

From Derek Frost's 2021 Memoir - Living and Loving in the age of Aids

February 1981

Take yourself to the southernmost city of the continental USA and you'll find yourself in Key West, Florida. Once there, head north on highway US1 and at mile marker one, turn down the dusty lane to your left and look out for a mass of flowering vines tumbling over a high broken-down fence. You've found the Old Cuban Shack. You've arrived in paradise.

In 1981 we visit Key West, a small tropical island nearer to Havana in Cuba than to Miami in the USA. In the late 1970s its charms were discovered by NYC luminaries Calvin Klein and Angelo Donghia; a group of fashionable and fun-loving, mostly American homosexuals quickly follow them there.

We love Key West at first sight. To one side of the island there's a coral reef and open ocean; to the other shallow "flats" populated by a myriad of small islands cut through by shady mangrove-filled channels. The town is historic, a collection of painted clapperboard houses of great charm, embraced by luxuriant vegetation. The air is infused with the sweet perfume of tropical flowers. Bicycles are the transport of choice. Tennessee Williams is still resident, and his slow, southern, decadent, sexual style informs Key West life.

The Old Cuban Shack lies to one side of an overgrown jungle of avocado trees, bananas and big-leaved vines. A small turquoise pool beckons from a far corner. All is hidden from view behind hedges of untended bougainvillea. The tropical abundance here seems immediately familiar to me and takes me back to the first garden I knew, to the tropical garden where I took my first steps, alongside the Passig River in Manila.

The shack is just that; as simple as can be. It's constructed entirely of a rough sawn dark red wood called Dade County pine; its interior spaces are unpainted and dark. Silver metallic roof tiles reflect the sun's glare. Sash windows separate its shady rooms from the brilliant light outside and big double doors connect its double-height living space to the garden. Over the years, the shack will fill with crazy pink and turquoise but will never conceal its humble origins. We and our friends will spend many happy times here.

The shack's jungle will slowly become our much-loved tropical garden. As with all gardening in the tropics, it means the liberal use of saws and machetes – everything is enormous and growth is rampant. A tropical garden

is virile and dense, filled with brilliant light and dark shade. Leaves are large, shiny and brightly patterned. Many of the flowers are fragrant. Cacti produce great plate-sized blooms which open during the night; their scent attracts the bats who pollinate them. Ginger flowers in profusion hang over the pool. I make sure the garden remains a jungle, and I'm often in it, scaling trees to attack galloping climbers, hacking away to create space and light amongst the plants. Growth is so fast that both quickly diminish. Larry, "the Leaping Lizard", visits and climbs amongst the trees. Great branches come down but new growth quickly calls him back. You sweat and fight mightily and joyously in this verdant place.

October 1981

Key West at that time is "queer party central". It's a liberal, uncritical place where queer people find complete welcome. For us, our days are filled with boys on boats, on the beach, underwater in the ocean and in sunny and shaded places. There are nights of pool parties, shared meals, dancing at the Monster or the Copa, cycling down dark lanes and lying in each other's arms. There's a constant tropical languid sensuality which perfumes the air and informs our behaviour. Each of the many wooden houses seem to have an exotic story to tell. Key West is, for us and for our increasing number of friends here, a glorious celebration.

We dance, dance, dance ... so much dancing, so much happiness.

Drugs, particularly cocaine, fuel the party. There's such an excess of cocaine when we first arrive in Key West that the US authorities set up a customs post north of the island to prevent its entry into the rest of America. Cocaine is a fun party drug, but its excessive use is quickly dangerous and destructive. I'm happy that our relationship with it proves fleeting.

The many Cuban boys in Key West party and love with the greatest enthusiasm and style. We are more than happy to join them doing both. We find ourselves particularly attracted to them and they to us. Maybe it's something about the European in them that is lacking in most Americans. We learn that many arrived in Key West only the year before, as deportees packed onto boats in their thousands on the Mariel Boat Lift, victims of Fidel Castro's purge of political opponents, criminals, queers, mad people and everyone else he imprisoned or marginalized. Our friend Jose Sanchez tells us he was a medical student in Havana when he was given two hours' notice

to leave. There was no time to find his mother and give her a final hug. He was never to see her again.

In Key West we experience what must be one of the fullest expressions of gay liberation, a freedom from any form of censure. Here we celebrate these victories surrounded by great beauty on this glorious tropical jewel embraced on all sides by turquoise oceans. We begin to believe we are in paradise.

And then change, profound change.

It's here, in our perfect paradise, as elsewhere, that something quite other occurs. Here, where something imperfect arrives, silently, almost imperceptibly; something that is not light but is dark; something that is not joyful but is tragic. Here, in paradise, a hellish demon insidiously invades our lives.

It is here, in Key West, that we first hear rumours about a gay cancer; hear talk of a new disease that appears to be targeting and killing gay men. No one seems to know anything about this disease. We have no understanding of what it is or knowledge of the terrifying impact it will have on our lives.

Talk of this cancer starts to slowly invade our happy conversations, in clubs, on beaches, around pools and dinner tables. It begins as a murmur, barely heard. Soon its ugly voice will become louder, much louder.

September 1991

We return to Key West, where our beloved Old Cuban Shack wraps us in its hot, steamy, tropical arms; where the turquoise pool beckons; where butterflies, geckos, nodding banana leaves and bright sunshine welcome us home. It is good to be back and to have it peacefully to ourselves.

February 1994

February 1994 finds us back in Key West. Clione is a beautiful classic schooner, and its naked crew are beautiful. Everyone on board gets naked. It's a happy day out on the water, Key West style.

October 1994

Back in Key West, I jump onto my windsurfing board. Now it's just me and nature. It's an ever changing dance between the wind, the sea, my balance and movement; it's the mingling of the song that is me, the song of the wind as it pushes me forward and the song of the water as it rushes past me. No time for thought. Only time to focus on the dance and the song.

April 1995

J and I make a trip to the Old Cuban Shack in spring 2005. We have made no other since. Now Key West has become for us a place of ghosts. The house remains magical but is filled with departed laughter. The island and ocean are as beautiful as ever but have an emptiness that overshadows other feelings. So many went to Key West to die. Andrew Cleveland died, Dana Severn died, so many beautiful young friends died there. We cycle to the White Street Pier to visit the simple dignified Aids Memorial. We went to its inauguration at a time when our friends were still dying. So many tears were shed on that occasion. More than a few of those named on the memorial were friends.

As in former times the pier is populated by the normal crowd of cyclists, fishermen and hippy types, hanging out and waiting for the sun to drop into the sea and over the horizon. The day is ending but it's still hot. Terns and seagulls line the pier's edge. They stand side by side facing into the salty breeze and the golden light. There's a movement in the water that attracts the attention of the terns. As one, they rise up into the warm air and hover there, gazing intently down into the sea. Then suddenly they stoop and make their vertical downward dive, down into the water to spear their catch. To the birds and to the people here, it appears that nothing of moment has changed; that all is as it ever was. For J and I too many are missing for us to feel the same. Only we, amongst those on the pier that evening seem to pause to read the names, to remember those who might still be with us but no longer are.

The sun dips over the horizon. The day is done. Soon it will be dark.

We are the lucky ones, those who remain healthy and whose lives continue in top gear. We decide our life will no longer include Key West. It's time for us to let go, to move on, to travel elsewhere, to know more of other places.

Despite leaving Key West, we will continue to live a major part of our lives on or beside the sea.

From Jeremy Norman's 2006 Memoir - No Make Up - Straight Tales from a Queer Life

The Old Cuban Shack

The house was already full to bursting with boys out to have fun. There was a special magic about that old house tucked away down a quiet lane in Old Town. A rather pompous friend called it "The Cuban Shack" and shack it was; a cigar-roller's shotgun house over a hundred years' old, built of white clapboard with a pitched tin roof. The magic of the place was its secluded garden, lush with banana, papaya, avocado and lime trees; a veritable fruit salad of tropical delights. Every houseplant in Europe became a tree in that lush tropical oasis. We lived mostly outside on the wide deck strewn with sun loungers by the swimming pool. Although the shack had only two proper bedrooms, there were two loft spaces in the eaves reached by stepladders and an additional bed in the enclosed porch so, the house could sleep ten if everyone doubled up.

The Tropical Shack Worked its Magic.

That mad spring of 1989 there were ten of us on many nights. Our guests went out to the clubs and bars and often came home on their bicycles with a new friend walking along beside. There was always at least one new face for breakfast. Sometimes the new addition would stay on for a few days and swell our numbers. Few who experienced the special charm of the place and the relaxed atmosphere of love we created wanted to leave. That house had a special magic.

Key West was Full of Gorgeous Gay Cuban Boys all of whom loved to Dance and Party.

One evening Luis returned from the Copa, a huge dance club, with a sweet, ash blond, blue-eyed, young German boy called Reine. Reine was

backpacking round America and had arrived in Key West with a couple of German friends all about the same age, nineteen. He was seductively dressed in lederhosen but I don't think he realised quite how cute he looked. For him it was just the way boys dressed in Bavaria. It was clear that Reine was not accustomed to gay life; his innocence of dress mirrored his innocence of manner. He abandoned his straight travelling companions and stayed on with us for about a week, in fact until we were due to leave. In that short space of time, Luis and Reine fell deeply in love and spent every moment together.

Ferdinand Coudert

I came to know Ferdinand well through the sleepy tropical island town of Key West at the southernmost tip of Florida, where Ferdinand had settled in his retirement and had his winter home. What a house it was, a grand old white-painted, wooden, sea captain's house; one of the largest properties on the island, situated in the historic part of Old Town. The lush tropical garden was extensive and was Ferdinand's pride and joy. The climate in Key West ensured that eating outside was the norm for most of the winter and Ferdinand would host memorable dinner parties "al fresco" under a specially constructed loggia in the garden.

His cook, Sophie, a matronly soul who had been in his employ for many years, would prepare dinner beautifully. She cooked delicious meals and the wines, well chosen by Ferdinand, complemented her cuisine. The table was artfully dressed with candles and bedecked with magnificent flower arrangements of heliconias, orchids, jasmine and tropical lilies. In the background, the swimming pool glistened with softly reflective light and the sweet smell of the night-blooming cactus filled the air. Frogs croaked loudly by the pool and the sound of insects filled the tropical night. A more romantic and seductive setting could not be envisaged.

Fantasy Fest

The highlight of the winter season in Key West was "Fantasy Fest", a variation on the theme of Halloween or Carnival. The town was en fete for a long weekend with a succession of parties and fancy dress competitions culminating in the annual parade down Duval Street. True to the spirit of Carnival, everything and anything was permitted. The gay boys who dominated the event paraded their sexuality and fetishes for all to admire;

there were drag queens-a-plenty, leather boys on motorbikes, boys dressed as nuns (the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence) and costumes of an intricate imagination of every conceivable type. Unfortunately, as is often the case, those with less to parade were often the most revealing, whilst the better looking were often more circumspect. People danced in the street and followed the parade and then went on to the clubs and bars before going home after the dawn. The “Lord of Misrule” went abroad for those few days to deliver sensuality and sodomy in a bacchanalian orgy of excess. Alcohol and other more fashionable and less legal substances fuelled the party. Ferdinand owned a second property that attached to his back garden that fronted on to Duval, a perfect place to watch the parade. He gave a grand party every year for his friends on the island. Everyone came dressed in fancy dress appropriate to that year’s carnival theme. Ferdinand handed out large strings of fake pearls to both boys and girls while Bruce served ice-cold champagne and vodka cocktails. Ferdinand presided over the occasion like a later day Nero or Caligula in flowing toga or Arab kaftan. He gave us all an evening to remember.

Henry P McIlheny

I saw Henry for the last time, just before he died in 1986, in Key West one Easter. He was staying at a stylish gay guesthouse of character and charm called La Terrazza di Marti (“La-te-da” for short). The proprietor, who went by the unlikely name of Lawrence (Larry) Formica, was a great party-giver. He had decided that the theme for that year would be Alice in Wonderland, Larry inevitably was the White Queen. The first course at dinner was half a gram of cocaine per person neatly piled on small plate. The tropical garden was planted with mechanical playing cards that rotated from side to side adding a surreal effect to an already surreal occasion.

I noticed Henry making a stately entry down a flight of stairs to join the party in full swing below. He was dressed in a flowing kaftan bedecked with a lay of frangipani flowers. At his side was a handsome young English boy whom I knew to be an expensive hooker. I asked Henry, “how are things going?” with the implied question as to whether the sex was up to scratch. “My dear, the libido is not what it used to be” came the laconic reply as he descended the staircase to join the party.

