

## NOTES FROM AN AMERICAN ISLAND

A rickety yellow school bus jolts along an unpaved road, thick green foliage brushing the windows on either side. I think of the movie Jurassic Park. People living here are descended from freed slaves. They are not dinosaurs. Their history, if they can help it, will not become extinct, even if that means sharing it with a busload of older white tourists.

South of Savannah and north of Jacksonville, a glistening bead in the chain of Sea Islands, Sapelo was home to West African slaves, brought here in chains to grow rice and cotton and other crops for their owners. Their descendants established several communities on the island, still reachable only by boat, but only one, Hog Hammock, remains.

Maurice, our affable bus driver and guide on this late April morning, is a strapping Black man in a Pittsburgh Steelers cap. I imagine him in another life, playing professional football, as he apologizes for potential lapses into Geechee, the Creole language developed here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He tells us the Saltwater Geechee were slaves on the Spalding and Reynolds plantations. Only about seventy of their descendants remain, a small, dedicated band determined to preserve Hog Hammock, the last Geechee settlement still occupied after the Reynolds company lured settlers to live in one small area on the island's southeastern shore.

At a picnic table behind the general store, Maurice's mother, Cornelia Bailey, signs her memoir. *God, Doctor Buzzard and the Bolita Man*, about growing up on Sapelo in the

1940s and 50s, and becoming a griot or storyteller. In a building across the dirt road, in the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society, a tiny older woman in a straw hat and shirtwaist dress tells more island stories. “It’s the woman on the ferry,” I whispered to my husband, never having guessed she was on her way to work.

Maurice takes us past modest homes with television, cable and phone lines but no cell phone access. There is one general store and bar, and one gas station on the island. All supplies are ferried in or brought over on barges, which is fine with the Geechee.

Developers would change their island, Maurice tells us, making it unaffordable. Even the state of Georgia’s conservation efforts threaten to absorb the little private property that remains.

Maurice introduces a young male relative who wants to speak to us. He’s just moved here from Brooklyn and his passionate love for the history of Sapelo Island pins me to his every word: words like “oppression” and “racism,” spoken with an assertive self-confidence quite different from the soft-spoken Maurice and Cornelia. As soon as he stepped off the bus, Maurice apologized. At the first opportunity for a private conversation, I ask him why. Some tourists had complained. They didn’t like being “lectured.” The young man was “too political.”

I tell Maurice there is no need for apology. Real people’s lives are not a museum display. History is messy, complex, untidy. And sometimes uncomfortable. I liked that young guy. Maurice smiles a gentle smile, and thanks me but I’m not sure he’ll heed my words. Tourists are important here. I can see that.

That afternoon, he drives us to the Reynolds Mansion, a plantation house with endless rooms and a bowling alley. In the nearby woods, ramshackle slave cabins and an obscure little slave cemetery cast a shadow over my heart.

At the end of the day, we arrive at a quiet beach where Maurice's family pulls up in a van and begins unloading baskets of food.

"What's in this?" I ask, taking a bite of moist sweet cake. A Black woman narrows her eyes, as if expecting criticism. It makes me sad, so I smile and say, "It's delicious!"

A young Black man at her side says, "It's a Sapelo Secret!" and everybody laughs.

All too aware of our differences now, knowing I was soon to leave on the ferry, as part of the privileged class who pay to see how these people live, I wonder. Am I gawking at their lives for my own entertainment? Or respectful of their lives and culture? Maybe some of both.

After our picnic, we walk on soft white sand beside grassy dunes strewn with sea cucumbers and shells. On the far horizon, shrimp boats float against a blue sky with puffy white clouds. I breathe a silent prayer for the Geechee to hold out as long as they can.