

# What I learned in Florida

CARY FAGAN



paperbytes

Copyright © 1999 by Cary Fagan

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system — without written permission from the Publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages for inclusion in a review.

Design: Perkolator {Kommunikation}. Typeset in Minion.

Published by

*paperbytes*

an imprint of *paperplates books*

19 Kenwood Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6C 2R8

[paper@perkolator.com](mailto:paper@perkolator.com)

[www.perkolator.com](http://www.perkolator.com)

## What I learned in Florida

THE FIRST CORPSE I ever saw was of a Shriner in Miami Beach.

We lived on what was then, in the mid-sixties, still a new suburban street in Toronto and in the winter it was very dreary. So at Christmas break we would go, my parents and my two brothers and I, to one of the pseudo-grand hotels in Miami. The hotel seemed so big, with vaulted ceilings and tremendous bowls of exotic blooms everywhere on tables. The humidity gave a damp feeling to the walls, the drapery, so that, despite all efforts of the management, the hotel had an air of decrepitude. I loved that

hotel; roaming its vast corridors was what I looked forward to most. It had its own private beach of cream-coloured sand where we built extraordinarily complicated castles and moat systems and tunnels. We took breaks only to swim, or rather play, in the ocean, diving into the oncoming waves and feeling that tug of the undertow which wanted to keep us down forever. But the hotel also had a pool and at the end of the day we would trudge up from the beach, shriek under the cold shower set into a stucco wall for washing off sand and salt, and then swim again. The pool had a thick glass window in one wall near the bottom; you could swim to it and make faces at people passing inside the hotel. I always had the urge to pull down my swim trunks and dash up again.

Early one morning my brother Lawrence and I got up before everyone else, dressed, and took the elevator down to the coffee shop for breakfast. Lawrence, the middle brother, was an early

riser; I would wake in the morning, open an eye to check if he was still in bed, and either go back to sleep or get up. Mark, the oldest, had an internal clock set to a different time zone and always slept in. From the elevator to the coffee shop was the hallway with the window looking into the pool, always devoid of swimmers at this hour, a gently undulating rectangle that was almost hypnotic to look at. But on this morning there was someone in the window, an adventurous early morning swimmer, and we stopped to watch.

He was holding his breath. At least, he looked like he was holding his breath. The man had on a mask and snorkel and he was hovering near the bottom, his arms and legs hanging beneath him in a relaxed manner, his head tilted slightly down.

Boy, can he hold his breath, my brother said.

We wondered why the snorkel wasn't in his mouth. We supposed he wasn't moving to conserve the oxygen in his body.

We were both thinking: nobody can hold his breath this long.

A flash in the water and then somebody, the lifeguard, was grabbing the man around the waist and hauling him up out of the range of the window. Lawrence and I looked at each other, eyes wide with excitement, before running for the stairs up to the pool.

For many years after I felt an awful and secret guilt which I did not even confide to my brother. We had seen the man, we had stood there, we hadn't told anyone. When he was pulled from the water we'd even felt ourselves privileged witness to some great event. Surely this made us somehow responsible. And that feeling of guilt was already germinating in me as we ran. At the pool we could see the lifeguard kneeling on the deck, water dripping from his sleek body, while the man lay on his back. We approached silently and I saw that the man had a big chest carpeted in curls. He had a big face too, eyes closed, skin bleached and pasty like he'd been in the bath too long, and a lavender tinge to his nose

and ears. The lifeguard was giving him mouth-to-mouth, breathing into the man's parted lips and then turning to watch his chest deflate.

We just stood there watching for two or three minutes until the ambulance men arrived, one carrying a metal box marked by a red cross. I was amazed by their unhurried pace as they crossed the deck and wanted to scream at them to run. When they reached us one of them kneeled down, placed his hands on the man's chest, and pumped hard three times. The man's head tilted to the side. A white fluid seeped from his nostrils and mouth.

The ambulance man stood up. "Well, gentlemen," he said in a grim, matter-of-fact tone, "we tried our best."

While our brother Mark was jealous to have missed a real drowning, our parents were horrified to hear of what we had seen. My father made enquiries and found out that the man was attending a gathering of Shriners at the hotel. A heart attack had

seized him in the pool. According to the hotel clerk there were usually one or two deaths during a large convention. Back in the hotel room my father got on the phone and booked us into another hotel on the same block. He and my mother wanted to separate us from the experience as quickly as possible.

The porter arrived to take our bags down to the lobby. While my mother supervised the loading of the car, I stole away and went back through the hotel, past the underwater window, and up the stairs to the pool. I needed to see again the place where the man had lain. When I reached the deck I simply stood there. Kids were cannonballing off the diving board and being scolded by their parents, grandmothers were doing the backstroke up the length of the pool, mothers were dandling their babies on the steps at the shallow end. Along the bar, men in straw hats read the newspaper or traded jokes in Yiddish. Others slept in the lounge chairs, little black goggles protecting their eyes from the sun and

paperback novels resting on their bellies. None of them knew that a man had died in that very water this morning and that his soulless body had lain on the hard deck.

But I knew — knew that he had died and that others too must have died all around us, wherever we went. In restaurants, barber shops, on street corners, park benches. We could never escape the dead; we lived among them. That was what I thought as I sat in the back seat of the rented car, my brothers fidgeting on either side, my mother already announcing that she had spotted the new hotel.