

11SHORTGRASS.DOC

Competition among the cabdrivers at the Key West Airport on this Tuesday ranges between fierce to the brink of a sidewalk clash. The lady cabbie closest to my bag all but snatches the ol' pack from my hand to throw in the trunk.

At boarding, her seatmate hands back a card reading "Key Lime Cab - Airport Specialist." She repeats, "Cypress Inn - Right, Mister? Only six bucks for your first ride."

The same procedure at unloading sees the bag slap the sidewalk at the two-story Cypress House still decorated for Christmas on this January sixth. Fir wreaths hang on a sharp-pointed iron fence. Enough ornaments and lights and balls flash and tingle and sparkle off rails and banisters and door knockers to bring the Noel to downtown Mertz on with a few garlands left over to festoon the Yellow Rose Bar in Barnhart.

A phony green bough covers the button to summon attention. First pedestrian to pass knows how to open the gate. She fails to notice, however, a sign tacked to white moldboard that states: "Do not allow strangers to enter on your key. 'Bebe' our dog, has been the center of two foiled dog robberies."

Before I think how to deter the lady, a tall Hispanic guy opens the gate. "Bebe" begins to bark underneath a mask of black hair accentuating her blindness. The man grabs my bag. Private thoughts arise as Bebe smells my shoe: "You little spoiled wretch. Better not spot my shoe. Foot inside that shoe been deeper in a mongrel's flank than you are in size."

Part of the trouble for the moment is that eating nothing but airport food all day challenges my will to stay alive. While the innkeeper, ol' Dave, pulls up reservations on his computer, my right hand slips from the shoulder strap on the carry-on pack to nick a few tidbits in a metal dish from an end table. Strange dry kernels hard to chew, but substance to deter starvation.

Too late, the baggage guy to my near left whispers partly in English, partly in Spanish: "*Cuidado, Señor. Aquel es 'for the cat'.*" Alone on this cold earth, bent by merciless age and cursed by an incurable travel fever, the provincial air emanates strong enough for this Latino to want to forestall, for an Anglo he's known less than 10 minutes, the humiliation of eating cat food.

Social offense? The consequences of eating cat food are — what are they? Brings back the time barbecued horsemeat steaks on an Argentine ranch caused me to buck

from shadows for months thereafter and hump up every time I tightened my belt.

On the way to the room, the porter agrees that my Spanish fits the definition "B.B.," or "Broken Border," spoken between Mexico and Texas. He puzzles more on the cat food incident. We part on a vow to translate "meow" to *espanol*.

From a previous visit to Key West, vague directions steer me toward the Gulf side restaurants from the Cypress Inn. The route follows the street aimed at cruise ship dockings. It's still light enough to see souvenir joints on the way loaded with mementos to tempt grandmother to flex her credit card draw after sailing the high seas on a cruise ship.

Move next to the nap in a good bed after a dinner on the Gulf side docks. Also, actual time isn't passing as fast as this report moves.

After I awaken from roosters crowing, the stairs lead to a breakfast buffet by the main house's swimming pool – a bountiful spread of fresh fruits, soft scrambled eggs and fresh French pastries. The layout offers portions that would last a Texas hostelry 14 mornings and startle, say, a Bible salesman from Waco so bad, he'd go back upstairs and wash his face to be sure he was awake.

Ol' Bebe passes by without a sniff. Over on the lounge chair by the pool, a tan and white cat sleeps on a white towel on a lounge chair. Her breathing synchronizes with the same beat mine hit in the night. A sign warns not to feed the pets from your plate. Nothing is mentioned about the pets feeding the guests.

Local newspaper items confirm the poetry conference starts today. Not that the location matters, but it might have been the roasted horsemeat served in a restaurant in southern France that caused such a severe reaction from shadows and being cinched too tight. I must start keeping better records.