



Reentry

Miami, August 1972. From the airport, it is a cab ride across Biscayne Bay to Miami Beach, site of the Republican National Convention. The cab passes a golf course, where the sprinkler system is working nights. The atmosphere is that of a sauna. The sun has been down for two hours, but there is still pink in the horizon. Airplanes in the landing pattern search the thunderheads with their beams. The illumination of the clouds makes them cherubic; the clouds and the pink horizon, visible in the general obscurity, suggest a Tiepolo, as viewed through sunglasses.

An assignment to cover the Republicans brought me from Washington, D.C., my adopted residence, back to Florida, where I was raised. Being raised Floridian means that I moved here from Connecticut when I was seven years old, with parents who came out of the Midwest, transferred to the Northeast, retreated to Florida, and then left as soon as it was convenient, as soon as the children were grown.

The state's population nearly doubled in the 1950s and doubled again from 1960 to 1980, making it probable that one's Florida neighbors had originated elsewhere. Of course, all states are composed of people from elsewhere, but Flor-

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ida in the years of my childhood was the extreme of elsewhere-ness, with a majority of residents having just arrived in the present decade. The difference between tourist and resident was only a matter of a season's inhabitation, last season's tourist was this season's Floridian.

What great distinctions we made over short time spans, perhaps based on our own insecurities about our claim to this place. It is analogous, I think, to the insecurity over racial purity that produced all the distinctions of color (octoroon and so forth) in the French colonies. In Florida, a five-year resident was taken for a native, and could then pose as an expert on mildew and heat prostration to the tourist. A ten-year resident was a hoary ancestor, who probably remembered a hurricane. A twenty-year resident was a remarkable creature, an oddity really.

On the east and west coasts where most of the newcomers live, a child who grew up in Florida was given the kind of deference that in New England is reserved for those few Daughters of the American Revolution. Here we achieved it without having to wait any two centuries, and so while I entered the schools as a newcomer in third grade, by the time of the tenth I was counted among the old-timers. Native Floridians, that is, those few people who go back more than one generation, were so exceptional that they lost status, their tenure so unbelievable that it was irrelevant to the rest of us. I am a nominal Floridian, but the nominal Floridian is the typical Floridian, as opposed to the native Floridian, who is unusual and feels like a stranger.

We made the trip from Connecticut to Florida in the summer of 1953. The car seat smelled of breakfast jelly. The blob that must have dropped from a piece of toast was now only a stain on the gray upholstery; the heat revived its odor. We

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drove through the center of every eastern seaboard city from New York to Savannah. There were no bypasses. The cat was shedding in a wicker basket, the air from the open car windows brought flurries of dander across our faces. The dog panted as if it had rabies. It tried to run away at gas stations.

Like Icarus we fled to sunshine, two children, two pets, loosed from the New England suburbs, stuck in our own sweat to those seats redolent of jelly, forced to refresh ourselves at segregated drinking fountains, emerging from cheap motels to be transported closer and closer to the primary solar source.

My father saw everything as a learning opportunity. Our stifling confinement was his mobile classroom; he expected us to absorb history and culture through the windshield. For three hours in the midday summer traffic jam, we absorbed the marble steps of Baltimore. That great Florida invention, the air conditioner, originally intended to soothe victims of malaria, was not yet attached to cars that we could afford.

To avert mutiny from his captive audience, my father announced that we would stop at a motel and then get up and drive at night, when it would be cooler. It would also be too dark to learn. Already we compromised with the latitude: northern industry sacrificed to southern comfort, and we hadn't even reached the Florida border.

My sister and I prepared for a volatile increase in temperature that never occurred. Florida was no hotter than Georgia. We drove by day during part of that last 200 miles, the north Florida landscape seemed anemic and somehow depressing, like the pencil sketches on the covers of ragtime piano sheet music. My spirits were improved by the Florida gift shops, which doubled as orange juice counters and gas stations. My father preferred to pay for his gas and leave. "These are tourist traps," he grumbled.

For a child's affection, there was no contest between the

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drab road and the brilliant tourist traps, with their bags of Day-Glo citrus bunkered around the legs of giant billboards twice the size of the adjacent buildings, billboards whose own colors were the equal of the most luminous highway caution cone or police rain slicker. It was at such a tourist trap that I got my first glimpse of the Rebel flag terry-cloth beach towel, Florida's special contribution to Civil War tourist trap memorabilia. In Georgia and the Carolinas, the Dixie grudge was expressed on bumpers and windshields, but here you could lie down on it, a prospect that both astounded and reassured a Yankee browser. If you could lie down on Dixie in Florida, perhaps you could lie down on anything.

A hedonistic surrealism replaced all the roadside historic themes from the gas stations of the other eastern states. Black mammy syrup jars and butter dishes shaped like plantations were absent from Florida's shelves, which instead were taken up with coconut heads carved to look like pirates, pelicans made from seashells, tiny crates of bubble-gum oranges, fish skulls advertised as souvenirs of the Crucifixion, seahorses dried and packaged like aquatic beef jerky, perfume tapped from tangerines, stuffed alligators, cans of sunshine, and post-cards of beauty queens in low-cut bathing suits, stooped in the groves like migrant fruit pickers, with their half-exposed breasts competing favorably with the fruit.

Whatever culture these things represented—and that the seven-year-old found irresistible—was not what brought my family to Florida. We sought the physical and the economic cure. I had asthma, and the hope that Florida might bake out my illness was the hope that populated St. Petersburg, our destination, with invalids sixty years my senior. My father had money worries; the schoolteacher's salary in Connecticut was insufficient to cover expenses.

Prior to having become a teacher, my father studied Russian at Columbia University while working part-time as an

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elevator operator at the New York Stock Exchange. Any man who read Bolshevik literature, even as he lifted capitalists to their daily transactions, would not have been hired in some U.S. school districts in the McCarthy years. But by the time we came to Florida, McCarthyism had waned. The state was growing fast, and county school systems along its west coast were desperate for qualified teachers.

The salary was low, lower than in Connecticut, but a Florida teacher could live better on less. The sunshine was an extra employee benefit, potentially more valuable than medical insurance; for me, it was free asthma treatment. And in Florida, there was a constitutional amendment against an income tax, as if an income tax were an affront to basic human rights.

These were the Florida advantages for which my father, a Russian scholar, a sentimental populist, a registered Democrat, and an extremely industrious man, elected to become a resident of a Gulf of Mexico resort, dominated by old Republicans in the exile of retirement and playing golf as their last reward, the golf course serving as the very landscape of afterlife.

In 1972, I was twenty-seven years old and disinterested in Florida per se. I was not interested in Republicans either, but a friend who had been to the earlier Democratic convention, also held on Miami Beach, returned with some intriguing stories about a mansion on North Bay Road, owned by a generous and eccentric heiress, who offered free room and board to anybody who opposed Nixon. The friend had said there was plenty of "acid" at this mansion, and I had heard only the first syllable. I was getting a divorce. Selective perception led me to seek the assignment to cover the Republicans, the assignment that resulted in my Florida reentry.