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Cape Air flies from Key West up to Fort Myers over coastline fingered and scrolled by the Everglade swamps and Gulf tides. Nine passengers board a plane piloted by a crisp young lady.

An old duffer takes the copilot seat for room for his breathing apparatus. It's clear he knows how to fly. It's also obvious the pilot knows how to deal with him in her firm, polite manner, nodding assent without being diverted from the instrument panel.

For this small twin-engine craft, scales back in the terminal determine seat assignments. Agents seat the passengers to balance the load. Weigh-ins override the federal right to privacy code to an extent that would make the Secret Service sound like a public forum.

On helicopters or fixed wing, the same thing happens. It's like the world knows your sense of balance is so bad, you trip on dance floors that ballerinas choose to practice upon. That you had better be the one to jettison if the ballast is miscalculated.

It's always - every boarding: "Mr. Noelke, please stand back until called." Next: "Your seat folds down by the door." Then, the guy slams the door closed within inches of my left elbow.

The flight passes over my destination, Everglades City. To reach Everglades City requires a rent car from Fort Myers. Not an ordinary rent car, but one new enough the mosquitoes won't start the computerized ignition.

On my first visit to the Everglades National Park years ago, a semi-retired jalopy rented in Miami ran low on gas twice from swamp mosquitoes under the hood swarming so thick around the fan that they jump-started the engine.

A kid at the motel sprayed mosquito repellent under the hood the next night, but forgot to disconnect the battery cables. By daylight, the old buggy idled fast enough to throw mosquito wings and body carcasses from the fan in a blood-splattered mess gorier than a Fort Worth slaughterhouse.

Everglades City is two hours south down the coast from Fort Myers, if you discard the car rental map at the first roadside park. Crystal balls make better guides than rent car maps. For proof, a sign saying "Stone crabs for sale" landmarks the turnoff to Everglades City. The map's directions point 30 miles farther, to a turn-off leading to the "Trail End Baptist Church."

Frost burn shows along the right-of-way into town from last week's freak 29-degree cold spell. The young man at my hotel limits his smile to the question of whether the

Burmese pythons in the park withstood the cold wave. A two-dollar bill on the desk improves contact.

He says, "Mister, we ain't supposed to act like pythons exist, much less them Burmese snakes. But the rangers think there's over 30 thousand in the park."

I lean over and slide the bill closer, face down. "Nod if it is true those snakes can kill an alligator."

He nods and picks up the bill in the same motion. He adds, "I can tell you aren't a city guy, but watch out on the boardwalks if the sun ever comes out again."

Frommer's guidebook mentions a rod and gun club in Everglades City as a dinner choice. The old three-story veranda type house shows big and tall along a river bank on the edge of town.

Before I lock the car, the lobby resounds in pool balls clacking, which brings on a mind freeze back to Doc Sorrel's in 1939 Mertzon. Alone in the shadows, bullfrog and green cricket music close by, words come back, like "Four-bits on the nine in the middle pocket." And, "You scratched, little cowboy."

Tonight, a quick pass by the pool table and a quicker appraisal of the diners stalled on the porch by a one-waitress act makes a tonic water at the bar cover all the atmosphere necessary for the gun club tonight.

Morning dawns into drippy fog leaving town. Parking lots stand empty at the Cypress National Preserve next to the Everglades National Park. Normally, my rubber-treaded travel shoes drag on the 2X12 boardwalks on jaunts to park sights. But not a leaf or a vine floats, or hangs, or shadows the walk enough to dim awareness that a monster snake might lurk underneath.

The old encyclopedia back at the ranch says Burmese pythons reach 30 feet in length. Madame Butterfly, in legend or reality, could never have kept her ballerina slippers arched as swiftly as I rise onto tiptoes from a twig hitting a rail.

The snaky feeling goes back to all those childhood days, gathering the eggs in henhouses that were little more than dens for chicken snakes. Mud pools underneath the walks make good burrows for the giant reptiles. Maybe if I match a pool game tonight at the Gun Club, my attention will shift elsewhere.