

83rd St. Notebook

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Always the palm trees, the plane touching down.
Old Florida, shaded by the huge live oak.
Right away we had to smell the gardenia, taste the kumquat.
We saw the street corner where Uncle Dave died, nineteen.
The appliances immortal, the furniture arranged in 1946.
Did they bring the smell of Illinois with them?
The St. Pete Times, the newspaper bags crocheted into doilies.
The Bible, the daily inspirational booklets, lifetime subscription.
A framed print Dave's insurance money bought — a boy fishing among the palmettos.
Soft-skinned oranges, grapefruit like round bags of juice.
Being shown off to the neighbors — sometimes we had to read aloud.
Once I put a pretty bead in my ear and we went to the doctor.
Every other mishap, my grandpa could fix me up.
"Sodey water" when I ate too much candy.
Splinters out with a big needle or a jackknife.
Puzzles, cards, buck-eyes from the farm.
Washtub I bathed in, till I was brave enough to shower.
Feeling of sharp Florida grass on my tender feet.
Taking the boat out of the shed, to the Bay, through the mangrove knees.
The pier, the huge brown pelicans like flying dinosaurs.
The muddy taste of just-caught sunfish, the spill of their guts.
Grandpa's temper at dinner, his meanness to Grandma.
The unfairness of it a knot in my stomach.
Which remained clenched through the bedtime devotional readings.
The jiggly bed, the knick-knack shelf Grandma found in the chicken coop.
I caught a toad, felt its pee in my hands.
There was another shed full of dead things in formaldehyde.
Also rattles and fangs and discarded skins and bones.
With Grandma's Singer treadle, we sewed laundry bags from bits of cloth.
The only evidence of my mother was two framed photos.
I could never picture her living here.