

A BRIDGE, A DUCK, A CRUSH, TWO GOLDEN LIONS, AND HOPE

By John F. Hall

I arrived in Miami, Florida by a propeller-driven airliner, at the age of 10. The word-“Miami” is said to have come from an Indian word meaning “sweet water.” One would expect some things to disappear after 67 years. Thomas Wolfe wrote a novel called, “You Can't Go Home Again.” It was published posthumously in 1940. The meaning of the title is that you can't truly go back to a place you once lived, because so much will have changed since you left, that it is not the same place anymore. That is a true statement. In this story, I will take you back to a place where I once lived, and found some things that did not change. At the same time, where I once lived was dramatically changed.

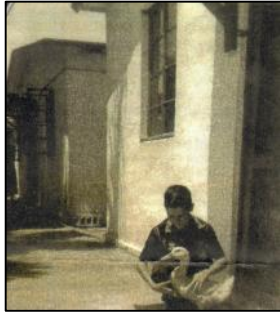


The first time I walked across the West Flagler Street Bascule Bridge, I was amazed. It was the first time I walked across a drawbridge. I walked back and forth over that bridge hundreds of times as a boy, and then as many times as a young teenager. I know a few things about that bridge. It has a 35-foot closed vertical clearance. That means, if your boat is taller than 35 feet from the under surface of the bridge, you cannot go under the bridge, until it is opened by the bridge tender. The bridge has a 75 -foot horizontal clearance in the center span, which means the space limit for carriageway and sidewalk above the bridge. So, if a boat requires a 76-foot horizontal side clearance, the boat will have to use a different bridge.

The West Flagler-Street bridge operates on a restricted opening schedule. There are no openings Monday through Friday from 7:30 to 9:00 A.M., and then again from 4:40 to 6:00 P.M. This allows for vehicle rush hour traffic in and out of downtown Miami. The bridge opens on demand at all other times. The boats hail the bridge tender to raise the bridge by horn signal (one long and one short), or by hailing the bridge tender on VHF Channel 09. In 1956, I remember sitting in a Cris Craft Rocket Runabout, 17-foot wooden boat. It was tied to a pier on the Miami, River. The water that feeds that river comes from the Everglades.

I did not mind being delayed when the bridge tender raised the drawbridge. I enjoyed seeing the sailboats coming in and out of the Miami River. Seeing a distant picture of the drawbridge, brings back memories in the back pages of my mind. The same thing can be said about a melody. Paul Simon and Ivana Kindl wrote the song, “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” These are some of their lyrics: “When you're weary, feeling small, when tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all. I'm on your side, oh, when times get rough, and friends just cannot be found. Like a bridge over trouble water, I will lay me down...When you're down and out, when you're on the street, when evening falls so hard, I will comfort you. I'll take you're part, oh, when darkness comes, and pain is all around. Like a bridge over trouble water, I will lay me down... Sail on silver girl, sail on by. Your time has come to shine, all your dreams are on the way. See how they shine, oh, if I need a friend, I'm sailing right behind. Like a bridge over trouble water, I will ease your mind...”.

Someone, back in the day, when I was a kid, gave me a baby duck when I lived in Miami, Florida. I named the duck "Duckie." A baby duck is called a cladding. A little more than a day after hatching, a duckling can run, swim, and forage for food on its own. A duckling will eat dandelion greens, chopped grass, weeds, insects, and worms. I became attached to Duckie, She is a Peking duck from China, and a delicacy to eat in that country. She has very white feathers. Someone took a picture of me with Duckie. The picture was taken in front of one of the Hotel Flagler's apartments where I lived. Across Flagler street, from my apartment, was a small grass park with three circular benches. In front of the benches was a lockable outdoor-wooden cabinet. Inside that cabinet was a color television.



Color television was introduced to the public in 1954. In 1956, I was 11 years old, and color television amazed me. Only one percent of the homes in America had a color television set. In 1966, only two percent of American homes had a color television set. I would bring Duckie over to the park to eat the grass while I watched the color television. Duckie was getting fatter and fatter eating the grass and weeds growing around that outdoor-wooden cabinet. The drug store, across from the small green park, owned the park, the circular benches, and the color television. A drug store employee would unlock the outdoor-wooden cabinet, in the late afternoon, and turn on the color television set. I guess this was a way that the drug store repaid its customers for their patronage. Many people watching that color television were retired and living on fixed incomes. They could not afford to buy a color television.

I kept Duckie in a two-foot high fenced-in area behind the apartment. Duckie could not fly as she weighed about 12 pounds. Anyone could reach over the fence and pick her up. One day, I came home from school and Duckie was gone. I assume that she became a meal for someone living in the neighborhood. After school, I would go over to a friend's house and we would watch the Mickey Mouse Club television program on his black and white television. I was smitten watching Annette Funicello dance and sing. She was 13 years old at that time. I thought that the Mickey Mouse ears that she wore on the television program were silly. Annette was such a pretty girl and she had the sweetest voice. But her beauty and her health, like a beautiful flower, were fleeting.

The two things that I admired the most about Annette was, first her faith, and second, her bravery fighting multiple sclerosis for 25 years before she died. In an interview with People Magazine in 1992, she said that it was her faith that helped her cope with the disease. These are her words from that interview: "I'm a Catholic, and I've always been a religious person, and having MS reminds me that there's a higher power up there who knows what He is doing." I can only write my stories because of the grace upon grace upon grace and the inspiration that I receive from Christ. I was down in Nashville the other day for my three-month cancer check-up with my dermatologist, Dr. Natalie Curcio. Thanks to her skills, I'm still alive. We talk about her kids and I told her about Duckie. She told me that when she was still a teenager, her dad, four months before he died, gave her a kitten. And someone she knew, intentionally killed her kitten.

I do have some fond memories when I was a student at Ada Merritt Junior High School in Miami, Florida. The school closed in the 1970s. The building was used as a Jobs Corps Center until it was demolished and a replica of the Spanish colonial-style structure was rebuilt in 2003. The impressive front entrance to the school, which is now a K-8, is still guarded by the same two, golden lions. I would touch the noses of the two golden lions for luck.

Clay Harrison wrote a short piece called, "Hope Is." These are his words: "Hope is the rainbow after the storm, a cozy fireplace to keep you warm. Hope is the friend who knocks on your door when times are bad, you're hurting and sore. Hope is a card that comes in the mail, the wind at your back to help you set sail. Hope is the glue that mends broken hearts, pieces restored to become works of art. Hope is the song that you hear, the voice of an angel heard in your ear. Hope is the sunrise even blind eyes can see, springtime blossoms on each cherry tree. Hope is a dream that keeps coming true, God's blessings from Heaven coming to you. Hope is the strength you need to survive, the joy that you feel just being alive. Hope is a bug that lifts spirits high, the shoulder you lean on if you cry. Hope is a miracle in any form, hope is the rainbow after the storm." I would add these words to Clay Harrison's short piece: "Hope is the knowledge, faith, and belief that Jesus Christ has loved you since the moment that you were born. And all that He asks is that you love Him as much as He loves you.

Thomas Wolfe is correct about not being able to go back home again. From the ' West Flagler Street Bridge, at the Miami River, and extending west, for two miles, is now the area know as Little Havana. This is where I use to live. Today, it has a population of over 50,000 people, and 98 percent are Latino. The place where I once lived is, today, more like a Caribbean city. I was never proficient at learning the French language, and my dad, who could speak and write German, wanted me to learn to speak German. My brain is not wired to learn a foreign language. I even have my share of grammatical errors writing the Queen's English. The best that I can say, should I ever go back to Little Havana is: "No hablo espanol."

*Read more stories written by John F. Hall and others at: <http://www/ajlambert.com>