

# Christmas dreams of the Are-We-There-Yet? State

CHARLES PINNING

Rhode Islanders never go anywhere, and we were no exception. But in 1961, the word came down from Dad on High, and the word was good: "We're driving down to Florida to visit your aunt and uncle for Christmas."

Yaaay! The orange tree in the front yard, the white Cadillac convertible ... the "kidney-shaped" pool! The snapshots were part of our family mythology.

For about 15 seconds, an unreal happiness fell over the house. Then my older brother refused to go, claiming he'd lose his dishy girlfriend. He carried on for days, finally browbeating my parents into submission.

We pulled away from the curb, my brother and grandmother on the front steps waving bye, my mother in tears, and drove straight through because my father was using up a whole week of his annual two weeks of vacation for this trip. My mother had to get out of the car twice to vomit. My father spanked me in New Jersey, Maryland, and twice in Virginia. He blew a gasket when the waitress at a Howard Johnson's in South Carolina didn't know what a sundae was.

"You're kidding!" he croaked. "You don't know what a sundae is?"

"No, sir. Is it good?"

He'd been fantasizing about that sundae for the last 200 miles, and meticulously explained to the waitress how to make one.

In Georgia, we got lost and pulled up a long dirt driveway to a shack with a corrugated tin roof. A bunch of little black children were running around barefoot in the dirt front yard, and while my father asked for directions from a man none of us could understand, I saw a pig hanging



upside down in the side yard, and they were burning the bristles off it.

At last we hit Florida — the "Are We There Yet? State." Who knew the trip could be so long or boring? Just as I was about to fall into a coma, we saw something: smoke.

Smudge pots — those nasty, black metal orbs they used in Rhode Island that burned oil to demark road construction, were being used here to heat the orange groves. Florida was experiencing its worst cold snap in a hundred years.

In the early morning of some morning, we

pulled into the driveway of the ranch house. There was the orange tree in the front yard, and there was the humongous, white Cadillac deVille convertible with the red leather interior, top up. Behind the house would be the kidney-shaped pool.

The sliding doors to the backyard and the pool were steamy and locked. It was 28 degrees out. I wiped the condensation off with my hand so I could see the pool.

"Please don't put your hands on the glass," said my aunt.

"Can I go out and see the pool?"

"You don't want to go out there," she cackled. "It's freezing!"

My aunt was what they used to call a "health nut," and served us fresh squeezed orange juice with the pulp. I told my mother it tasted like it had toenail clippings in it. My aunt stared piteously at me. I told her I wanted to swim in the pool.

She said it was too cold. I threw a fit. I was exhausted. The drive had turned me into a zombie. I wanted that pool. I'd come all the way down here for that pool. And the Cadillac. I wanted to take a ride in the Cadillac with the top down. My aunt said that was impossible: "It's below freezing, Chucky!"

I was from Rhode Island! What was below freezing to me? Just another day.

They didn't have any children to play with. The house smelled like a furniture store. My aunt was talking to my father about investing in aloe cream. Everything was an electric-baseboard-heated nightmare of pastel wall-to-wall carpeting, paper-thin walls, low ceilings, white linoleum and spotlessness.

We drove to Fort Lauderdale Beach in the Cadillac. With the top up. It was so windy the adults stayed in the car while I ran out to the beach. The palm trees were blowing sideways. I threw a handful of sand up in the air and it blasted back into my face.

In the end, they let me swim in the pool. My uncle said, "Let'm go in — maybe he'll finally shut up!"

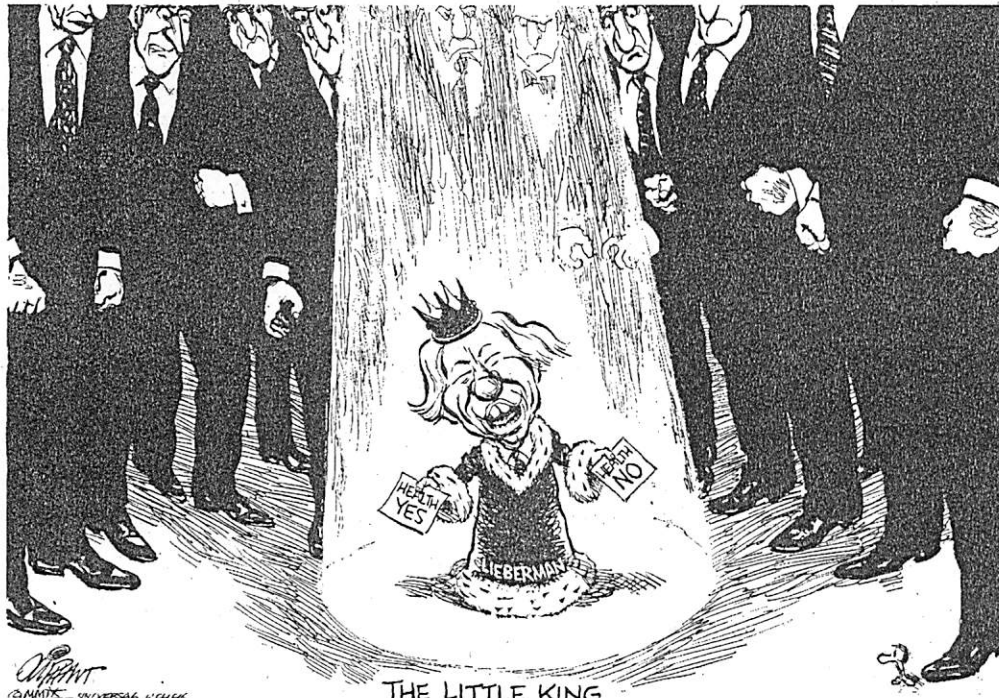
Much as he probably wanted to asphyxiate me himself, my father wasn't going to accept anyone talking that way about me, and asked my uncle if he'd like to "go to Knuckle Junction."

Okey-dokey . . .

The water was 45 degrees, but I laid atop a pink float and willed myself into the Florida of my dreams. Within two minutes my head was about to explode and I was turning blue. My father leaned over and fished me out. Inside, my mother buffed me with a big towel and while I cried, both my nostrils started bleeding.

Two days after arriving, we left. Drove back straight through, of course. At home, we staggered out of the car like castaways off the "The Raft of the Medusa."

Waiting on the porch with a big grin, my brother asked, "How was it?"



THE LITTLE KING.

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