

Exile

By Stephen Gauer

In the fall of 1972 I packed all my belongings in the trunk of an old Volkswagen and drove south from Toronto to Miami, where I planned to paint houses for the winter and make enough money for university the next fall. I was twenty years old. I thought this plan made sense. I drove the interstates all the way and picked up hitchhikers who said Miami was cool but Miami Beach was cooler.

In Rome, Tennessee, I stayed in a motel called the Arcadian. When I came out of my room after unpacking I saw a ragged line of men, some black, some white, sitting in cheap lawn chairs, fishing from the swimming pool and drinking from brown paper bags. "What kind of fish are in there?" I asked one of these men. "Dunno," he said, with the sly American smile I was seeing on the faces of waitresses and gas station attendants. "I just catch 'em, and then I eat 'em." He spoke very slowly, as though he needed a breath for every word.

Later that evening, after dinner, after the men with fishing poles had left, a beat-up old truck pulled into the motel. The man behind the wheel had messy hair and a face as long and as skinny as a book spine. He waved me over. He asked how much the rooms cost and I told him. I went closer. He looked younger than I was. As he talked, I peered into the cab and saw a woman and two kids asleep beside him. "We're headed west," he said. "Everything we own is in this damn truck. We're headed west, gonna make a fresh start."

Somewhere in northern Georgia I pulled off the road late at night looking for a motel and ended up in a small town by a river, where a

dozen black kids were fishing from a ramshackle bridge, flashlights hanging from the rotting wooden handrails to attract carp and catfish. It was midnight or later. The air was thick and hot; it pressed against me as I got out of the car and stood watching the kids who were fishing. I stared at them like a dumb tourist taking in the scene. They smiled and laughed at each other but ignored me. Insects buzzed around the flashlights. The river was so calm that the flashlight beams formed perfect white circles on the surface. I went down to the edge of the water and put my hand in, and took off my glasses and wet my face. The water felt cool but only for a moment. I got back in the car and drove south.

In South Beach, the bottom end of Miami Beach, I found a hotel six blocks from the beach that was still charging summer rates. South Beach is spruced up and trendy now, but in 1972 rooms were cheap. For fifty bucks a week I had a large room with a fold-out bed, a kitchen and bathroom, wall-to-wall carpeting the colour of dirty chocolate, and cockroaches the size of walnuts. The cockroaches gave me a day's grace and then came out to introduce themselves when I opened one of the kitchen cupboards. They looked at me and scurried away. I wasn't afraid or disgusted. I was living on my own, by myself, for the first time in my life. I unpacked my books and my records and I went out and bought a record player in a very large department store. The woman who took my money smiled and said "Uh huh" when I thanked her. I went home and played some Mozart, very loud, and stared out the dirty window at the tired buildings next to the hotel and the taller, shinier buildings to the north and the long line of high-rise hotels that stretched north along the coast as far as I could see.

I found work easily enough, but the pay was poor. Every day's edition of the *Miami Herald* advertised for skilled painters so I played the

field, quitting jobs on Fridays and starting new ones on Mondays. I worked for bosses who were stock characters from Central Casting: exiled Cubans who wore expensive suits and drove big cars and assembled huge crews to paint mansions filled with the sound of Spanish, Kentucky Baptists who prayed to God every morning at 8 a.m. to bless their businesses and boost their profits, local Miami boys who were high school dropouts with dreams of making it big in the construction world. Miami was the future, they all said, everyone would want to live there.

I worked six days a week. I got up every morning at 6 a.m. to be on the road by 6:30 for the long freeway drive to subdivisions with names like Paradise Estates and Seaview Village and East Flamingo. I played the radio very loud and smoked menthol cigarettes. Some weeks I would drive thirty miles or more, from Miami Beach across the General MacArthur Causeway through downtown Miami and then south, to the outer edges of remote suburbs like Homestead and Sweetwater. The land was very flat, and after passing the city limits I saw mile after mile of scrub bush, red earth and dry riverbed, a distant line of palm trees on the ocean side and a dirty green horizon on the inland side. One morning, just as the sun was rising, I passed a field where a dozen black men were digging ditches by hand. The air was already hot and dusty, because September is still summer in south Florida, and they had their shirts off. They wiped their faces with huge handkerchiefs. Their mouths were moving but I couldn't tell whether they were singing or talking.

The subdivisions, despite their fine names, were usually bleak rows of identical single-storey stucco houses on bare, unsodded lots. The only distinguishing features of the houses were the colours we painted them. There were no trees. Dust covered the road, waiting for

passing trucks, cars and backhoes to bring it to life. The heat smothered everything. To work outside was to embark on an eight- or nine-hour endurance contest with the sun, and the sun always won. I painted quickly, too quickly, trying to stay in the shade as I worked my way around the house, rolling thick layers of latex into the fresh stucco, but always ending up in the sun during the hottest part of the day. The boss would tell me to slow down, but I couldn't. I was used to working for myself: the faster I went, the more money I made every minute I worked. But in Florida, speed was no advantage because the heat of direct sun made fresh paint dry too quickly, producing splits and cracks, so that another coat was needed to cover up the damage, and another coat meant wasted paint. The boss would scowl and shake his head, as though my work habits were incomprehensible.

A month after I arrived in Miami Beach, winter rates went into effect and my rent doubled. The young man who ran the front desk told me this one day when I came home from work. He wasn't much older than I was. He was short and had a soft, round, boneless body. His uncle owned the place and his wife and two kids, whom I rarely saw, lived on the ground floor at the back. "Me, I'll never amount to much," he said to me one night while we drank cold Buds from the grocery store next door, "but my kids, they mean the whole fucking world to me." He knew nothing about Canada. He had never seen snow. He asked me how long I was going to stay. I said I didn't know.

On Sundays, my day off, I walked to the beach. The South Beach pier stretched fifty yards into the Atlantic. I paced it off and wrote the number down. Young couples walked the pier hand in hand, and teenaged boys—some white, some Hispanic—and old Jewish men stood in small groups on the pier holding fishing rods in their hands and talking

to each other. But you could see that they didn't expect to catch anything, and when they laughed at a joke the poles drooped and almost fell into the water. The immense ocean was blue or grey, depending on the weather. Young kids played in the surf. Older kids spent hours trying to stand up on surfboards. Their parents were tourists staying in one of the tired hotels that lined the beach as far north as you could see.

There were pretty girls on the beach but I was usually too shy to talk to them. I chain-smoked Kools and tried not to stare. They seemed as remote as the moon. One day a girl in a bikini with a perfect tan from her toes to her hairline looked straight at me and smiled and said hi, where are you from? and I told her and we talked about the ocean and surfing. She was from New Jersey and was going back home in a couple of days. She said, Why don't you come back to the motel and meet my friends and we'll do something together. She gave me a time and a room number and the address of the motel. I didn't know what to say, so I said yes. She smiled again, then picked up her towel and walked away. When I showed up at the motel two hours later, I knocked on the door but there was no answer.

In the evening after work, I drank beers from the grocery store and cooked macaroni or spaghetti or heated up cans of stew. I played Joni Mitchell records while I ate. She sang about being on a lonely road and travelling, and looking for a key to set her free. The cockroaches looked up at me from the corners of the baseboard in the kitchen while I ate my home-cooked dinner and drank more Bud. By the end of the album, darkness had fallen and half a six-pack was in my stomach.

The evenings stayed soft and warm into late October. The Lincoln Road mall, a couple of blocks away, separated the shabby neighbourhood of South Beach from the more affluent neighbourhoods

to the north. Stepping into the mall was like rejoining the middle class after an accidental detour amongst the poor. It had a movie house, clean and prosperous, where I went three or four times a week and always on Friday and Saturday nights to watch whatever was playing. I didn't care if it was *Fiddler on the Roof*, with the audience singing along with Tevye, or Clint Eastwood grunting and shooting bad guys in a spaghetti western. I felt happy for two hours, surrounded by strangers who would spill out into the street afterwards and make plans for dinner or drinks. I walked among them for a block or two and pretended I was tagging along. Sometimes I thought up clever comments about the movie we'd all just seen and practised them quickly in my mind with a view to impressing a girl who might catch my eye for just a second in the lobby, or on the sidewalk outside when she would stand in a huddle with her friends trying to decide what to do and where to go after the movie. It would only take one look, just a single look, and I would smile and move closer and at exactly the right time make my clever comment. The girl would laugh if the comment was witty, or nod if it was wise, or just keep smiling, and then she would invite me to join her and I would say yes and my life, at that precise moment, would change forever.

The winter rains started sometime in November. Many mornings I drove to work in a heavy downpour. The air was so humid I couldn't keep the windows clear of condensation. The windshield wipers on the Volkswagen suffered from a strange hyperactive disorder that sometimes caused them to fly off into the street for no reason whatsoever. I always kept a spare pair in the glove compartment. There were fewer outside painting jobs, which I preferred, and more inside work. For six long, exhausting weeks I worked in a new apartment building. I mixed twenty-five-pound bags of dry stipple with water in large drums, and then poured

a gallon of this slop into a hand-held compressed air sprayer, and then held the sprayer above my head as I covered the concrete ceilings in every room of every apartment unit with a white bumpy layer thick enough to hide the cracks and imperfections of the concrete. There were twenty units on each floor and five floors to the building.

This was hideously exhausting work. I don't know what kept me going. The most difficult part was mixing the stipple correctly. Too much water produced a milky concoction that refused to stay on the ceiling and dripped onto the floor and ran down the walls instead; too little water produced a lumpy glue that jammed the machine, forcing me to remove the head of the sprayer from the compression hose and run it under cold water at the tap behind the building to clear the nozzle. The boss showed up for fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes at the end of the day and never smiled or made small talk. He inspected each ceiling carefully, pointing out the imperfections in my work and urging me to work "faster, just a little faster, you know, because I know you can do it." He paid me every day, in cash: four ten-dollar bills that passed from his pocket to my pocket in seconds, as though we were petty criminals evading the eye of a surveillance camera.

The best part of the day was the drive home. I washed my head, my hands and my arms under the cold water faucet behind the building and changed back into my jeans and T-shirt. I lit up a Kool as soon as I started the engine and sat smoking for a few seconds before putting the car into gear. I always felt a little drunk from the exhaustion of the day, my muscles tight and aching, but my mind clear and relaxed, emptied out by a job that required no thinking beyond instructions to my body to ignore the pain and keep going. In the late '60s I had spent four summers doing building trade jobs to make money for trips, drywall and

painting mostly, and I liked the way this work transformed things. At the end of a day of drywalling a new house, I felt I'd put flesh on a frame skeleton of 2x4s, creating rooms where none had existed before. At the end of a day of painting I could look at my work and see the shine of new colour on doors and trim, and the rectangular perfection of freshly painted walls free of dings and scratches and scuff marks.

One Saturday evening late in November I went to a rock concert at a sports arena in Hollywood, one of the dozens of beach towns strung out along the coast north of Miami Beach. As I drove north, the neighbourhoods changed from poor and dirty to rich and clean and then settled back into a mid-level groove of comfortable decline. Most of the late-fall tourists were gone by then and the restaurants and cheap motels and beachside parks in the stretch past Fort Lauderdale were empty and dispirited. I got lost a few times and had to check the map. The man with very long hair who'd sold me the concert ticket the week before had tried to give me directions. "Where are you coming from?" he asked. "Canada," I said proudly. "No," he said, "I mean, where do you live, man? I can't tell you how to get here," and he stabbed the map with his finger, "unless I know where you're coming from."

After I parked the car, I had to pass through an inspection checkpoint where security guards were poking through purses and bags looking for liquor. Inside, night turned to day. I blinked and surrendered to the noise—thousands of people trying to talk to each other above guitar-drenched hard rock pouring out of the banks of speakers on the stage. The band was an hour late. By the time they came on, I'd had several tokes from joints that passed back and forth in front of me. I remember seeing clearly that we were all young and had long hair. I'd never seen so much long hair before, in one place, at one time. I

remember the press of our bodies and a great feeling of heat and sweat, and I remember smelling a thousand smells that seemed alive in the darkness. I remember swaying for hours and feeling every note of the guitar solos enter my ears and collide in the centre of my brain. When the band played a slow blues, the world seemed to stop and I almost panicked for fear it wouldn't start up again. The band had a famous song. They played it at the end of the concert, stretching out the solos to the breaking point, and then with a sudden snap the music stopped and the lights came back on. For a moment I could only blink in the harsh light. My eyes hurt. The floor of the arena was littered with garbage, snacks and candy wrappers, empty bags and burnt matches and bits of paper. Everyone looked older in the light. The air was still thick and heavy but the warmth was gone.

In the parking lot a group of teenagers asked me for a ride back down to Miami Beach, a couple of miles to the south. I said yes and they got into the car. I started the engine and drove out of the parking lot. The skinny kid who sat in front asked for a match and then lit a cigarette and rolled down the window and stuck his arm out, using his hand like an airfoil in the wind, up and down, the same thing I used to do when I was kid. He had short hair and no tan, and he smoked with the cigarette dangling from his lips, a trick I'd tried and never been able to master because the smoke always drifted into my eyes, causing me to blink furiously and then drop the cigarette on the ground. His eyes were narrowed to slits. He removed the cigarette from his mouth.

He said the concert was cool. I agreed. He asked me where I was from.

"Do you mean where I am from originally, or where do I live?" I asked.

"What? I mean where are you from? Where do you live?"

I told him South Beach. He nodded. I asked him how old he was. He said, "Almost sixteen." Then he didn't say anything for a long time. His friends in the back seat had either fallen asleep or passed out. There was a lot of traffic on Highway A1A heading south. I drove very carefully.

"I do heroin, you know," he said suddenly. "Yeah, I do heroin, " he said again. He flicked the butt of his cigarette out the window. "I mean, I sell it, you know? I make a lot of money. I sell it." I didn't know what to say. How could you be a heroin dealer if you were too young to drive? I'd smoked grass and hash, dropped mescaline and LSD, even shot speed, but I'd never met a fifteen-year-old heroin dealer.

I let them out by the side of the road across from a Howard Johnson's and watched them walk away. The kids who'd been in the back seat walked with their arms around each other, as though holding each other up. The kid in the front seat walked apart from them as though he didn't know them, and then for a moment as they passed under a streetlight he made restless, goofy gestures with his arms, amusing himself, looking like a small happy boy on the way to school, and then the three of them moved beyond the street light and disappeared into the Florida night.

One night, when I walking out of the movie theatre in the Lincoln Mall, my heart began to beat furiously and huge, unstoppable waves of fear began to pulse through my body, moving down to my toes and up through the top of my head. For a second or two I felt faint, as though I might fall down on the sidewalk in front of all the people streaming out of the theatre. I didn't fall down. I started walking faster, away from the theatre and away from the people. I stopped and leaned against a building for a moment. I closed my eyes. Loneliness, fear, pain, anxiety

crowded my brain. The future felt hopeless. I had no friends. I was far away from home in a place where I didn't belong. I had no one to touch me, to hold my hand, to kiss my lips. I felt insignificant, reduced to nothingness, stripped of purpose, ignored, utterly alone. I kept walking. I breathed deeply. Back in the apartment, I opened a beer and put a record on. I could barely make out the words but the music, the instruments and warmth of the voice help to calm me. I played the record once, and then played it again. I drank more beer. And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the fear went away. I went to bed. I remember thinking one night, struggling to sleep, that back home there were people who loved me.

The panic attacks usually came over me when I was alone among other people, eating dinner in a restaurant or leaving a movie theatre or wandering through the mall. The attacks were predictable, which made me feel like a character in a horror movie whose impending doom is always signalled by a creepy trickle of notes on the soundtrack. Was I having a nervous breakdown? The attacks always passed, but they had the effect of undermining me, of hollowing out the ground I walked on and making me more nervous in the evening, in the darkness, anywhere there were groups of people. Obviously it was futile for me to stay in Florida because I wasn't making enough money to save anything, but I refused to admit defeat and go home. There is nothing at home, I thought, and there is nothing here but rain, and fear, and cockroaches.

I was so desperate for conversation that I took to loitering in the Lincoln Road bookstore, trying to impress the female sales clerks with my knowledge of Kafka and Joyce and many other dead writers. These young women were slim and blond, and glowed with good health and happiness. They would nod or smile politely, then say "excuse me" as

they moved away to help a paying customer. I assumed they had boyfriends, and proper lives without panic attacks. The manager of the store was an older woman who tolerated my awkward attempts at conversation. When I mentioned the election, she said, "Oh yes I voted for Nixon, but there wasn't really any choice because we couldn't let McGovern in, could we? He's very dangerous." I wasn't sure who she meant by "we" or what she meant by "dangerous." She was Jewish and well dressed and I thought she was very attractive, but I saw a wedding ring on her finger and knew that it would be very embarrassing for both of us if I got up the courage to say, "I know you're married but would you please have dinner with me?" The fantasy of asking this question excited me whenever I walked into the store.

There were Jewish people everywhere in Miami Beach, in the shops on the mall, in the restaurants, bars and hotels along the hotel strip, sitting in big lawn chairs in front of the retirement homes, walking the pier arm-in-arm with their friends, spouses, parents and children. I eavesdropped whenever I could. They were from New York or New Jersey, they had grandchildren, they loved the weather, they hated the weather, Nixon was good for Jewish people, Nixon was bad for Jewish people, thank God for Israel. They wore bright colours and commanded the sidewalk. I loved the brash sound of their accents cutting through the lunchtime roar at Howard Johnson's. "Waitress! Coffee!" they would call out. "Waitress! We need more coffee here!"

The area of South Beach where I lived was the poorest part of Miami Beach and there were no Jewish people there. The whites I met seemed to be mostly hourly wage slaves trying to hang on their jobs until the economy picked up, or rural refugees from the poorer southern states, like Kentucky and Tennessee, trying to climb a rung or two on the

money ladder before they fell off completely. There were few blacks in South Beach. I met a couple of them who lived in my apartment building. Like me, they were single guys, alone and a little desperate. They had mysterious pasts that resisted questioning. They were on their way somewhere else, of course, once they got a little money together, and that just required a little luck. There was much talk about racetracks, horses and greyhounds, bookies and odds and lucky streaks. They talked and I listened. We drank cheap beer in cans, a buck ninety-nine for a six-pack from the store next door, run by an angry-looking guy who counted the change back to you in the old-fashioned way, so if the total was \$8.90, he'd hand you 10 cents, saying "and ten makes nine," and then hand you a dollar: "and one makes ten."

At Christmas I bought a return plane ticket and flew home to Toronto. The immigration official at the airport in Toronto looked at me suspiciously when I said I had nothing to declare and I thought for a moment he would order a drug search because I had long hair and wore a headband to keep it out of my eyes. Even though I was clean, I worried. I worried that a panic attack would disable me before I could get my suitcase and walk through the airport doors and out into the air, but nothing happened. I walked through the glass door into the raw grey cold of winter and stood shivering at the bus stop. The warmth of the bus didn't cheer me up. As we pulled away from the curb I stared through the window down at the muck and slush along the road and felt a terrible weight of sadness and depression. We drove through the grey, overcast city until finally the bus let me off a dozen blocks from my parents' house. It was early evening by then, the weak light gone from the sky and the lights coming on in houses. After the bus let me out, I walked by a school I'd once attended and then up a hill and through a park where I used to

play football. I'd flown a glider there once, launching it high into the sky from the end of a long piece of twine, then watching it slowly circle around and around, until it crashed, with a satisfying thud, into the side of a neighbour's house. The park led to a short path that led to the street where my parents lived. I turned the corner and walked up the street and felt a heavier weight of failure and despair fall onto my shoulders. I looked up and saw the lights, the familiar Christmas wreath on the front door, the same car as always parked in the driveway. My family was in there, waiting for me, my mother and my father and my sister. I took a deep breath, pushed away the panic that was rising inside me, and began once again the long walk home.