

Florida Boy

My first big-boy job was in South Florida.

Why the hell would I pick Florida?

Sure, it's a bit kooky and you might run into someone who is tripping on bath salts and wants to chew your face off, but Florida isn't so bad. I'll go so far as saying that first job solidified my love of the place.

How did I end up there having been born and raised in Owosso, Michigan? Great question, especially considering I was a Midwestern boy who did Midwestern things; I mowed neighbors' lawns in the Summer, raked their yards of dead leaves in the Fall, and shoveled their driveways of snow in the Winter. Warm weekends were bonfires, tennis, or "Up North" in Indian River, Michigan at the family cottage. Colder ones meant the bowling alley, Comstock Cinemas, or driving around aimlessly. All seasons consisted of sneaking light beer into a friend's basement to drink or smoking Marlboro Lights and pretending to like it.

I went to college only twenty minutes away from home at Michigan State University where debauchery occurred in a more diverse setting, without the parental buffer zone I'd hoped for. Come senior year's last semester, I applied to jobs in Chicago ad nauseam for months, first from my apartment, and then ultimately my childhood room because no one was hiring.

Chicago was the dream. Big city, far enough away from home, *lots* of gay men.

So why Florida?

The economy forced my hand. I graduated in the worst year possible: 2008.

I think it was around February of 2009 that my Aunt Susie called me and mentioned she had a sales job for me at her company Everglades Direct, sold labor law posters and employee tax forms. Sexy, right?

At first, I was hesitant.

Florida? I thought. *Barf. I cannot do Florida. The heat, the old people, the HEAT.*

I told her I'd give her an answer in a week.

I was beginning to feel the confines of home, which devolved into feeling more and more like high school under the watchful eyes of my parents, who also had taken it upon themselves to help find me a job.

"Ponderosa is hiring, Matt! Beggars can't be choosers!"

The thought of working a buffet where heavyset children shoved their unwashed fingers into the bucket of chocolate pudding was the tipping point.

So, I applied to my aunt's company with zero sales experience and, through the wonderful magic of nepotism, I got the job. Soon after, my parents and I packed up my worldly possessions into my white '93 Oldsmobile Cutlass with burgundy interior (previously my Great Grandma Esther's) and I was on my way to America's Sunshine State.

I moved in with my aunt and uncle, both with kids from each of their previous marriages, so I found myself guest-starring in a modern day *The Brady Bunch*. I rode to work with my aunt, but made her drop me off on the other side of the building so as not to be identified as the nepo-nephew who was handed a job.

The job itself was making at least one hundred phone calls a day attempting to sell, cross-sell, or upsell said posters and forms. What I learned rather quickly at this first job was that you're going to be told to *fuck off* at least once a day on the phone, you're not as smart as you think you are, and no, you don't deserve raises for every little thing you accomplish, like graphing a few numbers, adding a gif to a PowerPoint slide, or discovering the precise posture to muffle a fart into your office chair cushion while surrounded by occupied cubicles.

I also learned that there are a whole bunch of women and gay men in sales and marketing, the latter of which loved my milky-white skin, and bright blue eyes, dime-a-dozen qualities in the Midwest, but a thing of rare beauty in this Latino land of dark features and uncircumcised penises. I'll say that I was equally taken by such exotic dark features as you'd be hard pressed to find in Mid-Michigan.

One of these Latino beauties, Alex, a Sales Manager in a different department, invited me to his apartment that was close to the office for lunch. One thing led to another, we did the dirty in the middle of the workday (*gasp!*) and a couple weeks later, I was summoned to speak to our HR Director, Maurice.

A tall, skinny, bespectacled man with a balding head and terrible slouch, Maurice told me he'd received an anonymous letter that implied I'd had relations with a manager. He began our meeting very seriously, and asked me questions like *Did you feel pressured into doing this with Alex?* and

After I'd answered what I thought were all his questions and he finished updating what I assumed was some kind of employee file, he looked at me with a smirk and asked, "So how was it?"

He chuckled, and then said, “Just kidding, don’t answer that!”

Maurice, who was as gay as a picnic basket and someone I came to find out was a huge gossip, loved every minute of my confession (I still don’t know who told him). We became friends of a sort, and he went on to tell me things like who faked a disability claim in the warehouse or who asked if breast enhancement surgery is covered by insurance. He also told me how much my aunt made in a year, a number I still can’t comprehend to this day.

I came to realize he had a lot of little birdies he was whispering company secrets to. To a few of them he had divulged the story of my lunchtime romp.

How the hell such a gossip held the title of HR Director is a great mystery.

Karma always seems to come for these people, though. Fast forward a year and Maurice’s inevitable moment of shame had arrived. He’d stolen the key to the private executive washroom, had it copied, and then while using the toilet managed to clog it.

The porcelain throne of our company’s kings and queens overflowed into the hallway and into a group of cubicles. I remember the dry heaving, the mounds of flimsy brown paper towels that were barely capable of drying a pair of hands as fellow coworkers tried to clean it up as the foul river of sewage flowed. Maurice was nowhere to be found, and I assumed was hiding in his office, slowly dying of embarrassment. When the plumber finally arrived, he took one look at the wreckage and exclaimed, “Good God...”

Maurice was fired soon after, although I can’t say it was from *The Clogging* (soon to be an M. Night Shyamalan film). While I don’t necessarily believe in Karma, I do think

the universe rightfully balances itself once in a while. That, and the The Kickin' Chicken Hot Sauce at Subrageous doesn't fuck around.

Speaking of lunch, lunchtime was where I made some of my best friends, young coworkers like myself who couldn't be trusted with important things to do and weren't important enough for their supervisors to keep track of them, which made two-hour lunch breaks a normal occurrence.

My aunt worked in the corner office on the southwest side of the building, so naturally we'd sneak out the Northwest side, traversing the warehouse where those who stacked boxes, punched timecards and didn't have office chair cushions to muffle their farts eyed us with contempt.

At lunch, we'd discuss intellectual things, like how hungover we were, or who we hit on the night prior, or who pissed us off that morning.

Katelyn was my Work Wife and Office Bestie, but unlike me, she actually tried. I give her credit because she could accompany me on those lunch excursions and get right back to it when we returned.

I, on the other hand, would need coffee, a round or two of Solitaire, maybe a nap on the Sleep n' Shit toilet (this was a somewhat hidden toilet with an abnormally wide tank that you could straddle backwards and put your head down like in grade school), and then made sure to fire off an email or two that usually consisted of nothing more than an *I agree* or *So glad you did the thing in time for the thing* before clocking out at 4 PM.

Weekends were spent in Key Largo at my family's big neon green getaway home, exploring the islands, drinking Bloody Mary's for breakfast (it's not alcoholism if you do it in The Keys), and, my personal favorite, sit on a balcony and do nothing but watch the water and listen to the crickets.

Key Largo and the surrounding islands are beautiful, lush with wildlife that feels alien compared to the rest of the States. There isn't a place I love more.

Florida, while kooky, odd, and sometimes downright off-putting, has also inspired much of my writing, including the novel that I'm *determined* to finish this year, damn it.

In accepting a job in a state that I had little interest in, I was shown a new world that is still very much part of my life today. I visit often, keep up with those old coworkers, and spend a good amount of time with the family and my niece, Riley. At age three, she's still young enough to believe that between trips I live in The Lazarus Chamber (aka the shed) and eat magical bugs to recharge before I show up again.

Not quite tripping on bath salts and going zombie mode, but pretty close.