes.

“Give me everything you got,” Simon yelled at the lady as he grabbed her collar. He could not have possibly believed that that lady had any money. It was the excitement that drove him. I heard Simon’s gun click.

“Simon, be careful!” bellowed out of my mouth.

“Shut up!” Simon turned to me with that tone of disapproval again. But before he could return his attention to the bag lady, she had placed a little gun to Simon’s head. Without warning, she blew my best friend’s brains all over my face.



I fell to the ground. My brain froze. I wanted to run, but my brain wouldn’t deliver the signals to my feet. Simon’s body fell forward. The bag lady brushed him to the side. She looked in my direction. I screamed at the top of my lungs hoping I sounded enough like a woman that someone would rush to my rescue.

The bag lady laughed at me. To my surprise, she took off her wig and threw it at me. It turned out to be a man. The man in the wig left me alone on the ground in the alley and trotted away. Kicking and screaming, I mustered up the courage to run the other direction. Finally, I made it back to the hotel bruised by laughter and mocking, and destroyed by the death of my only friend.

I jumped in the car and drove. It was an hour before I realized I was driving in circles inside of Pernosta. I drove a few more hours after I convinced myself that it was better to report the murder than to worry if I was wanted for armed robbery. I never found a single police station or a pay phone, but I did see the overpass for I-75. Finally, I made my way to the interstate. I had driven all my gas out; so I stopped to gas up to get the hell out of Pernosta. I parked the car in front of a gas pump. I walked into the store and Simon’s disgusted voiced sounded off in my head. I could not make out what he was telling me.

“Hold it!” I heard another voice. It was the voice of the cashier we robbed the day before. I froze, because he had a rifle pointed at me.

“Remember what you did to me, punk?” He shouted. My chest exploded and I woke up three days later in one of Pernosta’s hospital. I was still in hell. Then, I remembered the sign, “Welcome to Pernosta.”

