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Florida, Farewell

A strange blue veil lay over everything down there. You would have thought yourself aloft in the air with only the blue sky above and beneath you, rather than down at the bottom of the sea.

—Hans Christian Andersen, “The Little Mermaid”
(translated by Jean Hersholt)

1.

Clouds are gathered at the horizon over a dark smudge of rain, their mountainous size graspable only in the slow perspectival glide they perform whenever you round a bend in the highway. The midmorning sun brings out their architectural features: airy buttresses, alcoves, and cupolas set off in whites and grays. In Manhattan, where I live, it’s easy to lose track of the high-flying wispy cirrus among the skyscrapers. Here, unobstructed and magnificent, the cloudscape makes the human achievements beneath it—the car lots, the theme parks, the riverside condo developments—feel low-slung and small.

2.

Florida’s air is always humid, but in the summer, the heat weaponizes all that moisture, directing it down onto earthbound creatures with force. Radiant heat from blacktop and car hoods causes the air to shimmer slightly; the invisible becomes visible under this much sun. Pedestrians scoot from one shadow to the next, and drivers getting into their cars whimper as their bare thighs hit the upholstery. In the morning and evening, though, the warm air has a soft, soporific feel to it. To be caressed by a breeze at those hours is to almost remember the womb.

3.

The water comes in two flavors here, salty and sweet. The gulf (tepid) and Atlantic (cooler) provide the former; the lashing rains and underground springs and humid air deliver the latter. There isn’t enough water in the aquifer, and there’s too much in the rising seas. At the tourist beaches, the water is fairly clear down to the white sandy bottom, and Florida’s cold springs are famously crystalline. Other stretches of the state are bordered by murkier water that plays host to algae and decaying marsh grass and young fish and crustaceans and mudborne insect larvae. This water is a world unto itself, pulsing with drama and life cycles.

4.

The middle of the state has good farmland, but coastal Florida’s native soil is mostly sand. On the outskirts of Brooksville, a small city in Hernando County near the Gulf, the dark green leaves of scrub olive trees spring surreally from sand fields as white as snow. A remarkable number of hardy plants make their homes here, filling in the empty space from the limerock mine to the western salt marshes. The ground near the coast is conditional, constricting and expanding in accordance with the slow throb of the tides.

5.

Today, these earthly forces are marshaled at Pine Island, an out-of-the-way State Park on the Hernando coast: glowing clouds far off in the Gulf, wrinkled green water stretching out to reflect them, a small crescent of sand flanked by mangroves in the foreground, the searing embrace of the air on all sides. A scattering of locals occupies the beach, some stretched out on deck chairs, working their skin to a deep shade of mahogany, others sitting in the shade beneath the cabanas. The guard at the park gate warns all who arrive that there is a bacterial bloom in the water, so swimming is prohibited for at least a week. The playground on the other side of the parking lot is empty,
its metal structures too hot to touch. A quiet sweltering persists. No one moves. The gulls provide the only sounds. In this suspended moment, there is nothing but the glare and the heat.

[...]
[...]
[...]

My phone alarm vibrates in my back pocket. I take a deep breath, fish it out, and turn it off. Squinting, I trudge through the sand, the lone beachcomber in wingtips and slacks. I climb back into my brother-in-law's dusty gray Honda Element, fumble around with the keys, turn the ignition, and slowly pull out of the parking lot. I've procrastinated as much as I can. It's time to cremate my father.

6.

I am on Highway 50 heading eastward, the old car humming along nicely. A series of retrofitted wires and adaptors connects my phone to the car's antiquated stereo system; the phone is shuffling through my song collection and playing random tracks. As if it knows I am back in Florida, it serves up an old recording by Compay Segundo and Eliades Ochoa, two masters of the Cuban son. In a plangent minor key, following the rhythmic pulse of the clave, they harmonize a simple descending melody:

Yo vengo aquí
Yo vengo aquí
Para cantar
Para cantar
La rumba de
La rumba de
Mi adoración
Mi adoración.

The music pulls me out from under the relentless weight of the heat and humidity and the sad point of this car trip, allowing me to experience these things as if through clouded glass, or projected onto a screen. Segundo's warbly voice awakens youthful thoughts of time spent dipping in and out of Florida's Cuban neighborhoods. I remember the original La Teresita, a modest one-counter diner on Tampa's Columbus Drive that years ago was replaced by a much larger and less soulful restaurant of the same name. Nubia, the senior waitress, would put in my order the moment I walked through the door: arroz con pollo, frijoles negros, plátanos, café con leche, flan. She was four-foot-eleven, old enough to be my mom, always fully made-up, hair just so, indefatigable and ferocious and warm. I introduced every girlfriend I ever had to her, and she would voice her approval or lack thereof the next time I came in. I was such a devotee that once my dad called the restaurant to see if, as he suspected, I had snuck into town without telling him.

I had.
The old men sing:

Tú eres la causa,
La única causa
De mi dolor.

7.

Brooksville is not the kind of town most people think of when they think of Florida. But in its own way it is a very Florida town, with a dark history and modest present. Originally called Piercetown, it began as the outgrowth of a military garrison built to protect white settlers from the Seminole people in the area. In 1856 it was renamed to honor Preston Brooks, the Southern congressman and slavery advocate who earlier that year beat the abolitionist senator Charles Sumner to the brink of death with his cane on the Senate floor. Most people don’t tie this incident, which contributed to the initiation of the Civil War, to the current sleepy little town. Most people don’t connect Brooksville with anything at all. I spent over a decade in Tampa, fifty miles to the south, without once visiting or hearing a word about it. But here I am, driving down a pleasant residential street lined with old clapboard houses, paint peeling off the sides. Two elderly men sit on the porch of one, not talking, just being
together. They, and the pedestrians in this neighborhood, are Black. Sunlight and the smell of a charcoal grill beat through my open window. The calm voice of my phone’s navigation app instructs me to turn onto Broad Street, the town’s main drag. I pass a weathered strip mall, a church, and the Hilltop Saloon, est. 1952, which, according to its sign, is offering line dance lessons. It appears I have now crossed into the white side of town.

8.

Several blocks later a sign for the funeral home and crematory slides into view. The one-story brick building is in the Colonial Revival style, with white window shutters and wooden columns dressing up its boxlike shape. Small palm trees separate the building from the cracked blacktop parking lot. My father died suddenly, six days ago, and I’m still in a kind of daze about the whole thing. Some details stand out with great intensity, but others are lost to me altogether. I notice the plushness of the carpet, for example, but fail to register the face of the woman behind the desk or take in the words she is saying. She brings me a cup of water and leads me around the side of the building to a door labeled Crematory Chapel. She opens it, and the director, after whom the funeral home is named, greets me with a tanned face and practiced smile. We are standing in a tiny antechamber, empty but for a wooden chair, a small door, and a long window, which is covered by blue satin curtains. My father, he tells me matter-of-factly, is lying in the cremation room on the other side of that window. After asking if I am ready to identify the body, he reaches for an unseen button and, with the muted whir of a small motor, the curtains slowly part.

9.

It’s him, I confirm.

10.

The director asks if I want to see my father up close before the cremation proceeds. He opens the door and I step through. The room is dark and, unsurprisingly, warm, with the kiln-temperature natural-gas flame already fired up at the back end of the furnace’s oblong opening. The smell of formaldehyde radiates off the body, filling the space between us. I see that what I had assumed was a crude pine coffin is actually a cardboard box. My father had always said “do it cheaply” — he would, I think, appreciate the bare-bones nature of this operation. His body is loosely wrapped in a blue and red plaid cloth. It is stiff; the left arm is half-raised and bent at the wrist, as if it is holding a cup of tea. Most strikingly, the entire surface of his bald head and white-bearded face is beaded with droplets. For all the world my father looks like he is perspiring, from the heat or from some mysterious exertion. Over the course of a few vertiginous seconds I attempt to take in this terrible new knowledge: corpses can sweat. What other bodily functions do they retain? But a second later the obvious hits me: the Florida air is treating his morgue-chilled forehead as predictably and dispassionately as it would any other cold object, condensing as much water on it as humidity and surface tension will allow. I know that this is the case. I know the body before me has no life left in it. Nonetheless, the figure it cuts, with the drops dancingly lit by the orange flame, is that of an elderly coal-stoker catching a few winks deep in the ship’s dark hold, or of a weathered old sea god fresh from a swim.

11.

“Would you like to help me push him in?” the director asks. With a clank and the whine of an ancient motor, he adjusts the metal gurney on which the body rests, raising its height to that of the furnace. I am standing at the head. I don’t know what to push, or when. He comes around to my side and together we give the box a gentle nudge. It doesn’t move. Cocking his head, the director walks back to the far end of the box, fiddles around underneath, and pulls out a cardboard tube. “The roller’s come off,” he says apologetically,
and explains that “we'll have to kind of muscle him in.” He pulls the box from his end, I push from mine. We get it about halfway in when the integrity of the thin cardboard wall is compromised; it creases outward in response to my shove. My hands are up against the head now, separated only by the cardboard. I find myself in a grunting battle of force against friction and mass, me against my father at the bitter end. After a series of small forward gains, I give one last push and successfully deliver him into the furnace. The director clamps the heavy metal door shut and opens up a panel in the wall to reveal a number of antique dials and gauges. Satisfied with their readings, he turns to me and solemnly shakes my hand.

12.

The funeral home will close for the day before the ashes are cool enough for transport, but the director promises to deliver them to the branch office in Tampa so that I won’t need to make a return trip to Brooksville. On my way out to the parking lot I catch a glimpse of a modest metal smokestack protruding from the back corner of the crematory roof. There is no visible smoke—just a shimmering column of heat escaping into the midday air.

13.

Other details I manage to glean at the crematory:

- Temperature: 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Length of process: three to four hours, depending on the weight of the deceased.
- Extra steps: cooling the ashes (takes an hour or more); scraping ashes into receptacle (quicker).
- Accessories: urns can cost from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.
- Number of cremations per day: four to five, every day of the week except Sunday.
- Government regulations on crematories: many.

Complaints from neighbors: very few in fifty-three years of operation.
Percentage of bereaved who lose hold of first-person narrative upon exiting facility: impossible to calculate.

14.

The drive to Tampa takes about an hour, but there’s no rush to get there. The memorial dinner isn’t until eight o’clock, there’s plenty of gas in the tank, and this stretch of Florida presents the eye with a string of subtly mesmerizing sights. The westerly loop from Cortez Avenue to Highway 597 cuts through the marshland’s sublime flatness. When was the last time a long blade of grass was the tallest object in your field of vision? Responding to a sudden urge, you pull the car over to admire the glass-like quality of the pools amid the growth. You turn off the engine, open the door, and get out to take a better look.

At first the marsh appears perfectly silent, but slowly a soft chorus of distant cicadas makes its presence felt. The consistency of the insects’ metallic drone concentrates your attention on the pools and the marsh grass, and on the tiny disturbances to the water’s surface made by a host of small insects. They circle wildly and then crash land, creating miniscule concentric ripples. You stand motionless as a heron at the water’s edge and witness the world smoothly collapsing into those circles, beneath which a small fish must surely be lurking. Focus . . . be still . . . he’s down there, scales glinting dully as he meanders through the algae-rich water. A nearby stalk of grass vibrates ever so slightly in response to his aquatic nibble. Focus . . . he is almost within reach . . . he—

[...]
[...]
[...]

The growing hiss of tires on pavement and dopplered whoosh of a passing car pull you out of your reverie. Your eyes dart toward the road and catch the hand-painted sign of the bait shop and fish shack
down the road. The sign’s lettering, which you are mildly surprised to find you can read, brings you back into yourself. It’s time to move on down the road again.

15.

After a few missteps, the phone skips to a live version of Paul Simon’s *American Tune*. You walked around with this song in your head when you were younger, luxuriating in its wistful atmosphere. You revisited it after a recent presidential election, finding it weirdly on the nose.

Now, as you coast along on the highway, the song opens up like a Florida sinkhole, and you fall through it into a space that is neither you nor not you. Simon’s thin tenor is close now, blanketing you; it is sincere and world-weary and vulnerable. You attempt to sing along, a lump in your throat, your wavering voice the sound of fragility itself:

Oh, but I’m all right, I’m all right
I’m just weary to my bones
Still, you don’t expect to be
Bright and bon vivant
So far away from home,
So far away from home.

16.

Rounding the bend at Highway 19, you see signs pointing to Weeki Wachee Springs, the area’s largest attraction and without a doubt one of the strangest state parks in the nation. Opened in 1947, the park is built around a preternaturally clear freshwater spring that issues from a deep underground river. On a normal day, the spring discharges 110 million gallons of water from a twenty-foot by three-foot vent located 185 feet below the surface. During drought season, when the flow slows down, divers squeeze through the underwater fissure and explore the caves beneath. These extend laterally for well over a mile and reach a depth of more than 400 feet, making Weeki Wachee the country’s deepest spring. It is hard to imagine a circumstance in

which anyone with time on their hands would drive by without stopping to take a look.

17.

Cordoned off from the bulk of the spring, the northern section contains a fairly standard old-school water park: slides, inner tubes, artificial beachfront, concessions. Tourism is light in this part of Florida over the summer, but a respectable number of local families are seeking refuge from the heat here, their splashing and frolicking and joyous shrieking almost drowning out the bird chatter from the palm trees. As the hour approaches three o’clock, many of these frolickers begin to move toward the subterranean amphitheater at the southern end of the park. They are heading to the show that is Weeki Wachee’s claim to fame. It has been modernized since its heyday, but based on the billboards you saw driving in, the attraction retains all the kitsch, charm, and vague inappropriateness of a midcentury Florida tourist trap.

18.

The sunburnt families, towels wrapped over bathing suits, gasp with pleasure as they make their way down a ramp out of the heat and into the cavernous cool of the amphitheater. The front wall, twenty feet below the water line, is taken up by a series of floor-to-ceiling windows which, at this moment, are covered by, of all things, a long blue satin curtain. The music begins and an unseen motor slowly lifts it, revealing a large aquatic grotto illuminated by sunrays shooting prismatically through the water. A gilt-domed temple in the distance and a concrete statue of what appears to be Hermes in the foreground give the place the feel of ancient Greece, or Atlantis. A limestone ridge runs parallel to the window, beyond which the water flowing up from the spring’s unseen mouth shimmers and coruscates.

One by one, the Weeki Wachee mermaids, clad in bejeweled bikini tops and colorful fishtails, emerge from the depths behind
the ridge and swim, smiling, toward the audience. They undulate along the length of the window, waving at the collection of young girls who have clustered at the front, their little hands outstretched. The mermaids then retreat to the middle distance and begin tracing arabesques in the water, their hair swaying back and forth in the current. Every several seconds they steal breaths from thin rubber hoses that protrude from the rocks. Their exhaled bubbles sparkle in the sunlight as they rise.

19.

The show is billed as “Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid,” and it follows the Disney animated film closely in tone and substance. The songs the mermaids lip-synch sound a lot like the songs in the movie, but, as one might expect in a time-weathered Florida water park, they’re all a little off—a little too repetitive, with droll lyrics not quite clever enough to be Disney. In place of the popular Jamaican crab Sebastian is Chester, a vaguely Caribbean turtle, played by a male swimmer in a green bodysuit and a fraying fiberglass turtle head. The crowd doesn’t seem to mind the derivative cast of the production, though. They appear happy just to be in the presence of water-bound grace. Happy to be seduced not into the story as much as into the world of the grotto, with its dark rocks and emerald veins. When, at the end of the show, the mermaids wave goodbye and swim down into the spring’s seemingly bottomless abyss, the effect is nothing short of magical. We know that these are local girls whose legs are hidden inside fabric tails, we can see them breathing through the rubber hoses, and we can surmise that there’s a hidden passageway beneath the ridge through which they exit into the air at the show’s end. But like all good theater—more than most good theater—the illusion feels more real than the world itself. It will die out quickly, in the space of one exhaled breath, but for a split second, it is true: the watery depths of the grotto have never been plumbed. Mermaids live among us. Turtles can sing. Love conquers all.

20.

Back on the road heading south toward Tampa, the sun is at a lower angle now, and the horizon is picking up colors: rose, tangerine, azure. But before long, the clouds that remained all day at a distance approach with haste and darken. The sun disappears into the creeping murk, a cool breeze picks up and strengthens. Seconds after the first heavy raindrop falls on the roof, a rolling volley of thunder rattles the Element’s windows; seconds later, the skies open up and release a full-on southern downpour. The freeway’s gutters flood within the first minute, visibility is close to zero, cars turn on their hazards and slow to a crawl. This is as Florida as it gets: tropical rains sluicing from the sky, the once-oppressive heat entirely defused, all signs of commerce and culture blurred out behind the fogging windows, all of us equally at the mercy of this palm-lashing storm, all of us one good lightning bolt away from the end. Ten minutes from now it will be over and the clouds will part to reveal a shimmering, technicolour sunset. But in this suspended moment, there is nothing but the roar and the darkness.