

# PARADISE SWAMPED

The boom and bust of the middle-class dream

By Paul Reyes

**H**oneymooning in Miami Beach was my father's idea; my mother, impressed by an ad she'd seen of newlyweds canoodling in a heart-shaped tub—wrapped in bubbles, champagne in hand, rose petals scattered among candles on the floor—thought the Poconos would be nice. My father thought the tub was tacky. Besides, the wedding was set for just after Columbus Day, and as beautiful as the autumn colors were in upstate Pennsylvania, October nights often slipped toward freezing. My parents had already spent three winters in Philadelphia and were due to spend another. This was no small concern. They hailed from warmer latitudes—he from Cuba, she from Colombia. Miami Beach promised a nostalgic respite. My mother wasn't quite nineteen when the black and yellow taxi pulled up to the Seville Hotel. Until that day she hadn't so much as left the house without a brother to chaperone her. Now a bride far from home, 1,200 miles from family, bound by God and the State of Penn-

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sylvania to a man who was still mysterious to her, she was so wrecked by a case of nerves that she spent her first three days in Miami throwing up. She saw the town, swam a bit, ate paella at the Covadonga on Calle Ocho. But, for the most part, she puked. "I was so sick and so happy," she remembers.

By then, in 1969, Miami Beach was entering its doldrums. For nearly fifty years a hot streak of hotel building had made the shore itself a showpiece. The streak worked north over the decades,

devouring the waterfront. In the 1950s the trend attained a gaudy, fantastical peak with the mega-hotels of Morris Lapidus. His unhinged aesthetics made the "Florida style" infamous and alarmingly popular. However shocking the decor, the grandiose spirit was the same as it had been in 1920, when Carl Fisher, a manic Hoosier entrepreneur, touched off the hotel boom. It was all rooted in a simple equation that transcended generations of architects and tourists alike, articulated by one of Lapidus's contemporaries in 1965: "To convince the sucker who's spending fifty bucks a day that he's really spending a hundred bucks a day."

Fisher, inventor of the Prest-o-lite automobile headlamp and founder of the Indianapolis 500, discovered the barrier island while on vacation. Sailing the bay, he spotted a couple of fragile outposts in the thick of what was mostly jungle. He dropped anchor and went to have a look, and there met John Collins, a New Jersey horticulturist who'd been struggling to convert half his land into an avocado grove, the other half into a resort, and to build a bridge to the mainland so that both ventures could

profit. Fisher didn't need much convincing beyond the effects of a turquoise surf to see what Collins saw, and, with millions at his disposal, he quickly struck a deal with the horticulturist, loaning him enough money (at interest) to finish the bridge in exchange for 200 acres. In 1913, Collins got his money, and Fisher got his land.

Those 200 acres were an almost impenetrable knot of mangroves and palmetto, a sanctuary for exotic fauna—alligators by the hundreds, small bears, wildcats, coral snakes, rattlesnakes, rats, crabs, rabbits, and bugs (enough sand fleas and mosquitoes to bleed a man into a deep sleep). Fisher attacked his acreage with everything at hand: men, machetes, dredgers, threshers. What he couldn't yank out of the ground he burned, and what was left over he buried, dredging tons of white sand from the bottom of Biscayne Bay to be regurgitated on top of whatever stubborn growth or stumps could still be seen. In just a few months' time, the thickets disappeared. Nothing poked out of the sand that did not have a purpose, some role in the big vision.

In 1915 the old sandbar became a city: 500 residents, one paved road, and a small hotel, the Brown (two stories, pine and stucco; thirty-six rooms). Fisher, a natural promoter, began to advertise the island, first to the middle-class "tin-can tourists" clattering down the Dixie Highway in Model Ts to access the vistas of the rich, then to the rich. He branded Miami Beach with a carnivalesque sex appeal through goofy, tantalizing ads of pinup girls by the ocean (laughing, legs high); he enlisted an elephant, which sat for posing flappers.

In 1920 he built the beach's first colossus, the Flamingo Hotel. A million and a half dollars got him eleven stories, 200 rooms, a handful of private cottages, and a lighted dome that glowed on winter nights like a candy-colored lighthouse lamp. In the afternoons, tea dances packed the lawn, and there would have been actual flamingos mingling with the crowds had not the entire imported flock died en route. As a finishing flourish, Fisher purchased several gondolas to be piloted by "some of the most wonderful Bahama negroes you ever saw," who would be "stripped

to the waist and wear big brass earrings. And possibly necklaces of live crabs or crawfish." In building the Flamingo, he built the touchstone of the excess that would follow.

By the peak of speculation in Florida, just before the hurricane of '26, Miami Beach boasted its own power plant, a trolley, a pair of public schools, a church ("the best goddamn church there is," Fisher promised, to appease his devout wife, Jane). Hollywood film crews descended now and then. Tourists came and went with the seasons. Despite the hurricane, which all but erased the island (which Fisher rebuilt), and despite the implosion of the real estate market on the mainland, and despite even the Great Depression, Miami Beach kept growing.

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## UNSUSPECTING COUPLES WERE LED THROUGH MODEL HOMES, THEN WORKED OVER BY HUCKSTERS PEDDLING QUARTER-ACRE LOTS

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The streak crawled north, the splendor of the Twenties giving way to the chintzy sensuality of the Space Age. Lapidus, an architect who'd cut his teeth designing department stores, took a transformative step with the Fontainebleau—550 rooms in a quarter circle that hugged an Olympic oceanside pool, a building praised for the bold elegance it projected but damned for the overkill of its interior, decorated in a hybrid style, Miami Beach French, that the architect invented to please his client: oval columns, marble trimmed with gold (black marble, white marble, marble statuary, marble dummy fireplaces), wooden antiques painted gold, a palette of two dozen colors smeared together, and a lobby staircase that seemed ripped from a Busby Berkeley set, snaking upward to an empty mezzanine. By the end of the Sixties, the Atlantic had been competing for some time with the glass-and-concrete circus that elbowed up to the water's edge. This was Fisher's legacy, as translated by the Fontainebleau, which served as the model for the dozen or so hotels that followed, including the

one my parents chose for their honeymoon, the Seville.

One evening, resting in their suite after a day of sunning, they received a call from an officious-sounding gentleman who invited them on a scenic tour. He spoke of alligators and the smell of citrus, of the splendor of Indians and sugar. It sounded adventurous, a little educational. Best of all, it was free. All that was required was that they sit for a brief presentation at the end, a half hour at most. They rose early the next morning, as instructed, and reached the lobby by daylight, where they were greeted by a bus captain who escorted them, along with several other couples, all honeymooners, onto a Greyhound charter. Then they headed into the swamp.

For five hours they stared out at a flat, soaked, sleepy landscape—sawgrass and sugarcane for three counties, with only a couple of towns and an orange grove's watchtower to break up the trip. They hooked a left at Lake Okeechobee, then drove deep into the scrubby lowlands of Lee County, arriving, finally, at Lehigh Acres, a community not quite a town, not yet, but where, every day, after trekking through so much of nothing, hundreds of sore and unsuspecting couples were led through a dazzling idyll of model homes, then corralled into eight-by-eight offices to be worked over by hucksters peddling quarter-acre lots with the greasy hubris of Bible salesmen.

Set on a roundabout known as Charmed Circle, each model had a name—La Hoya, Raphael, Pelham. Folks could choose a terrazzo floor or even a built-in vacuum system. Across the street from Charmed Circle was a charming little pink motel, next to a charming Spanish restaurant, the Matador Room. Down the street sat a charming A-frame church. The maps and brochures my parents studied in that eight-by-eight room promised a thriving community in full color—not too big, not too wealthy, but certainly white and by all means comfortable. Retiring there would be like taking a "52 week a year vacation," with "all the privacy and convenience you want plus a way of life where upkeep and responsibility give way to full-time fun."

I learned of my parents' nuptial tour only recently, while reading aloud to my father the impressively depressing news of how Lehigh Acres had experienced one of the worst busts of the Florida housing crisis. In the final four years of the boom, developers built more houses there than in the previous fifty years. By 2009, new homes in Lehigh Acres were selling for a third of what it had cost to build them. Duplexes and single-family units built to flip, then foreclosed on, had been left to crumble.

Hearing this, my father *humphed*. "We own land there, you know," he said, then produced the proof, a manila folder stuffed with paperwork—the deed to the land, maps, brochures, certificates, letters sent by some agent or entity seeking to cash in on the boom, asking to buy it, and of course not a single letter dated after the devastation we were reading about that day.

In hindsight, the bus ride alone seems like a borderline-criminal stunt and, frankly, a stupid way to spend one's honeymoon. In hindsight, it also seems like a portent of things to come. Such are the ways of love and real estate in Florida.

**L**ee County—the interior of it, at any rate—was an improbable spot for a paradise. Before World War II, it belonged mostly to cattle ranchers building small fortunes on what brittle grass cows could find. Spanish fisheries came and went; sawmills whined briefly, until the stretches of yellow pine ran out, and once depleted the land was sold cut-rate to start-up farmers who, facing treacherously dilapidated roads, shipped their goods to port by way of the Caloosahatchee River—a miserably slow trip, slow enough that crops would often rot along the way. Making a living in Lee County was a slog, no matter how you looked at it.

But land was cheap. In 1951, Lee

Ratner, a Chicago tycoon who'd amassed tremendous wealth through mail order, television, and radio—hawking knives that cut through aluminum cans, gas-tank additives that boosted fuel efficiency, and even drink coasters—sold his company that produced d-Con rat poison for \$7 million. Then he looked for a place to shelter his profits. He knew nothing about cattle, but that was the point: the losses would be tax-deductible. Ratner already owned a winter home in Miami Beach, and Lee County was just a half-hour away

Ratner should sell the land itself. Small lots for sale were a leitmotif of the landscape, on road signs and billboards and in the paper. Gould knew of landowners who had divided, say, 300 acres and sold them at the rate of ten to twenty lots a year. Knives, coasters, rat poison—for Ratner, land would be just another product.

In 1954, Gould and Ratner flew to New York to line up financing. On a barf bag flattened on a seat-back tray they sketched out the hook: "You can own a full half acre in fabulous Florida! Only \$10 down and \$10 a



by plane. For fifty bucks an acre, it all made sense. So, in 1951, he bought 18,000 acres, bought some horses, some cattle, and began spending expensive weekends on horseback in Lee County.

Shortly thereafter, a young Miami advertising executive named Gerald Gould began courting Ratner as a client. Two years in, the tax provisions that let Ratner off the hook as a cattleman ran out. Ratner needed either to get rid of the land or to make it profitable. Gould thought

month." Ratner's Chicago ad agency fleshed out a sales pitch, staged a photo with Ratner's niece sitting by a lake, took some shots of houses in other Florida towns. They ran an ad in Northern papers, produced a television infomercial, and began pumping the mirage of Lehigh Acres across the country. Gould and Ratner sold more than 12,000 lots that first year, some for as little as \$500. Ten-dollar checks began pouring onto the conference table at Gould's Miami office. And as the lots sold,



the pair bought more land, until, by the 1970s, Lehigh Acres covered more than 60,000 acres—150,000 lots, all told.

In the annals of real estate marketing, Lehigh Acres is legend. In the history of urban planning, it was apocalyptic. Last summer, the *St. Petersburg Times* caught up with Gould and interviewed him for a feature that used Lehigh Acres as an omen of bad development, a story in which the eighty-five-year-old developer owned up to the wreckage. “We gave so much thought to selling the land that the normal reservations for commercial properties,

listed several styles and prices, he called up Gould and ordered one, looking right at it—\$14,000. He wanted it ready by spring.

Gould was flummoxed. There wasn’t a single house anywhere in Lehigh Acres. There wasn’t even a store. The only amenity was a fueling station used by the dredging crews. “Tell me something,” Gould said. “When was the last time you were in Florida?”

“I’ve never been to Florida,” Gibbs said.

“Don’t you think you ought to come down and take a look at the place first?”

“That triggered the idea that we probably would have to be in the business of building houses,” Gould said.

**I**t took about an hour, between stepping off the bus and being handed the ballpoint pen, for my parents to commit; \$850 later, they owned a quarter acre on a canal that would someday, the salesman promised, carry them to leisurely excursions on the Gulf. It seemed, at the time, not only a good investment but a profoundly romantic gesture of faith in their future together. They never even saw the land; they simply opened up the map and pointed. The next week, inspired, they dragged my mother’s parents down to buy the lot next door.

Over the years, as the housing market improved and Lehigh Acres grew, inflating to absurd proportions, my father kept every piece of paper sent to him—postcards, contracts, three-page letters with business cards stapled to the corner, picture after picture of agents who persisted, aging over the span of years but always wearing that same prom-night smile.

In 1997, my father couldn’t have gotten more than \$2,000 for his 50 by 150 lot. By 2004, the asking price had crept up to \$9,000, then shot up to \$13,000 before the year was out. In 2005, the housing bubble’s skin began to stretch. The offers reached \$23,000 and kept climbing. He got letters

from realtors, schoolteachers (or realtors posing as schoolteachers), from a retired couple (or realtors posing as a retired couple). Letters from investors advising him that “now is the best time to CASH IN your long term investment.” Letters alerting him that lots nearby were selling for \$46,000 to \$55,000. My father’s pencil marks are on one letter, sent by an agent named “Marty”—faint circles around a sum, with light strokes underlining Marty’s promises and predic-



schools, all the ancillary things you need in a community, weren’t made,” he told the newspaper. “We had no concept of people coming to live here. That’s the last thing we thought about.”

The last thing, that is, until the fall of 1955, when Gould got a call from a Michigan carpenter named Oran Gibbs, who’d bought land in Lehigh Acres after the first run of ads. Gibbs had decided to retire. After browsing through a brochure that

No, Gibbs said, he was ready. The Detroit winters had worn him out. He hung up the phone, mailed his check. A couple of months later, in the middle of February, he and his wife were spotted by a foreman, driving around in a U-Haul crammed with their possessions, looking to stake a claim they couldn’t even find. Gould put them up at a Fort Myers motel, put their possessions in a warehouse, and had his crew nail a home together quick.

tions, and spindly arithmetic sketched in the margins, barely touching the paper, as if he had been whispering to himself through the pencil while Marty rattled on. One company, Douglas Realty, offered him \$25,000 in January 2005, then \$35,000 just three months later. Finally, in June 2005, the Palm Real Estate Group wrote to him with an offer of \$40,000 for the lot. None of it seemed real to him. He was convinced it was all some kind of scam. But the offers were real and, more absurdly, represented only 80 percent of what the brokers could get once they sold the land to developers looking to buy lots by the dozen.

It seemed insane that an entire community had grown accidentally out of some crackpot hybrid philosophy of *Always be closing* and *If you build it, pray they don't come*. Even more confounding was the fact that, once Lehigh Acres had a foothold, lots in such a nondescript part of the state—without access to the famous waters on either side—could be worth so much, however briefly. And in one news story about Lehigh Acres after another, I never found any satisfying answer to the question of what people were thinking. The cautionary tale seemed oversimplified; Lehigh Acres wasn't built solely on chutzpah.

You should go see it, my father said of his lot. Which, of course, I did.

**B**y the time I arrived in Miami Beach, the Seville Hotel was a crumbling hulk, long shuttered. The only action was at the bottom of the front steps—a couple of painters digging around for tools in a van for a job across the street; a handful of Haitian cab drivers leaning against their cars, chatting and smoking in the mid-afternoon sun. No one could tell me why the hotel had shut down, or what was planned for it. They couldn't even say how long it had been that way. An eight-foot-high chain-link fence blocked the lobby entrance. A few of the enormous tinted windows overlooking Collins Avenue had been shattered. The giant clock on the Seville's facade was off by hours. I got back in my truck, looped the roundabout, waved to the

cabbies, then headed north on Collins Avenue to follow the route my parents had taken long ago.

I reached Lake Okeechobee in about an hour, and knew it not by the glinting of the water but by the fifty-foot-tall berm that trapped it. Route 27 hugged the berm, bending east. I was curious to see the lake, of course, this being the spot where development began. I yanked a hard right onto a shell path that led me to the lip of the berm, to a dam lock. I got out and stared out across a dish-water vista. A couple of old men were fishing near the lock, their lines tangled. The haze was strong. The scene was just short of ugly. The pond-apple swath described with reverence in settlers' journals was long gone, sucked dry for the benefit of

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the farms envisioned by the champions of reclamation, farms that I passed on the way up here. Score: 1 for the Vision.

After another hour, not a mile inside Lee County, through scents of citrus and horseshit, past earth-movers dredging along the shoulder, I saw the first sign of real estate trouble, on the north side of State Road 80, where the landscape shifted from orange groves to a forest of torqued scrub oak blackened by fire. A gap opened and the whitewashed gates of Caloosa Preserve appeared, clean but with no signs of life, and only one roof peeping above the charred tree line. I turned and pulled up to the gate. The guard-house was finished, spotless inside (at least from what I could see through the glass), and empty.

A paved road, not a piece of trash anywhere. Blackened trees stretched in all directions, with a thick understory of palmettos hugging those tall burned threads. Slim fake-brick pallets marked the sites of houses that

were never built. The intentions and the emptiness blended together, creepy at first. It was like driving through some prehistoric diorama. I waited for something to pop out of the brush—a mechanical tyrannosaurus, a goon dragging a body.

Finally, the cypress fell away. I followed the bend into a savanna spotted with groves of palms and oaks. On the far side of the lake, a house stood in the open—two stories, Spanish tile, with its own landscaped roundabout in the driveway. For sale, of course, with the builder's sign in the front yard. Vultures hunkered on the roof. I pulled into the driveway, got out, clapped. One of the vultures unfolded its wings wide, then whipped off. I took the front steps, bounding over feathers on the brick, and peeked through the glass pane of the front door, into an immaculate vacancy—the tile floor bright, the fireplace finished, the interior a weird confluence of Mediterranean and colonial touches—straight back to the sliding glass doors and onto the patio and pool. The water was brown. There was something electric about this house's abandonment, something archaeologically pure.

On cue, a vulture waddled into the frame, swiveled its neck, and stared at me. I wanted to shoot it.

How many of those fuckers were back there? I went around the side of the house to see, singing and barking and whistling and, as I approached an iron fence that marked off the pool area, taking slower steps. A pair of vultures were perched on the rail and flew away as I got closer. And then, clearing the corner, I saw, in some nightmare variation on that cinematic moment when a secret door is opened and the soldiers of the underground resistance are revealed (leaning over maps, cleaning weapons, tweaking the shortwave), about a dozen vultures that all twitched at once. They craned their necks and puffed up and leveled their stares, opened themselves wide. A couple went airborne. I turned and left.

**I** entered Lehigh Acres on a two-lane blacktop that narrowed into the horizon, coursing straight through a

cluster of block homes—some finished, some not—that popped into view between expanses of cypress and pine. Side streets shot off into the marsh. Every half mile or so I'd turn to see where one led and drive through woods until the road ended at a weedy cul-de-sac or until the pavement simply ran out, as if the road crew had given up, with street signs sticking out of the dirt. When houses did appear, they did so in clusters, like huts tucked off the path, a few with roofs missing (unfinished or scavenged, it was difficult to tell). These neighborhoods had a disposable vibe to them but a gloomy pioneering thrill too, something brave about the neighbors who, after clawing out a spot, were holding fast. A minivan's back seat served as a porch bench in front of one home; between others, in a flooded ditch that separated a row of small back yards, a tricycle lay tipped over, just a dozen feet from the neighbor's garbage can drowning in the same ditch—backyard surrender all down the line.

Farther into town, things normalized. The blocks filled out. The yards looked tended, save for an overgrown lawn here and there. I pulled into the parking lot of a modest, cream-colored office complex.

Before setting out, I'd tracked down a man named Rick Anglickis. Around the time my parents showed up, Anglickis worked with the salesmen who hustled those honeymooners in the eight-by-eight rooms. When I found his office at the Heritage Group, a real estate company that handled just about every aspect of the business—investment, development, consulting—the front desk was abandoned. Anglickis emerged from a conference room. He was tall and barrel-chested, his blond hair paling with age. He wore a floral-patterned shirt, pressed shorts, loafers, and had an accent that blended the ensemble together—a hammy Chicago *bah*, like a fat man sitting on his vowels.

There was a golden shovel leaning in a corner, a gift from the local recreation center for his help in building it. He led me back into the conference room, where I sat opposite an enormous color-coded map of Lehigh

Acres, the same one Gould and Ratner had used long ago, showing all of Ratner's 60,000 acres and then some. I asked Anglickis to point out my family's quarter acre. He stood and waved across the purple center of the map, the zone that represented the heart of the community, where we were. "This here is about 50 percent of the population of Lehigh Acres," he said. "This is pretty much about where the city water-and-sewer system exists." He glanced down at the sheet of paper in his other hand, peeking over his glasses. "Your property is out in ... section 13 ..." His hand slid northeast, and kept going, toward a brown zone, well away from the purple center. "You're where there is no water and no sewer." He looked at me. "And not even in your children's children's children's children's lifetime will there be water and sewer out there." It was simply too expensive, he said, especially without homeowners on those lots paying the taxes to cover it. And yet, in order to attract homeowners in the first place, a water-and-sewer system needed to exist. It was a public-works paradox enshrined in the sales pitch fifty years ago.

When the trend shifted in the late 1950s from selling land to building homes, Gould and Ratner scrambled to form a utilities company to provide all the amenities of a normal town, but for only a small portion of those 150,000 lots. To avoid the infrastructure conundrum, Gould offered owners whose lots were farthest from the action lots closer to it. Some accepted the swap, others passed. But as ever more people showed up or sold, consolidating all those far-flung landowners into a town became impossible. Worse, since Lehigh Acres was never actually incorporated as a city, zoning had always been at the mercy of successive company presidents, each zoning as he pleased. Smart zoning was on the table once again, Anglickis said, pushed by county commissioners, but it was slow going, since it required an unlikely level of cooperation among developers, contractors, and homeowners. "Unless you get a block of lots all at once, you can't do much,"

Anglickis said. "So no matter what they come to you for—park, school, road—unless it's something they can take you to court and say you must sell it at a reasonable price, the development is held up by the individual property owners. And all it takes is a couple of lots to hold back." The installment-plan dream had backfired.

Charmed Circle was on the sightseeing list, though I needed Anglickis to help me find it. "It's gone now," he said, clearly dispirited. "The motel's gone, the restaurant's gone. They knocked it all down." The building that housed the sales offices was still intact, though, and included one of his favorite haunts, a diner called Rosie's, open for breakfast and lunch only. We headed there along Leeland Heights Boulevard, cutting through different neighborhoods. Some looked clean, stable, thriving; in others there were frazzled yards with for-sale signs, yellow foreclosure notices taped to doors. Anglickis insisted there was an economic uptick under way, which he could prove through the success of his own business. What bugged him was the media's cynicism, its insistence on ignoring the town's various signs of health. In his mind, this most recent test was just part of the cycle. "It only feels different because you're not remembering the last one," he said, "or the one before that, or the one before that. I can tell you that the last one, in the Eighties, interest rates were at 18 percent. So things were really ugly the last time—18 percent and people were still buying. They're buying today. The market is terrific. It really is. But if the media keeps telling everybody we're in the tank, I guess people start to believe we're in the tank."

We pulled into the parking lot of a low, coral-colored building, where Rosie's and a Pilates studio were apparently the only tenants. "This is where you went to buy," Anglickis said. He pointed to a field of weeds and wildflowers, a couple of palms, a few piles of sand. "Across the street, where all that waste is, is Charmed Circle." I looked at the golf course just ahead. The putting green was



overgrown, shoddy, swallowed. We entered Rosie's through a glass door—the only natural light in the room, the only view—and found a table. The waitress came by to chat with Anglickis. On their way out the door, the small bell chiming, two cops teased him warmly and waved.

I tried to glance around and get a sense of those eight-by-eight rooms. I shouldn't bother, Anglickis said, the place had been totally reconfigured. But this was it, the neurological center of what he called "the trap." To lure buyers into it, he and the other salesmen launched an advertising campaign that took on the aspects of a traveling circus. "We'd set up a model home in a snow-filled parking lot," he said, waving his hand around the room, "with orange smudge pots around the home, and chicks in bikinis laying out underneath palm trees, and an elephant walking around with a big flap that said FLY TO FLORIDA FOR PEANUTS. We'd load people up on Super G Constellations—105 seats at a time, piling those people in there—and we'd fly them down to Fort Myers, meet them with a bus, pile them into the bus, take them on the same trip your parents took. That was the business."

I asked him about the ruse that brought my parents up from Miami.

"We had probably fifty hotels we worked with in Miami Beach," he said. "We did a lot of vacation certificates—four days, three nights—and we booked people into resorts in Miami Beach or Fort Lauderdale, St. Pete, Clearwater. The vacation certificate required you to sit in a land-sales presentation. Then there was a group of solicitors whose job it was to contact people who happened to be staying at a hotel or beach, who got paid for every unit—or buying couple—they would book into a hospitality room or bus trip or plane ride. That's where your folks came in. They got on a bus. Some people were vacation-certificate holders down for their free vacation, some were random to fill up the rest of the bus. The best buyers we tried to put on a plane, because that would get them to the salesman in Lehigh first, before he got worn out. Those were the couples we thought were the best

units. The second-best units were put on the bus. These people would all come to Lehigh and go on a tour and then go into the closing rooms. We might send some of them out with a private chauffeur to look at the land, but more than often they were looking at something they were told was their lot, and nowhere close to where their lot actually was."

I mentioned a detail my father had shared, of the salesman working several rooms at once. "Actually," Anglickis explained, "every office was bugged. He'd go back to the sales manager's office and hear what you were talking about, what your objections might be. Now he's a lot smarter. There was also a turnover salesman, whose job it was to revive what appeared to be a dead sale. And he'd revive it through a sales pitch. Baloney. He was always sitting at the bugging station, listening to several conversations, and if he heard a sale was getting away, he'd walk in and say, 'Jeez, I got some good news, hate to interrupt you guys, but you remember that corner lot right next to the canal that sold yesterday? Well, the deal fell through. I just wanted you to know that it's back on the market. The other buyers already put a thousand down, and the boss just told me he'll sell it for the difference.' Funny stuff."

The corn bread arrived. Anglickis went on. "From the bugging station we could hear whoever it was in there. They'd say to each other, 'We just need to think about this. We need to pray over it tonight.' So the salesman would come back in and he would say, 'Now listen, I don't want to force you people into doing something that you'll be hasty about. And I hope you don't think I'm too corny, but I've always found that when I'm ready to make a big decision, my wife and I, we always go to the Lord and ask for some wisdom. So if you don't mind right now—" he began wheezing, a belly laugh, and put his cornbread down. "We used to just die. You know, the next day, they're signing hard and pushing hard and all excited. I used to love it when a salesman got the 'We gotta think about it and pray over this' thing. They would buzz me and say, 'We got one!' And I'd come across the street just to hear them pray."

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I reached down and dug through my satchel for the folder of paperwork my father had kept over the years, and found the sales contract for the lot. My parents couldn't recall much about the salesman they'd met that day, but when I showed Anglickis the contract, he smiled. "Mark Bateman," he said. "He was with us for twenty-five years. He lives over in Alva." Anglickis explained Bateman's shtick: "He was the Southern gentleman the wife would fall in love with, because of the way he talked. He was a young, good-looking guy. He grew up here, so he'd talk about the experiences he benefited from in a town like this. And of course he's shooting at this being a great place to live, raise a family, all that." I asked him about the other salesmen. Most had come and gone. Artie went to Orlando, opened a time-share, sold it for millions. Bobby, whom Anglickis had hired as a bus captain in Miami, was now a VP of sales and marketing in Tampa. One guy still worked out of his garage, selling lots for fifty down and fifty a month. Mark was over in Alva doing who knows what. Anglickis remembered them all wistfully, and with pride. Those were, it seemed, a salesman's glory days.

Was there an irony in Anglickis's sticking around—and not only living in Lehigh Acres but being so passionate about it? For him it wasn't so much an irony as a slow road to Damascus. They sold the hell out of this place, he insisted, because selling made them lots of money and eventually led to growth. Oddly enough, in all the time he'd spent here he'd become one of the community's champions, a godfather of sorts—former president of the local Jaycees, builder, salesman, with his hand in, and name on, hospitals, parks, community centers. "Everything before I came was geared toward retirement—that word was in every piece of literature," he said. "The real sense of building a community began once Charmed Circle was built. Everybody bought into building the community. That's the thing that drove everybody. We expected to sell a hundred homes in June, we expected to sell a million dollars' worth of land a month. Because we were going to be a city, and it was going to 300,000 people

someday. We even started to plan the land differently. We added curvilinear streets, just to break the monotony of what had been designed before, because that would make it a better place to live. The underlying drive was always to build a city. And I can tell you honestly, that's what's kept me."

He kept going, and in one monologue after another, he broke down the ecology of what he loved about this business, the interplay between predator and prey that made real estate a wondrous ecosystem. The suckers weren't just suckers but instrumental to the evolution of the town that over forty years he had grown to build, and love, and lead. "This community has grown because of people like your parents. They bought this piece of useless garbage 'cause they were shlucked off a beach somewhere, enjoying their vacation, dragged across Florida, put into a little tiny office half this size, beat on until they bought, and then they sent their \$10 for ten years to some wasteland across the way. Never came down, never had an idea. But the guy in the office next to them spent his lifetime dreaming about coming to his lot in Lehigh Acres when he retired. So for fifty years guys have been paying off their lots, and they come down to Lehigh Acres, and some of them say, 'Holy crap, what a piece of junk this place is! I'm going to go to Tampa!' And the next guy says, 'I've been waiting for this all my life.' And so for fifty years there's been this steady flow, the economy be damned. Now, some people paid for their lots, were going to sell them to the next guy, and found out there was no next guy. Some folks sold their lots for forty thousand and made a deal. And over the years, those things have spiraled and changed. Maybe your lot won't be forty thousand again, maybe it will. But overall, in the long run, it'll cycle up, and it'll cycle up, and it'll cycle up."

Even now, the cycle's length remains a mystery.

After dropping Anglickis off at his office, I drove through patches of the all-American middle-class experience Gould and Ratner had promised and Anglickis had hawked. I followed the directions he'd left me to his own

neighborhood, where his company had built several dozen homes to compete with the styles Gould and Ratner offered. It was one of the most charming neighborhoods I'd seen in Florida—not wealthy, nor crushed under the weight of mansions, but clean, with a wide street and single-story block-and-stucco homes, each a cousin to the ranch style, white and off-white and sometimes very white, all low as if to duck the heat, every mailbox straight. More important, they were all on level ground, with gutters, not a well or septic mound in sight.

But the scenery snapped to ruin with as little as a left turn. Here the houses wrestled with the vines and brush creeping over from the empty quarter-acre lots that surrounded them on either side. Some houses were entirely veiled in bushes. The architecture was lazier: one-story cookie cutters with thick portico columns and white Romanesque windows. Some houses stood half finished, roofless, with rebar poking through the cinder block, rusting in the sun. Other homes looked prepared for the worst, with plywood and metal sheets screwed onto the windows and doors.

Driving along 48th Street, where the shell-and-gravel road had turned to pavement for a while, I found, at the corner of Gene Avenue, my parents' lot. I would have passed it if not for a sweet, strange vision: across the street, guarded by a pair of enormous bright-green agave cacti, behind a chain-link fence that lined an acre as lush and varied as a botanical garden, stood a beach house, vinyl-sided, raised high on wooden stilts, irrelevant this far from the Gulf. Here what those stilts afforded was an unimpeded view of the void that surrounded the sanctuary these owners had cultivated. The front yard was a frenzy of landscaping, full of whimsical touches. Cactus shouldered up to palms and conifers. Plastic flamingos hid in a thicket. Clay frogs squatted underneath a massive cedar. A pair of stone rabbits stood sentry beside the gravel driveway. The fence itself was draped with tinsel stars on twine woven in between the links. In one corner, next to a slouching royal palm, an American



flag whipped on a pole. Every festive detail of this house was an antidote to everything else for miles.

I pulled up to one of the agaves, shut the truck off, and crossed the street to my parents' lot, which sat about another thirty yards down a narrow drive. I high-stepped over the weeds and grass that pushed up through the asphalt, dodged the thorny secondary growth, then waded into waist-high grass until I reached the canal. The brush rustled: small, startled creatures. I'd disturbed whatever peace had fallen over this place. A hot wind picked up. Forty thousand dollars for a sandbox. I couldn't imagine this land being worth a tenth that much, certainly not in my father's lifetime, probably not in my own. Or I might see it as a doddering octogenarian, spending my mornings looking for signs of life in that boggy ditch, waiting for a neighbor or candy striper to pick me up and take me to the pharmacy so I could fill a prescription—or, better, being stubborn enough and nimble enough to drive there myself.

I walked back to the truck, looking up at the house on stilts. A man and woman stood there on the second-story deck, watching me. They descended the tall, rickety steps of the deck, crossed onto the lawn, then disappeared behind the tight cluster of trees before reappearing on opposite sides of the cedar. They walked up to the fence and leaned on it. The man was slight, about five-foot-six, his clothes loose, as if he'd thinned out unexpectedly. His long face was masked in black sunglasses and a floppy booney hat.

He nodded. "What's going on, brother?"

I pointed back at the lot. "That's my inheritance," I said.

He leaned and looked over my shoulder. "Yeah, well, what are you gonna do with it?"

"I don't know. What do you think I should do with it?"

He grinned. "I mean prices are fucked-up," he said, then shook his head. "I don't know."

His name was Wink Parent. He had a slow, deep, Cracker drawl. His wife, Sarah, waved. Her long hair, wheat and gray, had been twisted

into a thick braid, with bangs she wiped away as the wind tossed them. She wore a squinting smile when she talked.

I asked them about their house. It was indeed a beach house, Wink said, which they'd found abandoned on Sanibel Island. They'd been living in Fort Myers at the time and had decided to leave the city for something a little quieter and, after Hurricane Bob, a little farther inland. The lot was cheap, the house was cheap, so they paid cash for both, then hauled the house over in pieces. "Spent the next six months just trying to make it livable," Wink said. "It had no insides. No sinks, no flooring. It was just a shell."

The deck, the plumbing, the siding, the yard: the whole place was a kind of sweat-equity jigsaw puzzle. Even the rock driveway was a bit of luck. Amid all the construction, to avoid having to haul excess rock from building sites to the local landfill, where they paid by the ton, contractors would instead dump their rock in secluded lots all over town. "They'd find a side street like this and just dump a pile of clean, fresh rock. We took that trailer over there, filled it to the rail about fifty times, and brought all of it here."

"There's still a lot of work needs to be done," Sarah said. The wood ties that framed the landscaping were old (they were thinking about replacing them with concrete curbing); the gravel driveway had scattered and dissipated over the years and needed to be filled in (Wink knew where to get some cheap); the deck needed to be replaced.

Had they borrowed against the house? Were they underwater? Buyers had approached them, Wink said, "but frankly, the way the value was shooting up so fast kinda scared me. So we just sat tight and watched it all go down around us."

Nearly all the neighboring houses—up the street, on the far side of the canal—were empty, with some misfortune attached. Sarah shared their legends: a husband in construction, now out of work; a wife in real estate in a dead market; an investor spread too thin; a poor fool hobbled by a DUI.

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"We're surviving it," Wink said.  
Was it lonely out here?

No, they liked the peace and quiet. Wink ran his hand across the horizon. "Nothing was here when we got here," he said. "We killed I don't know how many rattlesnakes. I'd watch 'em going across that tall grass—just surfen' on it. We got all kinds of foxes and panthers creeping around here, especially over across the street."

But things weren't so bad, considering.

"In Michigan," Sarah reminded me. "It's bad."

"Worse," I said. "The weather's awful."

"Right!" Wink said, as if he'd long argued this point. "You're not freezing to death. Down here you can be a bum and practically *live*. I mean, if you say you can't eat in Florida, there must be something wrong with you. When I was a kid, we had the mango trees, the orange trees, tangerine, any kind of fruit tree. You've got fish. Every night, I got rabbits and quail coming right to my fence. I got a good, high-powered pellet gun. I could knock a couple off."

Even on my parents' lot, Wink said, there was enough to harvest and make a little scratch. To prove his point, he led me back across the street. We waded into the grass, across the sand. I dodged a toad, lizards scattered. Wink led me up to a spiky thicket of saw palmettos where, once he'd lifted a pointed frond, I could see a cluster of red berries.

"Every once in a while you see the Mexicans," Wink said. "They'll be over here picking these palmetto berries. They use them berries for prostate cancer. The Seminole Indians used to eat 'em. They've got the lowest rate of prostate cancer, and it all comes back to the fact that they were eating berries off the saw palmettos like this little clump right here." He plucked one off, held it up, then dropped it in the palm of my hand. "So the Mexicans come and load 'em up in fifty-gallon burlap sacks, then go to the laboratory in LaBelle and sell 'em." He reached down and picked another. "But if you want 'em good, just go straight to the plant."

He tilted his head toward the canal, where water bugs skimmed the muck. "You've heard of tilapia, right?" He smiled, then spread his hands. "High dollar, too."

We shuffled back toward the street. At the corner, he pointed out the scourge of the neighborhood—the scourge of Florida, for that matter—the Brazilian pepper tree. It, too, produced berries, but a variety that was a delicacy for crows, which gathered in black whorls in the branches to pick the tree clean, with freakish, ravenous thoroughness—getting drunk on the fermented berries all the while. "They scream and yell like frat boys," Wink said, with a smile to the side of his mouth, "Then they fly off all crooked, like a big party."

And there, next to the Brazilian pepper, was Wink's favorite plant, a young kapok tree—tall and spiked with horrific-looking thorns, thick as screws, that ran base to tip along the thin trunk. Wink knew it as "Thomas Edison's laboratory plant"; the inventor had spent his winters in Fort Myers, where, on an estate he shared with Henry Ford, he imported and cross-bred thousands of plants in search of a cheap source of rubber, creating an Edenic arboretum, which was now a botanical garden for tourists. Most likely the kapok's seeds had been carried from there to here by a wheeling gull. Wink got a nostalgic kick from the kapok, since as a boy he and other kids had lopped and trimmed it to beat one another with, in play or fights, a use that led to its local name and, according to Wink, the birth of a phrase—the ugly stick.

I looked back at the lot. I suppose I should have known better than to assume it was a total loss. Certainly a few saw palmettos weren't going to bring back that \$40,000, but there was now, at least, a scrubby wonder to it.

Walking back to the truck, I marveled once more at the agave. It was like some giant green star that had crashed into the dirt, its thorny sword-shaped leaves fanning out, the middle leaf reaching just above Wink's head. This cactus had been the occasion for yet another encounter with the Mexicans, when a hand-

ful of them—county workers, apparently, judging by the county truck—spotted it one afternoon while working across the street. They walked over and surrounded it, resting on their shovels as they pointed and talked. Wink watched them from his window a while, then walked outside. They asked if it was for sale. It was not for sale, he said. They walked away. A couple of nights later, the Mexicans returned—a different truck this time, but with a rope that they lassoed around the cactus. The truck peeled out, the agave heaved, the rope snapped. The truck paused just a moment before peeling out again. Wink made it to his window in time to see it whip around the corner and out of sight. He went downstairs to observe the damage, loosened the rope from around his tilted cactus, rather proud of it. After that, he said, the Mexicans gave up.

Sarah pointed to a group of seedlings tucked close to the agave. "Little babies," she called them. She liked to plant them around the yard whenever she could.

"You're welcome to have one of 'em if you want," Wink said.

I demurred, but Sarah insisted, then darted inside the house to soak a napkin. She emerged with the napkin and a spade and a plastic bag, kneeled next to the agave, and began to dig a seedling out. She wrapped it carefully in the napkin, then lowered it into the bag and cinched the tie shut.

I thanked them. I didn't know when I'd be back this way.

"We'll be all right," Wink said. "We're sticking around till the end." All I had to do was swing by. "Come on back, look me up anytime," he said. "Maybe we'll make good friends."

I got in the truck, set the cactus down gently on the seat next to mine. I looked at the green, thorny behemoth that had spawned this gift. I had no idea where to put it. I didn't have the space. My father's yard in Tampa was big enough, but homogenous; a plant that looked like a spiked flail would definitely seem invasive. The trick would be to plant it without telling him, somewhere in the back, and let it claim its corner, a token of his investment. ■