

In Deep

by Dale Lerner

There used to be a large fountain on the south bank of the St. Johns River in downtown Jacksonville, Florida. It had a name, something like Friendly Fountain or Friendship Fountain. I don't know, it was a long time ago, but I remember going there as a child with my parents and watching fireworks shoot up from a barge in the middle of the river. Of course, that was before they built Parker Island between the two bridges, and well before the weather started to change.

I now work in the building that was built where the fountain used to be. My cramped office is on the fourteenth floor. I have a window that overlooks the river and Parker Island. In the summer, when the window isn't glazed over from the intense humidity, I sometimes daydream of taking an afternoon off and hopping a ferry to Parker Island to ride the rides. I especially like the rollercoaster that climbs almost even with my office and then dives straight down into the water. At the last moment, the water opens up and the coaster disappears down into an underwater tunnel. Under the water, the coaster rides along in a clear plastic tube and twists and turns between the steel girders that support the artificial island. It then resurfaces and does a few rolling loops over the water before returning to the island.

I couldn't get enough of that ride one summer while I was in college. Me and a college buddy thought it was the most incredible and innovative thing ever erected. But now, the coaster and island look dated—its futuristic spires and Disney-like castle appear faded and cheap. The ambitious amusement island that was once touted as a tourist attraction had gradually turned into nothing more than a local carnival and eyesore.

Blizzard season is upon us now, so it's not much of an eyesore at present. I can barely make out the shape of the island through the relentless snowfall. It looks like a giant iceberg stuck in the midst of an unruly sea. Beyond the island, on the north bank, I can faintly see the neon outlines of the buildings along the river, but even with the intense snow and low clouds I can clearly see the ominous Wyman Building. I read somewhere it had fifty green spotlights pointing at it from around its base and from other buildings, and another hundred red lights inside select windows.

Some said Frank Wyman built the pyramid-shaped building just so he could decorate it like a Christmas tree each year. After he died a few years ago, they stopped calling it a Christmas tree and opted to call it the Holiday tree but continued to light it up each year just the same.

When I bought one of the condos in the Wyman Building, it didn't matter to me that it was going to be lit up for a few weeks each December, but this year they asked me to put one of the red lights in my window. The only place in my condo that isn't saturated with red light is the back bedroom. Even there I have to run a towel along the bottom of the door to block it out.

I just saw Milton walk by my office door behind me in the glass reflection of a picture on my wall. I know he's going to come back in a minute and tell me the office party has started. I don't want to go. It's the same every year. Some bigwig makes a speech about how important we are to the company. Then one of our names is picked from a bowl to see who wins a new iPod or one of those silly hologram cubes. Then the bigwig leaves and everybody dives into the buffet and free liquor. The manager over Accounting always drinks too much for a man of his age and frail stature. After a few drinks, he's spry and confident and talks to the ladies from Marketing like he's an old chum. They smile politely and leave before things get out of hand. But most of the others follow the Accounting Manager's example and let themselves go.

Milton appeared again in the reflection in the picture.

“Hey, Kyle, aren’t you coming?” he said to my back. “The Winter party is starting. You’d better hurry if you want your name in the raffle.”

When I first started working with this company they called it the Christmas party, then it was the Holiday party, and now for the last few years it has been the Winter party.

I rotated in my chair and faced Milton. He had a plastic red cup in his hand, and his round cheeks were already beginning to take on the same red hue. His eyes were on me like a needy pup. No one else in the company gave him the time of day. I knew if I didn’t go he would be left to wander the room from group to group, only to be met with turned backs and excuses to be excused.

“I’ll be right along, Milton. I’m just finishing up,” I said, and swiveled back around.

“Okay, but you’d better hurry. I think I’m gonna win the uPod this year.”

I watched him hesitate in the doorway and then leave, and then I quickly ran my finger over the display port and said “End,” and the panel flickered blank. I pulled on some rubber boot covers I had bought recently because the Skyway Station in the Wyman Building has been closed for repairs, so I have to walk two blocks to my building from the old Convention Center Station. Then I grabbed my coat and gloves and headed out.

The Winter party was being held in an atrium area on the twelfth floor. The ceiling opens up to the fourteenth floor. I walked along the railing and looked down on the partiers below. Mr. Dupree, the V. P. of Marketing, called out a name, and an excited girl in a Santa Claus cap, I think she’s a receptionist, trotted up to get the uPod. I saw Milton making his way to the back of the room with his head down. As Mr. Dupree ducked out of the room, I looked for the

Accounting Manager, expecting to see the first signs of drunkenness, but instead, I spotted him slouched at a table looking sober and displeased. Next to him, his frumpy wife sat watching him.

I moved along and rode the elevator down to the tenth floor and waited for the next shuttle to stop in the building's Skyway Station. A few others were waiting—likely Winter party escapees from other departments and other companies. I noticed Mr. Dupree waiting further down. He gave a kind of nod and quick eyebrow raise in my direction. I did the same without planning to. He also lived in the Wyman Building. We don't mingle together at work, but we see each other on the shuttle or in the hall and feel obligated to acknowledge one another. He was also wearing rubber boot covers, gloves, and a thick coat. I felt a little cheered knowing the wealthy were as inconvenienced as I was with our Skyway Station being under repair.

An excited young couple on the shuttle got out at the Parker Island Station. The game rooms and indoor rides were open and active. I could see the golden lights at the entrance, and for a brief instant I thought of following the young couple off the shuttle, but some inner voice told me to act my age, and the doors shut me in and the shuttle continued on.

A pack of us, including Mr. Dupree, emptied out of the Convention Center Station into the bitter wind and snow. I flipped up my collar and followed along a somewhat cleared path between the buildings. An automated bulldozer plowed certain paths within the city at certain times, but it could never keep up with the steady snow.

Just before making it to the front entrance of the Wyman Building, Mr. Dupree slipped on a patch of ice and fell forward on his forearms. I turned to go to him, but he quickly pulled himself up and entered the building.

When I opened the door to my condo on the thirty-second floor, it seemed the red light had grown brighter. I took off my wet coat, gloves, and boot covers. In the kitchen, I squinted

and selected something with turkey from the Autowave Panel. Before it finished cooking, I had made a decision. I bent down next to the glaring red light and pulled its plug. A soft haze of white light came out of hiding in my condo. Peace returned, and I stood at my window and watched the large snowflakes hurry by. Down below I could see Parker Island, and I wondered how late they stayed open.
