

The Panther

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences

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Abstract

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The Panther is a work of short fiction set in the Florida Everglades that explores the tale of a family-run hotel and casino capitalizing off a tragedy that occurred within the establishment years prior by transforming it into a spectacle for the sake of entertainment. Serving as a demonstration of how the lines can easily become blurred between the real and simulation, the work also embeds research surrounding the history of Florida into the text. This thesis contains the fictional work and an accompanying poetics statement regarding the composition of the work and the research that went into its creation.

Poetics Statement

Late one night during the Spring 2022 quarter, I rolled over in bed, grabbed my phone, and hastily typed the following into my Notes app: “POTENTIAL THESIS IDEA: What is it about certain places that affords us discomfort and hypersensitivity over motivation and calmness?” At the time, I was looking at this question through the lens of how architecture that seems relatively harmless at face value can be weaponized against individuals when placed into a greater context. I had been going back and forth with a work of mine that follows a main character who’s incarcerated in a men’s correctional institution, which lent itself easily to a broader scope of thinking about how something as simple as a room with four walls reinforces unequal relationships of power. I knew, at the core of this research, I wanted to dive further into how more than just architecture but the whole of the physical characteristics of the geographic location we find ourselves in affects our psyche. This is where I discovered the concept of psychogeography.

Psychogeography, officially coined by French Marxist theorist and founding member of the Situationist International Guy Debord in his 1955 essay “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” is defined as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (Knabb 8). Encountering this definition intrigued me greatly because it seemed to align with the line of thinking I was gearing toward about how the physical characteristics of our environment impact human behavior. However, it would be within the *Situationist International Anthology* that contained this essay that I would soon learn of another seminal text of the movement, also by Debord – *The Society of the Spectacle*. This book, published in 1967,

functions as a series of over 200 short theses on the development and critique of the concept of the spectacle. At first, I was hesitant to think that this text may be of value to my research. After all, nowadays, when you consider the phrase “spectacle,” your mind typically drifts to the domination of mass media over our lives in the form of broadcast television, films, radio, and social media. However, upon reading this collection of theses, I was pleased to find that Debord shifts the attention from a traditional media context into a social and even architectural context, defining the spectacle as not a collection of images but “the relations between individuals themselves, as mediated by the stream of images that represent their daily lived experience of this pseudo-reality” (Debord 17). Architecture and urban planning are just one means of furthering the distribution of these images.

In Debord’s words, in the modern society, “Everything that was directly experienced has been replaced with its representation in the form of images,” largely due to the proliferation of capitalism (16). Rather than simply a society in which all relationships are bound to the creation and exchange of commodities, as we typically see in capitalism, Debord argues that we have shifted away from physical commodities into representations of the commodities – images. It seemed at this point, now knee-deep in the work of this critique of capitalism that fell somewhere between Marxism and surrealism, that I had stumbled upon something far more interesting to my research than simply the idea that our environment could influence our emotions. Instead, I now found myself delving deeper into how the environment acts as a double world, with architecture and city planning working in tandem with images to alienate us from one another.

So, on the one hand, you have the spectacle as referring to the phenomenon in which a consumer society is based around the consumption of images and, on the other, you have it

referencing back to the larger means of power employed by capitalism to manipulate and pacify its social subjects. For Situationists like Debord that sought to disrupt these systems of capitalism and advocate for authentic experiences, the spectacle was viewed as not only exploiting the worker but transforming them into a consumer – separating them from the products of their own labor and constructing false desires. In 1960, Guy Debord combined forces with Pierre Canjuers on a platform for discussion and relationship building between the Situationists International and libertarian socialist group Socialisme ou Barbarie entitled “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program” that further clarifies this phenomenon as follows: “Capitalist consumption imposes a general reduction of desires by its regular satisfaction of artificial needs, which remain needs without ever having been desires — authentic desires being constrained to remain unfulfilled (or compensated in the form of spectacles)” (Knabb 389).

In pursuit of learning more about the spectacle, I turned to Debord’s near-contemporary Jean Baudrillard and his 1981 philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard was heavily influenced by the work of Debord and the Situationists and similarly theorizes the development of a capitalistic society marked by the extensive proliferation of consumerism; however, he goes one step further than Debord to posit that we have actually moved beyond the society of the spectacle and the commodity to enter the society of the simulacrum – one of which finds a basis in reality and a chance for escape and the other which does not. Baudrillard opens his treatise with a brief description of a one-paragraph short story written in 1946 by Jorge Luis Borges that describes a fictional empire in which the art of cartography is perfected to the point where the society has created “a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it” (Borges 325). It is through this allegory that we get our first glimpse into a scenario in which a form of representation becomes more accurate to reality

than the reality itself. This phenomenon, if you could call it that, only represents what Baudrillard would consider second-order simulacra as today's representations are "no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 6). The territory of the empire doesn't just fail to precede the map; it doesn't survive it whatsoever. Therefore, while Debord might have put forth that media representation creates false images of the subject's desire, Baudrillard puts forth that the world of the hyperreal dissolves any distinction between true and false and real and unreal.

This leaves simulacra to be broadly understood as the endless repetition of images meant to represent an object and hyperreality as the continuous generation of an endless number of images, representations, or models that lack an origin or original reality of which to reference. Given this non-distinction between true and false, how is the real world still operative? In his work, Baudrillard addresses two instances of real-world places that serve as models of a simulated reality in which multiple orders of simulacra are at play and demonstrate the real world continues to function – Disneyland and Las Vegas.

"Disneyland," Baudrillard writes, "is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation" (Baudrillard 26). In other words, the imaginary worlds of pirates and space-age wonders serve to conceal the fact that the real world no longer exists outside of the park. Las Vegas, on the other hand, with all of its signs and lights along the strip, demonstrates that advertising "is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls, effaces the streets, the facades, and all the architecture, effaces any support and any depth, and that it is this liquidation, this reabsorption of everything into the surface (whatever signs circulate there) that plunges us into this stupefied, hyperreal euphoria"

(Baudrillard 164). The simulated environment, or even the sign for the simulated environment, is not only more alluring but more real than the actual geographic site itself.

All of this information, thus far, lent itself well to my original focus on architecture and pointed me further in the direction of postmodern architecture, specifically in the way it connects back to the idea of the spectacle and simulacrum. I wanted to create a story that revolved around something like a casino so that I may begin to incorporate elements of what I learned regarding how architecture reflects our relationship to the spectacle. From here, I was recommended to look further into Las Vegas, in particular, with the 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. It was within my reading of this text, which covers nearly everything in the architecture found in Las Vegas, from the layout of the interior of the buildings to the lighting styles used within, that I began to latch on to certain elements I found meshed well with the concepts of the hyperreal I had previously been exploring.

Right from the beginning, in the opening of Part I of the text, there's a section that goes into detail on several iconic signs along the strip, including that of The Dunes and The Stardust Resort and Casino. In both instances, these iconic casinos are frequently identified by their large signs, illuminated by several thousand feet of neon tubing and incandescent bulbs – creating an iconic shape and spelling out the name of the business. The sign, or the representation of the business, becomes “more important than the architecture...a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity” (Venturi 13). Not only are the signs bigger and brighter than the place they seek to advertise, but Venturi puts forth that, “If you take the signs away, there is no place” (18). In other words, the representation of reality (the sign for the casino) is not only more important than reality (the casino itself) but becomes the reality.

All of this representation with the signage, however, is only the start of the illusion at play. It is once you enter the casino that the true descent into the hyperreality can begin. Take, for example, the lighting within the casino. The gambling rooms are always very low-lit, under the guise of offering the occupants a private, protected, atmospheric space where they can focus on the game away from the distractions of the outside world. However, the combination of low lighting and the enclosure of the room also “disorients the occupant in space and time” where “time is limitless, because the light of noon and midnight are exactly the same” and “space is limitless, because the artificial light obscures rather than defines its boundaries” (49). Simply by virtue of what the text refers to as “antiarchitectural” lighting, the line between reality and the imaginary has begun to blur. In Las Vegas, in particular, the contrast between the fantasy being presented and the outside world is severe. The hotel and casino, with its courts, greenery, and waters, is “literally the oasis in a hostile environment” of the arid desert just outside the door. All of these elements fall under the umbrella of what the book designates as pleasure-zone architecture, characterized by “lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role” (Venturi 53).

The role the occupant takes on is, as expected, often determined by the theme of the hotel and casino. For example, an occupant may play the part of a centurion at Caesars Palace one night and a lone ranger at The Frontier on the next. Again, while these themed casinos make reference to the past and even seem as if they may be presenting an idealized version of a time during history, the link to reality is distorted to the point of completely vanishing. Once more, the spectacle on display is a “secularized and fragmented myth,” bearing no relation to authentically lived experiences (Knabb 158). This idea of an idealized version of history demonstrated through architecture can be seen in my thesis in the way that the design of the titular casino is identified

as containing elements from Spanish, Moorish, and Georgian architecture. This detail, although minor, is both accurate to the way many early hotels in Southern Florida frequently pulled aspects from architectural styles like the Moorish Revival in an attempt to appeal to the widely traveled, wealthy tourists that would make up their primary guests and indicative of the casino's determination to reflect an idealized image of history.

By this point in my research, I now knew for certain that I wanted to create a work of fiction that involved a casino because there seemed no better way than to access and channel a great deal of the knowledge that I had acquired about how the spectacle and simulacra manifest themselves in postmodern architecture. However, I wasn't keen on setting the story within the confines of Las Vegas. First, a great deal of literature has already been produced on the concept of the spectacle as it relates to the architecture and geography of Las Vegas, hence why I was able to easily delve into the research of the topic. Second, I had never been to Las Vegas and, thus, didn't feel as if I would be able to tell an authentic story about someone living there unless I devoted a significant deal of time and energy to immersing myself in the city. Fortunately, there was one location that I was keenly familiar with, having already done a good portion of research on during a course on Gothic Poetics, and that acted as a great jumping-off point into the hyperreal setting – the Florida Everglades. Much like the casinos of Las Vegas function as a kind of oasis from the hostile environment of the harsh Mojave Desert just outside the door, I was prepared for the casino within my piece to function as a similar oasis from the winding, murky swampland of the Everglades.

With regard to why I felt more equipped to set my story within the Everglades, I'll start by disclosing the fact that I grew up in Tampa, Florida, about 230 miles or so from the Everglades National Park. In addition to learning about the Everglades ecosystem throughout

school as part of the state curriculum, I also wrote a 4,000-word essay of self-directed research on *Killing Mister Watson* by Peter Matthiessen in high school as part of the work toward my International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma. *Killing Mister Watson*, although ultimately a fictional account, is drawn from the historical facts surrounding the real-life outlaw and entrepreneur Edgar J. Watson who terrorized the Chokoloskee community in the Everglades with a series of theft and suspected murders until he himself was gunned down by a group of anywhere from 30 to 50 local residents, depending on which account you read. 33 bullets entered his body that day, yet there were no good eyewitnesses to the event, and no one would ever spend a day in jail on account of his murder. This isn't to say, however, that the community has sought to forget the event. On the contrary, The Smallwood Store in front of which Watson was murdered has become one of the biggest tourist attractions of the region complete with reenactments of the shooting staged behind the now-museum with participants adorned with full frontier clothes and replicas of firearms carried by the original posse. But I digress, the point is that I soon discovered the answer to my question of the perfect ecosystem within which to place this narrative regarding the spectacle and simulacra had been in front of me all along.

To help you understand just how deeply engrained the struggle between reality and fantasy is in Florida history, I'll begin this section with a quote that appeared in the New York literary review *The Critic* on July 15, 1882:

It has always been difficult to ascertain the truth about Florida from any published writings. For the most part it has been concealed by one or all of three different methods: by intensely magnifying small facts, by withholding great facts, and by actual misrepresentation. The consequence is that very many persons have been induced to go to

Florida for the purpose of settling there, only to meet with discouragement, and too often with ruin. Mr. Barbour claims that he has here given the intending immigrant a practical and trustworthy guide, and we are ready to exonerate him from the faintest suspicion of an intention to deceive his readers. But he himself has been deceived (187)

In Florida, history is always being falsified on multiple levels at all times and, although it's difficult to discern where this phenomenon truly begins, it has never once ceased. In fact, as Timothy D. Allman puts forth in his 2013 book *Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State*, it can be argued that we are currently “living in Florida’s Third Great Epoch of Illusion” (Allman 311). To try and describe every instance of Florida rewriting its own history and creating a spectacle of itself would take ages, but it can be found in almost every place you turn. Have millions of acres inaccessible, waterlogged swampland? Sell it as a highly sought-after slice of paradise. Have settlers suffering from yellow fever and malaria? Advertise Florida as the land to cure all ills. Have storms so severe they physically unearth the bodies you continuously attempt to bury? Call that the price we pay for living in tropical paradise.

In my thesis, this falsification of history and the prevalence of the spectacle results in two competing casinos situated within the hostile environment of the Everglades – The Panther Hotel and The Dolos Resort. The Panther Hotel is a family-run hotel and casino that capitalizes on a fire that took ravaged the business years prior and severely wounded the mother of the family, who had been on stage performing in the theater of the casino when the fire broke out. Although the family had originally tried to move past this tragedy and resume business as usual, they soon realized they could make more money if they dramatized the incident and staged recreations of the fire as a routine, elevating the stakes of the original event and heightening the spectacle by

making the mother perform in a mask that simulates what her face looked in the days following the fire with scarred, burnt skin. We get the impression, from the start of the work, that, although the family might have felt a bit iffy about it at first, these nightly recreations and the fire itself have now become a founding narrative for their business as a whole. The Dolos Resort, on the other hand, is not a new casino but one that has been recently acquired by a new investor in the area and completely renovated to now act as ‘travel experience,’ in which visitors can expect to see and interact with supposedly authentic replicas of historical artifacts from around the world. For this attraction, this results in multiple, grand-scale exhibits of moments in history throughout the resort, one of which is The Panther Fire.

The distinction between these two casinos is intended to symbolize the two schools of thought on the spectacle, as put forth by Debord and Baudrillard. The Panther Hotel’s notion of the spectacle is based on an older model of artifice that closely aligns with the thinking of Debord. The spectacle, in this case, The Panther Hotel, conceals or distorts the facts in its representation of reality; however, it is still ultimately based in actual reality. The fire that The Panther Hotel is depicting in their nightly reenactments is based on an event that actually occurred within the theater where it is being performed. The Dolos Resort, on the other hand, aligns with Baudrillard’s notion of the spectacle in which the representation longer bears any relation to reality at all, acting purely as a simulation. The Dolos Resort, in its recreation of The Panther Hotel’s reenactment, is a copy of a copy and, thus, has moved too far beyond any real link to reality.

In its recreation, The Dolos Resort goes one step further into complete simulation, making both the mother’s injuries and the extent of the fire much more severe than it ever had been. The patriarch of the family, and owner of The Panther Hotel, is expectedly alarmed by this

recreation but not for the same reason the readers are. Rather than being disgusted or horrified, as we might anticipate him to be, he scoffs at the fact that people may be considering this reenactment to be more real than his own, despite the fact both of the reenactments at this point have a very loose basis in history at all. This, in turn, sends him down a much darker path in an attempt to maintain a similar level of visitors to the hotel, and we are left to watch as any link to reality we may have started with slowly crumbles before our very eyes.

All of which, as you may have gathered at this point, has links back to the real history of Florida. Let's take, for example, the idea of turning the site of historical event into a monetized spectacle that distorts or ultimately entirely rewrites the history of the actual event. While my thesis makes reference back to the site of the Fountain of Youth, there's actually a much more grim and modern case of this type of scenario – Prospect Bluff Historic Site, sometimes also written as Fort Gadsden Historic Site, Fort Gadsden Historic Memorial, or Fort Gadsden Historic Recreation Center. These are just the name changes that have occurred from 2016 to present-day, by the way, which is a pretty good indicator overall that something not so upstanding happened at one point in time or another. Without getting too far into the messy details, the site was once an emerging community of Indian, black, and mixed-race farmers called Prospect Bluff. Here, escaped slaves and Seminoles developed a bond, created plantations along the river, and raised a variety of different crops, including peas and corn. Then, on July 27, 1816, US forces under General Andrew Jackson's orders conducted one of the worst massacres in American history, eliminated what had become (in their eyes) a direct threat to their slave-holding interests, and, in the process, renamed the site Negro Fort. In what has sometimes been cited as the deadliest canon shot in American history and the largest struggle between runaway slaves and US forces

attempting to re-enslave them, the initial artillery attack killed more than 200 civilians, leaving a small number of survivors to be murdered or tortured to death soon after.

None of this, however, is evident at the present-day site of the massacre that has since been transformed into a recreation center, at least as of my last visit in the early 2010's. The interpretive kiosk that features information, displays, and a small-scale model of the site as it may have appeared in 1818 does more than just erase the truth of these killings, it very nearly seeks to justify it, turning the sailors that committed the atrocities into innocent civilians themselves and highlighting the fact that four sailors were killed. It makes no mention to the murders of women and children among the civilians killed nor are black individuals depicted in any of the exhibits. Allman describes this perfectly as “the Ongoing Florida Historical Method” in which Florida engages in the “suppressing, denying, or changing [of] the facts whenever they controvert the celebratory version of events historians of the time, and their audience, prefer—and then suppressing, denying, or changing the facts yet again whenever a newer false version is needed” (Allman 92). This, again, is reflective of the older model of the spectacle. There is a truth to what is being represented, provided you can look past its distorted representation. If you doubt the extent to which this type of historical rewriting occurred in relation to this incident, you can look no further than Charlton W. Tebeau's 1971 book *A History of Florida* in which the professor of history at the University of Miami and an American historian says that the massacre “removed any immediate danger to users of the [Apalachicola] river and also strengthened the American demand that the Spanish either police Florida's unruly inhabitants or cede the territory to the United States” (Tebeau 110). In a few brief words, a historian that otherwise provided some excellent information about the history of Florida and was lauded for his research for years,

turns the 1816 massacre into some sort of development project in which people could gladly be decimated so long as it contributed to the greater good of society.

We see the prevalence of this systematic erasure and distortion of history in almost every aspect of Florida's history that has time and time again prioritized a history of justified violence. And this falsification is still ongoing, although there have been attempts in recent years to try and rectify at least some of the circumstances in which individuals were misrepresented or entirely erased from history, particularly those belonging to minority groups. The issue is that the representations of history itself in the postmodern realm is another form of simulation, at least according to the ideas put forth by Baudrillard. The question then becomes, is there a point in uncovering these so-called buried histories? Is there still a usefulness in knowing? My hope, in the creation of this thesis and explanation of the research that went into it, is that I might be able to explore this question in greater detail and shed some light on Florida's ongoing "historical method."

The Panther

I have always lived where the sawgrass meets the sky – a glittering, swaying, brown and green expanse of endless sharp-toothed blades pressed flush against the infinite blue in a line of burning light. Where the water at once blue and green and impossibly dark constantly flows, often slow in its gigantic, swooping motion from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico through impenetrable labyrinths of mangroves but also prone to fits of sudden haste, rising and swelling until it is capable of drowning every inch of what the eye can see. Where the golden, grassy prairie rustles in the wind, lying in wait for the perfect spark to send it shooting up into an inferno of seemingly inextinguishable blaze that burns and burns and burns layer after layer of thousand-year-old peat and turns the sky a darkened shade of creamy gray. Where the fire continues to smolder until the spring rain slowly overcomes it and yet, every year without fail, it feels as if the flames might at last go on forever.

My family came here over a hundred years ago with the rest of the bright-eyed, blissfully unaware settlers, pushing the Indians that were already living there further south to the same unknown swamps that had been unmapped and unacknowledged for thousands of years. And when those very lands started to look desirable as well continued to push the Indians west instead to some variation of modern-day Arkansas or Oklahoma. They still tell the story of how Chief Osceola, upon presentation with the treaty that promised the Indians fair prices for their cattle and slaves with their westward migration, stabbed his knife through the thick, white paper and into the table beneath it. It might have been nothing more than a legend, even at the time, but the sentiment remained the same. The joyfulness with which my family and other settlers had made their way into log cabins and plantation houses was soon replaced with a fear like none other at

the news of the death of a general at Indian hands in what would eventually become known as The Dade Massacre.

Everyone lost everything in the war that followed that. Plantations were destroyed, houses burned, stores ransacked, crops ruined, and men and women on either side killed at any opportunity. For years, people like my family stayed afloat on rations and subsidies from Congress alone. What they don't like to mention is that, for some, the money provided from the claims was more than any of these settlers had seen in a while. War looked favorable from that light, especially as the rations continued long after the fighting had momentarily ceased. Unfortunately, as the years went on, the threat of Indian uprising wasn't strong enough to keep the funds flowing. It only makes sense that it was sort of a relief when the fighting continued. My family was among those who ended up heading further south of Lake Okeechobee, where they would remain as the war dragged to an end at an agonizingly slow pace in 1842 for the price of forty million dollars and thousands of lives lost.

As the years ticked on and many men left in search of gold in the west, my family stayed, sturdy as the slash pine pushing through the cracks of that limestone soil, trunk set thick with dark and platy bark and resistant to fire in a way the crops simply could never be. It would be wrong to tell you that we lived honorably, even then. That we tilled what we could of damp soil and hunted only what we needed to survive and truly made an honest living on that tiny swamp frontier. For we have always been what we are now – opportunists – and it starts with the fine-feathered egret.

After the Civil War, the fine feathers of the Great Egret were soon worth around seventy-five cents apiece. Over four feet tall with a wingspan more than fifty inches in length, these long-legged wading birds with their S-shaped necks and dagger-like bills became a fascinating target

for people looking to cash in on a small fortune. People like us, that is. It only took a small group of ragtag hunters perched in their canoes with clubs or shotguns to kill and pluck hundreds of the plumed birds in a single night. Plume buyers made frequent trips from New York to Florida trading posts in search of the highly sought after feathers to be used in the creation of extravagant ladies' hats. These hunting trips are where it starts, really. The whole of our story, I mean. Not in the bright rays of sunshine that comes filtering down through the gaps in the trees to the acres of stick nests below or in the curious squawking of the open-beaked chick as it cries up to its mother, but in the hazy stench of plucked, bloodied corpses with their limp heads dangling out of their nests, attracting alligators and vultures from miles away in the darkness.

Even when the law was passed against the practice, no one in the Everglades much cared. This is a good indicator of the cyclical nature of the relationship between Florida and the US government as a whole, an entity which goes through periods of caring and not caring about what goes on in the state depending on how it suits their interests at the time. The government simply didn't monitor what went down on its southern tip as closely as it would have liked to, would have needed to, to prevent what was happening or what would later happen from happening. The only problem is that, when you wind up beneath the law, it's hard to find yourself above it again. When the market shifted from egret plumes to alligator hides to liquor, my family followed it close at hand, forever anxious to get ahead of it when it might inevitably slide back in their favor. What this resulted in was moonshine stills, tucked deep within the twisting thickets of the mangroves, that you could only access via a maze of rickety wooden planks that disappeared at the slightest air of high tide. It wasn't pretty and had to be supplemented by hunting and selling alligator, but it brought in enough to keep us wealthy and satiate the appetite for something bigger than crops that weren't consistent. With bootlegging and

rum-running, you didn't crave consistency the way you would running one of those plantations further north. Consistency got foolish men caught.

When word of drainage of the Everglades became the new talk of the country under Governor Broward, my family sold useless acres of swampland nestled firmly underwater to high-pressure land agents out west who would in turn sell it to hopeful farmers, retirees, and other gullible investment seekers looking to strike their fortune in the newly drained frontier. You could defend people like my family and the agents they partnered with on account of the fact they hadn't truly known that the land would never (and could never) feasibly be drained in their lifetime, as lawyers often did in the court cases that would follow suit years later, but there wasn't much reason to. If people in the Everglades knew one thing, it was that no one outside of the Everglades could fathom what it was like to deal with the land that rebelled against you at every turn.

It was with the money from the sale of this land and the small fortune they had acquired from scheming for every penny they could get that my family had acquired over the years that they built one of the first hotel in the Everglades. Similar to many of the hotels built in early Florida, such as the Ponce de Leon Hotel and the Tampa Bay Hotel, the Panther Hotel sought to capitalize on all of the seasonal visitors to the area through proximity to strategic rail lines – the very same rail lines that would inevitably get used for the transportation of the same moonshine they'd been brewing in the mangrove stills, but that's partially beside the point. Built on the site of a mound as the Flagler Hotel had once been, the hotel required its laborers to take great care in the extensive and time-consuming removal of layer after layer of shell and bone from a tribe that had been long since pushed further down toward the water or hauled up west as a result of one of the original treaties.

The actual structure of the place took bits and pieces from everywhere in its design – Spanish in its white stucco walls and red tile roofs, Moorish in its horseshoe arches and vaulted domes, and Georgian in its precise symmetry and balance. At a time when the lower portion of Florida was sprouting with towns without any semblance of adequate sewage systems, hospitals, or schools for the ever-growing amount of children, lavish hotels like The Panther were raking in the profit that would eventually swell their small economies. Trains, air boats, and automobiles arrived constantly, jam-packed with tourists who would fill every square inch of every corner in the hopes of getting their hands on one of the tracts that was selling out faster than they could stake their claim on it. There was no real plan for any parkways or city organization other than how quickly they could turn liquid into something solid. The rich had no choice but to get richer and that's where the hotel blossomed into something more – a casino.

In a sense, gambling had already been occurring long before the transformation of the pink and white stucco palace. The people of Florida have always been gamblers, just mostly with their fate instead of fortune. But the real estate boom meant more people from more places and, more specifically, more people with money willing to lose a little money in the hopes of getting a lot of money. Poker, lotteries, table games, and eventually horse races on a track constructed in the rear of the resort. Apart from horse racing, bolita was by far the most popular form of gambling that took place, which was a popular Spanish lottery played by placing a hundred little numbered balls into bag to be thoroughly mixed and drawn at random. None of it legal, of course, or at least not consistently so, but bribes to politicians, police officers, and anyone brave enough to open their mouth was more than enough to keep it not only flourishing but wide out in the open. By the 70's, my father, my mother, my brother Jack, and I were all working to

maintain a delicate balance of money-making endeavors to keep our casino flourishing, from poker and bolita to our entertainment acts and the occasional event hosting.

Tonight, I was aching more than the usual amount, clambering into my usual spot on the floor in the parlor in front of Mom's legs as my family gathered around the television to tune in for tonight's game show, draping the back of my head over her knees like I was seven again with long messy strands of slick hair, still wet from the shower. She used to braid it all the time, one hand over the other like she was tying a knot in a piece of fishing line. If I moved even the slightest amount during the process, no matter how minor, she would always release the hair she was wrangling and thwack my forehead with the palm of her dominant hand before restarting the process, "Now it takes twice as long."

Of course, she hadn't braided my hair in years. I told myself it was because of the length, as I kept it up to my ears now. It was a compromise in that way, trading my chance at affection from her for the relief from the heat. In one-hundred-degree weather, you'll find even the daintiest of necklaces can begin to feel like a weighted blanket around your neck after a certain point. Keep your wrists, neck, and the back of your knees cool, and you might survive the summer. That was always the rule.

"Think Ricky's gonna go home tonight?" Jack had asked from where he sprawled out beside my mom on the sofa, fingers still clutched tightly around the neck of a beer bottle he'd been nursing for the past thirty minutes.

Jack, as I said, is my brother. Three years younger than me and the root of my personal agony. I loved him like the sawgrass loves the pink, fleshy skin of your bare legs – mercilessly. I knew since the moment that I saw his pear-shaped head peeking out from beneath the swaddled blanket in that hospital room that I was capable of caring for him, but only if God gave me something hard and sharp to do it with. It’s just one of those thoughts that you endlessly harbor when it’s late at night and the gentle drumming of an approaching thunderstorm is beating at your windowpane. *If you had been born before me, I wouldn’t exist.* It rolls off the tongue now as easily as it did the first time I thought it, watching Dad place his hand firmly over the center of his back in a proud gesture he could never grace me with or the second time when Mom smoothed the hair out of his forehead with a gentleness I would never feel. To be good for a few years and wrong for the rest, that was the ache of the older sister.

“I hope not. Ricky is the only one I still care about,” I groaned in response to him.

Ricky was the longest standing contestant on the latest game show we’d been keeping up to date with. Game shows were one of those things I think we all just pretended to be more interested in than we actually were just so we’d have something to talk about besides the casino. Or each other. Ricky was a schoolteacher from Ohio hoping to score big and use the money on improving his classroom. Ricky had morals and skin in the game. Ricky deserved to win much more than any of the other lousy participants. This was one of the few things we could agree upon.

“No way he’ll break that winning streak. Didn’t you see the look of determination in his eyes?” My father, sitting in his faded armchair like usual, quipped from behind the pipe he was raising to his lips.

“What I saw was him flying by the seat of his pants on that last round,” my mother sighed. “He just doesn’t know the answers anymore.”

“Well, and could you blame him? The capital of Vermont? Really?” my father laughed.

“Didn’t they make us all learn that in school?” she asked honestly.

“Oh, so now you’re insulting me.”

“I’m sorry, did it come across that way to you, Michael?”

And soon the room dissolved into a chorus of bickering in gentle chorus with the humming of the crickets just outside the window.

Finally, Jack caved, “We’re not gonna get to see him do anything if the two of you don’t stop talking for two minutes!”

He only raises his voice in minor disputes like this. Mom can’t find her wedding ring and decides Dad sold it to the pawn shop. Dad dislocates his hip during his sleep and lands on the conclusion that it’s because Mom is a bed hog. Now, Mom remembers the capital of Vermont and Dad believes she’s directly targeting his views on the American education system. These times, Jack plays mediator, referee, and couples therapist all at once with furrowed brows and words like fire.

In the real arguments, the ones where Mom cries and breaks things and Dad drinks and the TV stays at full volume all night, Jack just laughs. And laughs and laughs and laughs. About the time he watched Dad fall through the floor trying to repair a leak in the ceiling. About the time he had to have a branch surgically removed from his hand following an ATV accident. About the time Mom had him convinced that Santa Claus didn’t come to Florida because he was scared of alligators. Most of the stories fell back to Jack. Maybe it’s because they’re the ones that make us laugh the hardest, even if it’s for just a moment. He doesn’t try to break them up or tell

them to stop for our sake or say anything related to what's actually going on. He isn't brave at all then. I look to him to do something, and that same gap-toothed smile just spreads across his lips. Most times, I laugh along, but a lot of times, it just makes me angry and I'm smart enough to know it shouldn't. All of the anger has to go someplace though.

Now, of course, they listen to him. It's not that serious. They quickly quieted down and we were once more glued to our television set watching Ricky stumble through the next set of rapid-fire trivia. For what it mattered, Mom was right. He didn't know the answers anymore. He got sent home by the end of the evening and we were still discussing our next favorite out of the contestants to root for when the nightly news broadcast began blaring.

"For folks looking for old-fashioned fun this holiday season, be sure to check out the grand opening of The Dolos Resort this weekend! Travel across the world within seconds flat all from the comfort of your summer getaway with authentic replicas of history's finest artifacts, including those from right here in the Sunshine State. Book your expedition now and save thirty-five percent on your first three nights!" The news anchor explained, flashing clips of the new casino in the small box to the right of his head.

The Dolos Resort was the latest hotel operating off the southwest shore of Lake Okeechobee to be acquired by Scott Jackson, a reclusive and more importantly loaded investor from Nevada that the news had been following closely since his arrival. Investor was the word they used most often but the truth is he had been a state senator, army sergeant, engineer, and (allegedly) agalmatophiliac, a word we could've gone our whole adult lives without knowing. It meant someone who, supposedly, had the hots for mannequins, dolls, or other inanimate objects that seemed to resemble a human but weren't one. They aired a whole little special on him one summer afternoon with the title, "What This Misanthropic Mogul Has in Mind for This Side of

the Swampland.” The agalmatophilic part ultimately came down to a scandal involving an unseemly paparazzi photo taken of him transporting some scantily clad wax figures from London on to a private airplane, but the rest was the real deal. He was a bigshot tired of being big in a place where a lot of people were big and wanted to be big in a place where everyone else was smaller in comparison. That place being here.

Unfortunately for our family and the rest of the owners of the hotels in southern Florida, what he brought down to our side of the swampland was a plan to pave over all of the paths these people had spent years carving out of nothing but mosquito-infested wetland. Not only did he endorse the special aired on him, even with its speculation on his sex life, but he used it as an opportunity to air all of his grievances with the way the current hotels were being operated.

“I’m excited to get my hands dirty and get into bringing this community what it really needs,” he had said to the interviewer with a smile that showed off all of his big white teeth. “I think we’ve been allowing ourselves to be comfortable with, what I really believe to be, mediocrity. We’re content because it’s what we’re used to. But profit lies in disturbing what we’re comfortable with, doesn’t it?”

The words didn’t mean much to us at the time, so ultimately no one reacted. We all figured he’d open up a hotel in the empty spot at the end of the strip, most likely just another reiteration of one of his successful Las Vegas projects, and call it a day. Having his name attached to it alone was enough to draw a crowd in the first place. I think the casino owners’ lack of reaction somehow angered him. Granted, I can’t say for sure what kind of response would have pleased him, but having a bunch of self-made, self-righteous Floridians act indifferent toward his thinly veiled threats certainly didn’t seem to. It wasn’t long until The Panther became a roadblock in his path to success.

To get the full picture of the situation, there's something I should say about the way The Panther operates. To put it simply, when I was thirteen, The Panther caught fire and almost burnt the bottom half of my mother's face off. There's more to the story, of course, of how it seemed like it started due to a haphazardly tossed lit cigarette, or how it could actually be traced back to faulty wiring in the ceiling, or how the Clewiston Volunteer Fire Department arrived in waders having been pulled straight from their annual waterfowl hunting trip, but that's essentially the gist of it. One day, my mother had her whole face and the next, she very nearly had half. The flames licked at her jaw and her chin and her lips until there was nothing more than a flap of charred skin still fluttering over her two rows of pearly-white teeth. For the first few days, it seemed as if all the king's firemen and all the king's doctors couldn't put her back together again. Fortunately, by some miracle, they did. But, from then on, everything was all apart.

When I say everything, I mean the world as we knew it. Apart from smoke inhalation and minor burns, no guests were injured as a result of the fire that overtook the hotel theater where my mother performed twice a week, even as the ceiling came crashing in, sparking wires ignited into sickeningly bright blazes, and sprinklers coated the tiled floor to a nearly perfect slip and slide. My mother would have likely been fine too, if it wasn't for me. I had reached past her to grab my bag as she was getting ready in her dressing room that evening and accidentally knocked her wine glass over, sending deep-red Merlot stains down her chest and cream-colored ball gown. A dress worth more than most of the people that worked at the hotel would make in a year, as she often reminded me. It was my fault she had to switch into that pure white tarlatan dress instead, with the cinched corset bodice and puffy skirt that ended just around her calves. I hadn't known that, in the midst of the confusion and chaos of fleeing off stage as the alarm system had begun to blare, that the antique gaslight that would usually give the illusion that she

was glowing as she soared across the stage would transform her body into a column of fire as she knocked against it. With its bell-like shape, the dress was a funnel of heat and light with her body at the center in a Mom-shaped inferno. It took several months of recovery before she returned back to resembling someone I could call my mother and it was all because of me.

She never said she blamed me, but she didn't have to. I could see it in her eyes, cold and muddy brown and unblinking from that hospital bed beneath layer after layer of bandage. How she cooed for her baby boy moments before and said nothing of me, her fractured mirror, long-legged, acne-covered, and whole-face having. Things were different after that. Not just between us. The damage to The Panther's interior was minimal in comparison to the damage to its reputation. No guests seemingly wanted to be seen in a casino where a woman had suffered such a traumatic injury and especially not at one where said woman had been one of the main entertainment acts for the past twenty years. There were news stories, hushed conversations with investors and the bank behind closed and locked doors, arguments in hospital rooms, and delivery after delivery of flowers to the casino's front desk until the awful plan was hatched. You could see it brewing beneath my father's clenched jaw, holding my mother's hand as he sat on the bed with her and easing the straw from the water glass to what was left of her lips. A certain darkness in the way he brushed back her slick black hair, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead in impossibly slow motion. The show must go on.

The Panther was set to remodel. A complete overhaul of the current layout, complete with a safety panel with the fire department, building inspectors, and the mayor to strengthen any and all preventative measures against accidents like that. My father said it himself that it was mostly for show – a way to demonstrate to the media that, after a brief period of remodeling following the fire and a bit of updates to bring the building up to code, The Panther was once more a safe

haven for anyone ready to break out of the monotony of their everyday life. That the fire wasn't a reason you should avoid going to the hotel, but the very reason you should.

This is where the so-called solution to the problem laid. What my father noticed in that eighth month period in which my mother was laid up in a hospital bed nursing injuries some might have never recovered from was that people actually weren't as frightened about the fire or the injury as the news might have led him to believe. In fact, there was an overwhelming sense of somewhat morbid curiosity. People were disappointed upon realizing that the wreckage from the ceiling bursting through that night had been swept up and strangely dissatisfied upon realizing that my mother wouldn't be making an appearance in the theater that evening to catch a glance of her face. They didn't really want the issue to be swept under the rug and neatly cleaned up as if it never happened. Instead, they gossiped wildly with those who had been lucky enough to be there that evening. How did it feel, they would ask, to be pressed together like sardines trying to escape from the double doors of the theater entrance as the smoke poured in? Like it was some attraction, some feature of the hotel, that they were sad to have missed out on viewing. And so, the awful plan hatched.

What if we gave them what we wanted? If we allowed them, somehow, to be transported back to the night of the fire and see and feel with their own eyes what it was like to be enveloped in that moment of terror. While we couldn't set the place ablaze, so to speak, we could certainly get some artificial smoke, some sprinkler action, and alarm sounds. And, as for my mother, well, she could do what she always did. She could perform. These guests were coming to be a part of history, to see the burned woman as she been on that night, at once beautiful and terrifying. She would sing as she had once had, throwing in the occasional moan or scream as the simulated fire lapped at the stage. It didn't matter that her face had actually healed quite well in the long run,

either. She could simply wear a mask that depicted what she had looked like in those dangerous few months she spent on her death bed. In my ignorance, I thought such a terrifying idea would never really come to fruition, and, like always, I was proven to be wrong.

For, since its remodeling, The Panther was now comprised of a newly renovated main lobby and reception area, private hotel suites, a gift shop, a restaurant, a card room, a main gambling area and bar. The only area left largely untouched was the original theater where my mother had traditionally performed every other night in between a rotating assortment of acrobats, fire eaters, hula hoop artists, magicians, and a host of other entertainment acts. We paid special care to maintain no consistent act apart from her. Per its original design, the theater had a tiered floorplan so that every guest, of which we could seat a couple hundred comfortably, had an unobstructed view of the open, semi-circular stage adorned with rows of stage lights and deep red curtains that had to be lifted with a mechanical cable system. At showtime, the curtains were raised from the bottom of the stage, gathering upon themselves as they opened, with each of the center lines of the fabric being pulled at different times and framing the performer's figure in the center of the gigantic, scalloped curtain.

Although my mother wasn't ever hoisted into the air like the deep red curtains, I always thought it looked as she was floating when she sang, dancing across the stage in her vintage 1850s bell-shaped gowns with her feet never touching the ground. Her voice before the accident was something to be admired and she sang strictly jazz. New set list every week, rotated based on whether or not a conference or something was in town that she could cater her music selection toward. She sang in chest voice, as she'd often tell me, which just meant that she sang as if she was speaking. She didn't need to lower or raise her voice from her current range. When she sang high enough, she began to sound like a trumpet—amplifying her sorrows through the dark air of

that hotel. One of my favorite parts about her voice was that always sounded as if she was playing with the notes, varying the pitch as if she was playing an instrument rather than singing.

Since the remodeling, a duplicate false ceiling had been added over the original, repaired ceiling that could swing out and break through each evening to mimic how the ceiling had collapsed on the night of the fire, with an accompanying specialized sprinkler system and smoke machines to mirror the wet haziness with which guests had to push through to escape. Over the surrounding sound system, a track had been added to play that consisted of fire alarm sounds, sirens, and additional footsteps to mimic the feeling that a larger crowd was present. All in preparation for the new routine that was to commence. For now, every other evening in which my mother's performance would normally take place, guests would crowd on top of one another into the theater to witness the Great Fire of The Panther.

Things would at first appear as if they were to continue as usual. The curtains would raise, and my mother would appear in her spotlight in a glittering replica of the gown she had been wearing that evening, and the crowd would immediately hush at the sight of her masked face, no matter how many times they had seen it in passing or in the newspapers from the day she came home from the hospital. A beat passed. She'd open her mouth as if to sing but no real words would escape. Only tortured moans against the swaying backtrack in a discordant awful melody that began to get louder and louder until eventually the false ceiling would come crashing through, the lights would flash to imitate snapped electrical wiring, the alarms would sound, and the sprinklers would begin to go off, drenching any guests seated in the designated splash zone in the first few rows. By the time the last puffs of smoke came pooling out of the well-hidden machines on opposite sides of the theater, all of the guests had done a job well-done of playing the role of the frightened onlookers that scurried to safety out of the double doors,

through the hallway, and straight into the giftshop. Just one of many architecture decisions my father was deeply proud of.

In the giftshop, you could buy a variety of relics from the night of the incident. Buckets of one-dollar, five-dollar, and twenty-five-dollar Panther chips recovered from the casino floor, melted, broken, soot-covered, or otherwise damaged from the fire. The more damaged it appeared, the higher the price. Little tins of ashes and rubble for children that came with a small hand shovel they could use to sift through for buried treasure in the form of miniature panther figurines. Pendants for the women with shattered pieces of the lobby chandelier inside the locket. Copies of The Clewiston News, The Florida Times-Union, Orlando Sentinel, St. Petersburg Times, and the Tampa Tribune from the following day with headlines like “PANTHER BURNS” and “PANTHER HOTEL RAVAGED BY FLAMES.” Jack and I joked that the smaller the newspaper, the worse the headline got. The big ones already snatch up the obvious way of saying that the place caught ablaze, so they started to have to get more creative with headlines like “EVERGLADES HOTEL LIGHTS UP THE DARK SWAMP NIGHT.” It started to sound less and less like they were describing a tragedy and more like a circus routine. And now, it was, with each and every guest of the show as a performer. It was for that reason alone that I can admit, albeit selfishly, that it felt somewhat good when Scott Jackson started to turn the press against us for this.

“Can you believe this crap, Deb?” My father had asked a couple mornings after we first saw Scott on television, tossing down his morning paper on the table in front of her. “The nerve of this fucking guy. It’s bad enough he’s hogging a significant portion of our tourist crowd with that new trap of his and now he feels the need to drag us through the mud!”

I watched my mother's dark eyes comb over the article from where I sat across the table with Jack whose reddened ears had pricked up at the possibility of an argument. I wanted to knee him in the groin right there and then.

"If this corner of the swampland is intended to be synonymous with luxury and splendor," my mother read out slowly, squinting slightly to read the small text without her glasses. "Then why are we allowing something that reeks of cheap, imitation entertainment stink up the place as it has? Surely, this will only attract vultures and similar vermin to the site of what could be paradise."

"Ha!" My father bellowed loudly. "Imitation entertainment. The man parading his goddamn dolls across the country wants to tell me about what's fake."

My mother set the newspaper back down in the resigned kind of way she always did that signaled she agreed but was willing to let him continue on his personal rampage for as long as he needed. Always so accommodating.

"What we're doing here is real. We're gifting people with a very unique opportunity, you know," he said now, gesturing toward his children as if we were somehow also responsible for the creation of the newspaper article. "We're giving them the chance to experience history in the way it was originally made that night, as we remember it. Sure, the man's got his pyramids and coliseums back in Vegas, but what does he truly know without having lived through it? The most he could tell us about for certain is what the inside of his private jet looks like." Suddenly, he paused, "Goddammit, Jack, are you even listening to me?"

I knew the answer before Jack's fork, still wedged into a bite of warm chocolate chip pancake, clattered to the floor with an awful metal ding.

“Uh, no, sorry,” he said sheepishly, avoiding Dad’s eyes as he often did when he knew he was about to get torn a new one. “I just figured it didn’t really have much to do with me, you know?”

If anyone had been keeping a tally of famous words last spoken, I would have liked to mark those down in that moment.

“Nothing to do with you? Everything that I’ve worked for, spent my whole life building, that will be yours someday is being jeopardized right before our very eyes and you can’t think of one reason it might have something to do with you?”

It’s a weird thing my dad does, where he’s screaming but it comes out calmly, like he’s underwater or trapped in a block of ice.

Mom stood up to make space between them like she could see Dad’s hand grasping for his throat long before it ever snaked its way around her head and across the table at my brother who was stumbling backwards out of his chair with a loud clattering sound.

“Come on, Michael. You know he didn’t mean it like that,” she cooed.

What other way is there for that statement to mean, I wondered silently. I could have continued to eat at this point, blissfully unaware, and no one would have noticed. I wasn’t in the conversation or, metaphorically, seated at the table where a conversation like this takes place. There was no worry that I may not be concerned with what goes on at the hotel because I truly was the person it had nothing to do with. But I couldn’t abandon my brother who was, at this point, moments away from getting the shit beat out of him, so I swallowed my last bite and stood up from my own seat at the table, putting on the best expression of strength I could manage.

I could hear heavy rain beating at the door now. The interesting thing about our portion of the swamp and Florida in general is that we are always at war with water while masquerading we

are peace with it. There's always too much or too little, depending on whether we are in a dry or wet season as of the moment. It's comical, at the most basic level, to think about how time and time again the rain would come with vengeance, flooding any land businessmen unfamiliar with the land had supposedly drained and reclaimed from the swamp. I thought of our own little patch of dry land with its bustling highway and luxurious resorts perched on what was once several feet below sea level. How soon would Mother Nature decide she wanted it back within her grasp and all of this would cease to matter?

"That guy's just trying to get under your skin, Dad," I said, carrying my empty plate into the kitchen without so much as another look at the scene unfolding before me in the dining room. "If you really want to get back at him, you'd double down on making this place more successful than his new-age bullshit could ever be."

See, my brain says, against my best wishes. You can understand the family business. You could run circles around Jack if anyone ever gave you the opportunity. You can navigate the delicate balance between too much and too little water, like the alligators that dig down when they can't reach any, bulldozing through dry soil and sawgrass to form little ponds of their own. You can be like those scaly creatures who, in the dry season when hunting is slim, make their own bodies of water that become a living buffet of all of the fish and birds and other small prey who seek out the sanctuary they've created. You can make a space for yourself, even when there isn't one.

My dad went silent for a moment where he stood, being restrained both physically and mentally by my mother with his piercing green eyes tracking up and down Jack's body as if surveying the quality of his future successor.

"I want you to go and scope this out for me," he said flatly to Jack.

One thing about my father is that he would frequently dole out these types of demands to my brother in pursuit of preparing him to take over the family business one day, some more ridiculous than others but all of them ultimately unnecessary. The more Jack protested, the more ludicrous they became. Go flirt with this reporter and get us a segment on the evening news tomorrow. Go match paint samples for the lobby with photographs cut out from a book on Italian architecture. Go time the minutes it takes for a waiter to travel from the theater to the card room and back. Go stand on the side of the road spinning a sign in this mascot costume. Go organize all of the backstock of poker chips by color. And so on.

At the latest request on the lengthy list, Jack blinked, chest still steadily rising at a quickened pace from having been lunged at seconds prior.

“He’ll know what I’m doing there,” he protested, knowing full well it wouldn’t matter what he said but fighting anyway because it was what he did best. “He hates your guts. I don’t think he’ll take too kindly to one of the ‘swamp children’ poking around for intel at his classy establishment.”

“Jack, am I an idiot?” My father asked.

Jack went silent for a moment, as if pondering the question. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “No, you’re not,” he said.

“Then, why are you talking to me like I’m one?”

The room went silent then, apart from the gentle humming of the insects and steady rain just outside the door.

Jack shifted from one foot to another. “Carrie comes with me,” he said, “I’m not going alone.”

I pretended not to hear him. The plate I was actively scrubbing in the sink suddenly became a thing of great interest to me. I longed to be one of the scraps of pancake sliding off its surface and into the dark depths of the garbage disposal.

“Fine,” my father relented, “but I don’t want any word that she kept you distracted from what I’m asking you to do. No ‘Carrie whined that she was getting wet, so I had no choice but to head home for the day, Dad.’”

The incident he was referring to was back when we were both young kids and our father had sent us out to run a small roadside stand just off the highway selling bracelets, dolls, bows and arrows, headdresses, and other handmade souvenirs from “a local Indian village” to tourists passing through. Excluding the fact that the local Indian village in question was actually just one woman and her son that our dad had befriended back before the liquid of the swampland ever turned to gold instead of muddy water or that the price of said souvenirs depended entirely on the make and model of the car you were driving, we ran an honest business for most of the day until the wind began to pick up and our signs started to tumble across the throughway. By that point, we’d been at it for hours already, my feet were cramping, and Jack had this awful heat rash spreading across the back of his neck that made him look like a tourist. Then, the lightning strikes began, and Jack was petrified of lightning.

In those days, even the slightest glimpse of those familiar stark-white veins marbling the darkened sky could make him want to scramble beneath his twin bed with his eyes closed and his hands over his ears – a sight I was perhaps too familiar with at times. Dad abhorred this feature of my brother’s growing personality to the point he once made him stand out in a lightning storm in nothing but his boxers after one fateful argument in some sort of double exposure therapy meant to simultaneously cure him of his self-consciousness about his gangly, adolescent frame

and his fear of lightning. Neither objective was achieved, of course, but Jack got a hell of a lot better at faking it. Around me, he didn't have to though and, on that day, I could watch in real-time as his stomach sank to his equally blistered feet at the sight of lightning striking somewhere not too far off in the distance. I counted aloud beneath my breath for the 30/30 rule. Lightning wasn't close enough to harm so long as you can get up to 30 seconds before you hear the thunder, or so the age-old rule puts forth. I didn't even make it to five before the thunder came, rumbling the ground so ferociously with its low roar that a few of our headdresses and moccasins tumbled off our wooden stand and on to the damp earth below. We ran like hell.

I was the one who told Jack he could lie and say it was me who wanted, no, demanded to leave. I was the one who told him to insist that I wailed until his ears hurt about how I was getting wet or whined that my feet hurt or cried about how I was sick of doing this and what a terrible brother he would be if he didn't take me home this instant. All of which could be true. I was the one who promised it would be okay and yet still winced at the sound of the words leaving his mouth when we came home drenched and trembling. *Carrie's fault*. What at the time had made me feel shock and humiliation at Jack's willingness to sacrifice me and my parents' willingness to believe it without question would gradually morph into what could only be described as vindication of what I already knew to be true. I was better off being terrible, disagreeable, unladylike, and any other combination of grotesque adjectives my young mind could conjure. The one to blame when things went wrong.

"You have my word," Jack said back to Dad. "I won't let her flake on me this time."

Florida has always been a land of illusion, as demonstrated in the types of people it attracts and the outlandish fantasies they come in pursuit of. Since the very beginning, the image on the map of its wide peninsula with its jagged edges jutting out between the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean was enough to conjure up a shimmering mirage of mystery, riches, and glory. From dazzling springs believed to restore your youth to large deposits of gold rumored to be tucked just under the hard, fine sand of the eastern beaches, there has never been a shortage of delusions to ensnare the minds of eager adventurers with fire in their eyes. And the first of many lies begins with none other than the Spaniard responsible for leading the first known, successful expedition to the coast of Florida – Juan Ponce de León – albeit, not entirely of his own fault. Ponce de León arrived in Florida, according to more recent maps based off his voyage, somewhere along the coast of modern-day Cape Canaveral back in 1513, just a few days after Easter Sunday. He named the land he had discovered, fully under the impression that it was an island at this stage in time, La Florida in honor of Pascua Florida, quite literally translated as “flowering Easter.” We could pin the blame on him here first and foremost as the endless expanse of sand and sinewy beach grasses he came across would almost certainly never be described as ‘flowering’ in any sense of the word, but we’ll save our judgement for a different moment.

He came, as the vast majority of explorers in this time often did, in search of slaves and gold in this brave new world and found neither. Instead, he was met with hostile Indians that wounded his men with spears tipped with sharp shells and pushed them further south to a line of rocky islands and inlets they dubbed Los Martires, or ‘the martyrs.’ From here, they continued sailing, got attacked again by Indians who promised they would be willing to trade (they weren’t), soon realized this was a lie, and, after nine days, resolved to return home without

having accomplished either of the objectives Ponce de León sought out to achieve. It would be years before he would try his hand at a second attempt.

It's important to mention that, at this point in time (roughly 1521 to be precise), the Indians in Florida were on high alert, having fended off a number of other ships in the previous years filled with slavers that had been more than successful in the Bahamas in terms of capturing slaves. With enthusiasm in his heart and two ships, two hundred men, and a hefty arsenal of weapons at his side, Ponce de León likely thought he was more than prepared to handle any Indians that stood in the way of his conquest the second time around. Yet, as soon as the Spaniards began to trample forward onto the coarse sand of the shoreline, they were met with the hissing sound of arrows being shot out from somewhere deep within the shadows of the mangrove trees. The men drew their swords and likely prayed as they marched forward along the beach, but it didn't matter. One of the arrows had already punctured a joint in Ponce de León's armor, spilling scarlet blood onto the glittering white sand. His men retreated in their boats and brought him onshore in Havana only for him to pass away a few days later. Some believe the arrow that fatally wounded him was dipped in the milky sap of the manchineel tree, an incredibly toxic, round-crowned tree found in Florida known to cause burn-like blisters and inflammation when it meets the skin; however, this has never been confirmed. It just sounds better on paper.

The point is, in the bluntest of terms, he died without ever accomplishing his goal of creating the first large-scale Spanish colony in Florida. This, however, is not the story that gets told, even in Florida classrooms to this day, and certainly not the one my father taught me. The more fantastic story was the one imagined by these forgotten figures: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, and Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, in that order. We'll begin with Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, a Spanish historian who, 14

years after Ponce de León's death, published the first 15 books of his eventual 50-book manuscript entitled *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, which was intended to be a comprehensive chronicle of the discovery and conquest of the West Indies. More importantly, it is within this account that Oviedo makes the first reference linking Ponce de León to what would later be known as the Fountain of Youth, claiming that Ponce de León, upon hearing about it from the Indians, set off on a futile hunt for a magical spring that could preserve his youth and cure his sexual impotence. It's unclear exactly why Oviedo made this claim, particularly considering Ponce de León fathered at least four known children in his lifetime, though most historians nowadays chalk it up to the ultimate fairytale style vilification of a man Oviedo viewed as foolish and greedy. Either way, it stuck.

Fast forward forty years later to 1575 and we get a memoir from Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, a thirteen-year-old Spanish boy who had been shipwrecked in Florida and grew up living with the Indians, entitled *Memoria de las Cosas y Costa y Indios de la Florida*. The same boy who, amongst other things, briefly discussed Ponce de León's interest in a Caribbean legend of a mystical river that a man could bathe in to restore his youth. It changes from a spring to a river at this point in the timeline, but the concept is the same.

Then, like the final nail in the coffin, Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, otherwise known as the appointed Chief Historian of the Indies, went on to pen a detailed account of Ponce de León's voyage another couple of decades later in 1601, paying close attention to mention the fact that Ponce de León knew of the 'wealth' of this island, particularly of a fountain discussed by the Indians that could turn old men into boys again. So now, despite a lack of any evidence in the writing, contracts, maps, or letters from Ponce de León himself to indicate that he ever knew about, nonetheless expressed a fervent interest in seeking, a fountain of youth of any kind,

you've got this fantastic story that began purely as a lie suddenly twisted into the very fabric of the founding narrative of the state.

In modern-day Florida, this fantastic myth manifests in the form of a privately owned 15-acre park situated along Hospital Creek in St. Augustine, rightfully named The Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park. Among other attractions like a living reconstruction of a Timucua Indian village complete with palm-thatched huts and white men donned with feathered headdresses, the park boasts an unassuming shallow well situated in an open stone building that one can only determine to be the Fountain of Youth in question based on the clay plaque and wax figures of an unnamed Indian and Ponce De León himself precariously positioned on the platform above it. The well or 'fountain' is concealed by a mantel of man-made bricks so that the only thing you can really make out is the steady drip, drip, drip of water trailing down from an unknown source into a hole below, covered by a rusty metal grate.

Visitors are encouraged, after paying the \$20.00 admission charge, of course, to grab one of the plastic cups provided and drink to their heart's content. The funny part is that the water itself both smells and tastes god awful, like a burning match mixed with a rotten egg slowly cooking in the heat of that Florida sunshine. It's due to the concentration of hydrogen sulfide in the water. Either way, the whole of the attraction doesn't leave a great taste in your mouth, literally or metaphorically. Tourists eat it up though. You can buy bottles of the stuff in the giftshop in everything from wine bottles sealed with cork to plastic containers the size of shot glasses and guests frequently leave with bags full of it. There's something perhaps a little endearing about visiting, clambering past throngs of sunburnt children piling out of minivans with license plates from every northern state imaginable to grasp hold of one of the plastic cups

in your sweaty hand and drink water that isn't healing from a well that isn't a spring at a park that wasn't where Ponce De León settled.

That's the spirit of Florida for you – the only place where the charlatans and their victims are cut from the same piece of cloth. You'll never learn about Ponce de León's violent death or any sort of indication that the Spanish had found anything but an undisturbed, uninhabited Garden of Eden when they arrived upon those bright shores unless, of course, it's a leadup to a twisted narrative about how the feast between the Timucua tribe and the Spaniards was actually the first Thanksgiving – not whatever business went down at Plymouth about 56 years after. But you'll always, always learn about the fountain, even despite the continuous attempts to debunk it over the years. The reason behind it is far simpler than we'd like to admit. Florida is all fine and well with burying its problematic past deep beneath the murky surface of the swamp water – so long as it gets to fish out the parts they can use to make a little money.

Unfortunately, as anyone who's ever lived in Florida knows well, even the stillest of water trapped deep beneath the confines of the twisted mangrove roots is occasionally sucked up by the force of a colossal hurricane, wearing away the sand to reveal anything dark and twisted that may lay beneath it. This part isn't an exaggeration, either. Just mid-November of 2022, Hurricane Nicole ripped up Southern Florida's coastline, unearthing the skeletal remains of six individuals on Chastain Beach after a period of high surf and heavy erosion. It's nowhere near the first instance of something like this occurring as both Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and Hurricane Dorian in 2019 are credited with unearthing ancestral remains of a similar nature. The worst part of it all? The remains uncovered by Hurricane Sandy were from a historic Miccosukee Tribe burial ground – the very same remains as they had buried following their previous unearthing during Hurricane Frances in 2004. Our bodies, quite literally, won't stay buried.

Back then, I was thinking about bodies as Jack and I made our way over to The Dolos Resort to scope out what all the fuss was about because the casino had been built atop the site of an Indian village, just as The Panther had been. The only difference was that, while The Panther had kept a large number of the skulls to use on display in the giftshop, the original owners of the building The Dolos Resort now occupied had opted to dispose the bones they raked up in everything from muddier sections of the rivers to nearby sinkholes. They erased all evidence that their shiny, stucco building on smooth, imported soil had ever been tainted by the history of bloodshed that haunted us all. Looking back on it now, it was hard to determine which was the worse decision, even then – fabricating a fantastical version of reality or simply refusing to acknowledge it, as both seemed to do an actually good job of suppressing what no one wanted to accept.

“You know it’s pretty shitty that we have to be the ones to do this,” I tried to make conversation with Jack, digging the tips of my tennis shoes into the moist Florida soil as we walked. I could tell he was in a bad mood and so was I, although I wasn’t entirely sure why.

“Why’s that?” Jack asked with a scowl. “You got something better to be doing? Gotta get back to filling up the last corner of your room with another advertisement for a vacuum cleaner?”

For context, my room had been the subject of many a heated family argument since around the time I turned ten. I was, as Jack would put it, a hoarder of fantasies. Trimmed stories from the newspaper of events going on in states I didn’t live in, clipped and highlighted snippets from magazines about fun, affordable summer activities to do with the friends I didn’t have, and,

most recently, cut and pasted photographs from mail order catalogs of products I didn't have a need for. The longer my habit continued, the sillier the products became, from an electric guitar all the way to a pre-assembled hot tub. It wasn't all my fault it wasn't relevant to my life. They didn't exactly make products geared toward teenagers living in a casino surrounded by swampland on all sides, but I was at least partially to blame. What Jack or any of the rest of my family didn't understand is that I already knew who I was. It was just nice to indulge in who these things imagined I could be. Somewhere else, somewhen else. In other words, his comment hurt. Even more coming from him.

When I didn't answer, he prodded further, "You're mad because it's true."

"And you?" I asked.

"What?"

"Why are you mad?"

"I didn't say that I was," he said, kicking up gravel from the street.

"You are though. You're gritting your teeth."

It was silent then. He always grit his teeth when he was angry. Even the blackjack customers knew that by now. We continued our walk through the trees toward the back of the casino.

"Every year, it's something different, Carrie. The Key Casino has an automatic light system, don't we think we ought to get one? No, now, Lady Luck has live snakes! Surely, we can find room for a snake pit at the back of house, don't you think? And now, it's this and you're still cutting out photos of vacuum cleaners."

I'll admit I didn't get it. My silence must have alluded him to this fact.

"Never mind. Just forget about it," he said.

And so, we trudged along until eventually we made it inside the front entrance of The Dolos Resort only to find that it didn't look anything like the advertisements we had seen on the same television slot every night. To be exact, despite the outside renovations that included a new, bright neon sign, expanded parking garage, and complete overhaul of the present building, the interior we stepped inside looked identical to the way it was when it was run by the previous set of owners. My shoulders sank in mild frustration as we made our way through the maze of roulette tables and slot machines, searching for anything familiar to the grandeur we had seen displayed on the late-night commercials – only to come up with nothing.

“What gives?” I asked Jack.

“This isn't the casino,” Jack said bluntly, putting out the cigarette he'd been smoking on top of one of the slot machines with an unfamiliar look in his eyes.

“Huh?”

“Look around. There's that couple with the red umbrella that were taking photos from the fountain and, over by the desk, is that man in the suit that's staying on the third floor of our hotel. The one from the business conference?”

Sure enough, my eyes tracked the path he made through the room with his finger. The couple with red umbrella were settling into a blackjack table as the man checked his watch. The businessman in the suit was hanging over the bar, requesting a second glass of the whiskey he had already been barely drinking for the past ten minutes with a dazed look on his face.

“Okay, spotted, but what about them?” I asked.

“Well, the lovebirds aren't staying here. There's a map on the dashboard of their car and a dog carrier in the backseat. They stepped in for a moment because they're running low on gas on their way to Miami and the guy's convinced they can win them enough to get something nice for

dinner tonight,” he said. “And Mr. Business can’t afford it, even if it wasn’t already staying at our casino. The corner of his overpriced wallet’s peeking through the hole in his suit jacket.”

“Right. And what does that have to do with us?”

“Think about it, Carrie. Almost 3,000 people per day according to Dad and we’ve seen about 20 since we got here. None of the people in this room are guests at this casino.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you. But if they’re not here, where else would they be?”

He took another look around, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Well, that’s what we’re gonna figure out.”

In the grand scheme of life, how does God rank certain sins? Does the reasoning behind it matter? If one man kills another because he threatened him and another does the same but simply because he felt like it, are they deserving of the same punishment? If one man steals because he’s needy and couldn’t survive without it and another steals because he feels he is deserving, are they both the same level of thief? If two kids steal a room key for the sake of their family’s business, are they to be held to the same standards as the man who steals a room key for the sake of taking it? Does it matter if they intended to give it back, God-honest truth, once they were done scoping the place out? I can’t say. All I knew is we had it.

We latched on behind another group of tourists in the back parking lot, fresh off the highway from Disney World, still donning their Mickey Mouse Club Member wool caps and souvenir t-shirts. Older college students on some kind of spring break, already drunk on adrenaline by the looks of it, Jack informed me. They were almost oblivious to our presence as we clambered into the guest-only elevator behind them, flashing our room key to the guard posted at the front who scanned it over before closing the doors and sending us shooting sideways into the abyss.

As the elevator surged upwards, we were struck to discover that it didn't feel as if we were moving up or down, but diagonally, as if we were scaling up the side of a building rather than climbing stories through the interior. I felt a wave of nausea pass through me as the bodies of our newfound friends drifted toward the center of the enclosed space, sticky, sweaty, sunburned skin meeting damp, cheap fabric. Although the walls of the elevator were glass, we weren't actually viewing our surroundings of what would traditionally be the dusty, concrete machinery of the elevator shaft. Instead, we were submerged in pitch black darkness until, every twenty seconds or so, a new scene would appear in some type of enclosed display passing by – each an extremely detailed reconstruction of some scene in history, complete with realistic wax figures and recreations of artifacts and scenery. We passed the Egyptians building the pyramids, the Romans hosting gladiator battles at the Colosseum, and so on and so forth until finally the last scene rolled into frame, a group of Seminole Indians perched over the riverbed, aiming their spears and bows and arrows at a panther elevated by an invisible string above the water in leaping position, speared by an arrow through the chest and writhing in pain, mouth open in a scream. I tugged on Jack's sleeve, feeling my own breath suck back inside my chest. There was something in the Seminole's eyes that sent my heart sinking back down the last five stories. I couldn't put a finger on the emotion I was trying to grasp hold of.

“Well, that feels like a bit of a jab at us, doesn't it?” Jack whispered with a slightly alarmed chuckle, eyeing the panther's contorted frame, twisted in agony above the riverbed. I could simply nod in response.

When the elevator finally reached its destination to the real entrance of the casino, we were met with a decision as we stepped out into the depths of the interior of the building. It appeared as if, as indicated by more neon signage, that the casino was divided up into sections

based on the various themes of history, similar to the ones we had passed in the elevator trip on the way up. A brightly colored pyramid pointed to the far right, a colosseum to the far left, a leaning tower on our nearest left, and so on, but the one that, expectedly, caught our interest was the small flashing image of a panther pointing directly ahead.

“I don’t suppose you have any interest in checking out ancient Egypt, do you?” Jack asked wryly.

“I wish,” I huffed.

And with that, we proceeded in the direction of the panther sign, watching each of its pointed white teeth flash in synchronization with the loud music thrumming from somewhere deeper in the casino. As we stepped inside the area that we assumed would be designated as a replica of an Indian village, just based on what we had seen in the elevator alone, we were instead met with what appeared to be a theater. We exchanged a look of immense confusion between ourselves as we rounded the balcony and descended the stairs into the tiered theater looking on to a semi-circular stage presently concealed by deep red, scalloped curtains.

“What the fuck is this?” Jack asked, voicing my thoughts aloud for the both of us.

The problem wasn’t the fact it was a theater, but rather, that it appeared to be a full-scale, 1:1 replica of the theater at The Panther, right down to the tiled floor at the entrance, the scratchy fabric of the seats, and the dusty-looking curtains (despite the fact they were actually cleaned at least once a day). A sickening feeling of dread began to brew in my stomach. Before I could answer Jack, the theater suddenly went dark, the overhead lights shutting off, the stage lights turning on, and the scalloped curtains covering the stage slowly rising to reveal a wax figure of our mother. What’s worse is that, instead of depicting her in the mask she performed in, the wax figure showed her face with much more severe burn injuries than she had ever acquired, with

certain sections of her lips entirely peeling off to reveal bone underneath. Her eyes were permanently stuck in a horrified expression and her mouth was open, in either a scream for help or the start of one of her familiar songs. Music began to ring out throughout the theater.

“Oh, what the hell?” I murmured beneath my breath.

Jack and I could only stand and watch amongst the other guests who had slowly begun to pile in the theater after us as a total reenactment of our casino’s nightly recreation of the fire played out in the space, complete with the crashing of the false ceiling, flashing lights, sound of alarms, sprinkler systems, and fake smoke. The only difference being it was arguably better. More intense, brighter, flashier. The flames burnt hotter, the alarms sounded louder, and, above all else, we could only watch as our mother’s wax figure was slowly engulfed in flames from the bottom of her sparkling gown up, just as she had been on that fateful night. It must have been an optical illusion of some kind as I was at least certain that a wax figure would melt under the heat of a real fire, but it didn’t matter. It looked real enough.

We pushed out of the theater almost as quick as we had entered, sharing a look of confusion and horror at the scene that had just taken place.

“They, I mean, he can’t do that, right? That has to be against some sort of copyright, right?” I sputtered out, wiping smoke from my eyes.

“It’s Scott Jackson,” Jack said grimly. “I think he could have our father’s head on a spike up there and there wouldn’t be a thing we could do about it.”

“It might as well be,” I spat back, frustrated at his lack of concern over any of this. “That’s our mom up there, you know? Or, at least, a wax version of her. What right does he have? You can’t just steal someone’s identity like that.”

“He’s portraying history, Carrie. You know, the thing Dad always wanted so desperately to be a part of? You can’t stake a claim on that kind of thing,” Jack scoffed, heading back toward the elevator.

“So, that’s just it? We’re leaving?” I asked in disbelief.

“What? You wanna watch it again? Didn’t get a good enough look at our poor mother’s anguished expression the first time?” he asked, “I think I’ve personally gotten my fair share of it for the night.”

“What are we supposed to tell Dad?”

“What do you think?” Jack snapped.

“He’s gonna be pissed.”

“It’d be kind of weird if he wasn’t, wouldn’t it? Now, come on.”

The very last line of the book of Judges in the Old Testament reads, “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In the Bible, of course, this opportunistic, self-interested outlook results in a constant state of chaos and complete disfunction. We see one man sacrifice his daughter as an offering, another incite a mob that brutally rapes a woman until she collapses, and an entirely different man cut up the same woman’s body into twelve pieces to be sent to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, all due to a lack of fixed, moral standard for which they should abide by, or so the book implies anyway. It only makes sense that the book that establishes the rules for how to abide by this strict set of moral standards it establishes within its text would want to emphasize such negative consequences.

However, the quote, when removed from its modern-day uses, is a good way to view the actions of the self-serving, acquisitive individuals who put down roots in Florida to start their lives upon that watery new frontier. Every man was out for himself, which lent itself particularly well to the culture of deception and fraud that pervaded every aspect of Floridian society in the early 20th century.

From cruises to nowhere that would set off from the coast of Florida into international waters so that passengers could legally consume alcohol during Prohibition to real estate rackets that created a speculative boom for waterfront properties that were still very much underwater at the time of their sale, there was no shortage of crooked activities you could try your hand at in the Sunshine State, provided you were willing to operate with the risk that it could all come crashing down upon your head. However, during at least the first half of the 20th century, there was only one game of chance that was sweeping across the peninsula in a way no other get-rich-quick scheme had ever before – bolita.

Bolita, which translates to “little ball” in Cuban-Spanish, was an illegal form of lottery that surged to popularity among the working-class migrant population in Florida when it was brought over from Cuba to Tampa. A prelude to the modern Florida Lotto, bolita involved placing wooden or ivory balls bearing the numbers 1 through 100 into a sack from which one winning number would be pulled. The way it worked was that the sack, which varied in its material from burlap to velvet depending on the part of town you found yourself in, was shaken and tossed into the crowd where it would be passed to a person who would seize one of the balls from within the sack as they grabbed it. With the ball clutched tight in their hand, the sack would be cut from under it, letting the 99 losing numbers fall to the floor. The number of the ball in their hand would be declared the winning number and those who placed bets on the number in

question were paid at a rate of 8 to 1. These bets, starting at 5 cents, could be placed from just about anywhere, from the café to the local grocery store and even in the street, with bolita to be thrown nightly at 9:00 pm.

One of the most interesting things about the game, apart from the elaborate ritual in which it was played, was that there was a whole metaphysical vocabulary that provided different names and meanings for each of the numbers that allowed any event or dream in the gambler's life to be converted into a bet. One of the best examples of this is the numbers one and eight respectively. One is caballo, which literally translates to horse, but more aptly refers to the common moniker of Fidel Castro – El Caballo. Number eight is muerto, which translates to death. Any assassination attempts on Fidel Castro's life, of which we now know there was no fewer than 600, would cause large groups of gamblers to place bets on 1 and 8. Sometimes, incidents produced superstitions like this at such a volume that the banquerors (bankers) would have to eliminate betting on specific numbers entirely in order to maintain the game. It's worth noting that the further you move down the list of the numbers and their meanings, known as La Charada, the more obscure the assigned meanings seemed to become, ranging from médico viejo (old doctor) to mosquito grande (big mosquito) and, finally, inodoro (toilet).

Of course, as you could most likely expect, Florida didn't abide by the rules of even an illegal game. There were many ways a bolitero could rig the game in their favor. Most commonly, they would hollow out the ivory balls and either insert a piece of lead or cork depending on which balls they wanted to make heavier and which balls they wanted to make lighter. Simply have someone planted in the crowd instructed to grab hold of one of the "loaded" bolitas that's heavier than the rest and you're set. More foolishly, you could opt to simply insert duplicate balls that you've painted with the same number and run the risk of an unsuspecting

player noticing one too many of the same ball spilling out on to the floor that night. Finally, and definitely most absurdly, you could put your choice numbers onto ice overnight and entrust your same plant in the crowd to simply grab hold of the coldest one. The options were almost limitless.

The more popular bolita grew and the higher the payouts got, the more and more likely it was that any small, honest operations were forced out of business in favor of larger crime syndicates and these syndicates were increasingly complicated in their system. First, gamblers would place their bets with call-in guys who would then phone those bets to a call-in house, both parties remaining anonymous throughout the process in case the police were to become involved. Then, after a game of bolita was thrown for the night, the call-in houses would provide the betting sheets to the bolita lieutenants who would deliver them to a drop house, with the sheets exchanging hands anywhere from three to ten times before they reached their final destination. The call-in guys provided the money to different lieutenants who would bring the money to a separate drop house in the same way they had brought the sheets to the first house, which prevented the entire system going down if one drop house was to be seized in a police raid.

It wasn't long before the head of the largest bolita operation in Tampa at the time, Charlie Wall, held more sway over the elections through bribery of politicians and a constant influx of immigrants becoming citizens who were more than happy to vote for whoever the bolita boys said was best than any other figure. With Wall supplementing their salaries, the police force was more than happy to ignore the bolita games occurring just under their noses at any given time. The bolita raids, of which there was a number over the years, were largely for a show – a performance not unlike the dramatic cutting of the bolita sack. At one point, rather than seek the bolita rings out for themselves, the police would actually request the bolita boys come down to

the station where the police would demand a small fine, ask what name they would like to be arrested under, and send them on their way. The very next day, another phony headline would appear in the newspaper announcing that a raid had occurred and listing the fake names of all of those who had supposedly been arrested as a result.

This seeming impregnability of the casinos, however, did not stop a few choice journalists from making consistent attempts to expose the rackets occurring beneath the surface of these bolita joints. Eventually, the continued investigation lead to the creation of the United States Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce – a group of senators that banded together to smother illegal gambling on a national level. Just about everyone who was anyone ended up testifying before this committee, from Broward County's Sheriff Clark who openly admitted his involvement in a bolita operation that was worth more than \$750,000 to Mayor of Tampa Curtis Hixon who brazenly stated there was no real issue with payoffs so long as there wasn't any killing involved. As you can probably assume from the gorgeous 8-acre Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park that opened as recently as 2010 in Tampa dedicated to his namesake, these testimonies didn't amount to much more than empty words in floating in that humid Florida air.

When we arrived back at The Panther from our brief excursion to The Dolos Resort, our father was running a game of bolita. He had just dramatically sliced open the bolita sack, sending balls scattering across the tiled floor as we entered the main lobby. My heart was in my throat at this point.

“You’re telling him,” I said to Jack as we approached him.

“Fine, whatever,” he quipped, “have it your way.”

Our father looked up at him with a grin as Jack made his way over, with me following close behind him.

“So, what’s the damage?” He asked Jack, puffing on a thick cigar. “They got hundred-foot alligators shooting lasers out of their mouths? Imported monkeys putting on a tap routine?”

Jack grimaced slightly, most likely wishing either of those were the reality. “No, Dad, listen, it’s...” He trailed off, getting bumped in the shoulder accidentally by one of the casino guests as she leant down in front of him to pick up one of the bolita balls that had rolled across the floor. “Could we maybe talk somewhere private?”

“Jack, I’m not here to hang out. I’m at work,” my father answered sternly, gesturing around the casino as if to demonstrate the amount of work he was conducting at the moment. “You can tell me things related to work while at work. Now, get on with it.”

“Fuck, okay,” he said, pinching the skin between his eyebrows between his fingers in a bit of frustration. “It’s our routine, alright? They’re outdoing the doer, or whatever you want to call it. They, uh, put on their own thing of ours. The fire thing.”

I bit my lip. He was trying to play it off so nonchalant, so unbothered, without ever really conveying the full extent of the situation we had come across in there. For a moment, I thought it might really fool Dad or, at the very least, break the news a bit more gently.

“The hell do you mean our routine? You’re telling me they set their place on fire just like we do?” Dad asks.

“Not just the fire. It’s kind of the whole thing really,” Jack said quietly.

“You’re gonna have to be a bit more fucking clear.”

“It’s everything, alright?” Jack snapped, “It’s all of it. They rebuilt the whole thing, our entire theater in there, Dad. It looks more like the place than ours does. And it’s got-he’s got one of his little dolls dressed up like Mom on stage.”

“Jack, tell me you’re wasting my time here. Tell me you’re not saying that the man who hates our establishment more than anything in the world has created his own version of it.”

“Right, well, I can’t actually do that, because it’s what happened. Or, I guess, is actively still happening,” Jack said, passing a glance in my direction. I raised my eyebrows in sympathy.

“God fucking dammit!” Dad erupted after a moment of silence, earning a variety of alarmed looks from all of the surrounding guests with his outburst. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this, huh? And people went to see that?”

Jack nodded reluctantly. He didn’t need to tell Dad for him to know it was the truth. Business had been steadily declining at our casino for the past month or so, undoubtedly for this exact reason. Our one selling point had been stolen and amplified to a ten.

“This is where it really happened,” Dad laughed bitterly, “I mean, this is where the history was *made*, and he thinks he has a more authentic version of it. It’s funny, isn’t it?”

When Jack didn’t answer, Dad grabbed him by the collar of the shirt.

“I said, is it funny?” He asked again.

Jack faked a laugh, resentment mixed with terror stirring in his brown eyes, “Sure, it’s hilarious. What else do you want me to say? What are supposed to do about any of this?”

My father turned to me now, “You think it’s funny, Carrie?”

I nodded, lying through my teeth, “I do, yeah.”

He released his grip on Jack to stand in front of both of us now, looking at us as if we were some kind of cows to be delivered to the slaughter rather than his own flesh and blood. Perhaps the two were the same in his mind.

“Go get your mother, Carrie,” Dad said coolly, “We’re gonna give them a show they won’t forget.”

I felt like my feet were glued to the spot. I didn’t want to go. I kept thinking I shouldn’t, but my legs moved anyway. There’s not much more to say apart from the fact that I got her. Maybe I had hesitated but then again maybe I hadn’t. For the first time in my life, I had a task that related to the business. I was being directed to do something, not Jack. In a way, I had felt honored to do it, to knock on her dressing room door and tell her that Dad had a different idea for the way the show had ought to go down that night. It started with a simple request anyway. Dad just didn’t want her to wear the mask for tonight. Certainly, I hadn’t known what would occur is what I convince myself nowadays, but that can’t possibly be the truth.

That night, the show went on as usual, except the sprinklers didn’t go off at just the right time as they were intended to. The fire was allowed to burn just a little brighter, guests to be trapped for just a little bit longer, and my mother to sing just a little louder. However, there was always a delicate balance in the timing of the show between the sprinkler systems, the smoke machines, and the false ceiling collapsing. After all, it was something my father and a group of architects much more skilled in the practice had spent months perfecting. It all depended on things going down a very specific way in order to keep the domino effect at play of all the different mechanisms that had to be activated. If even one thing was out of whack, like the night one of the stage lights hadn’t turned on, it was enough to cancel the evening’s performance altogether. I say all of this for you to understand that we all were fully aware of the consequences

of the performance being extended past its usual runtime. There wasn't a single one of us who wasn't.

But we had to be the best. We had something to prove. We were better than the cheap replica. We were the real deal. The only problem was that the flames that steadily licked up the sides of the stage when the sprinklers were forced to keep spraying past their capacity were real and so were the screams of the guests banging on doors that were set to unlock on a timer that had since been overridden. As was the smoke that poured up from the higher levels of the tiered stage and my mother's gown once more catching on fire. In amplifying our fantastic portrayal of a dramatized past, we had in turn created a terrifying reality.

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