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A Spare Tire for the One Percent

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In September 2016, waves from Category 1 Hurricane Hermine dumped a heavy-construction tire on exclusive Belleair Shore, whereupon it dug itself into the sand. If I were superstitious, the tire might have represented a bad omen for the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. The colossal black olive was served up on a mound of lightning whelks, clamshells, scallops, and tiny coquinas. At first, the wet black sidewall created an interesting effect as it reflected the orange sky at sunset. The novelty soon wore off, and romanticizing it didn't make it more attractive. It was pollution, unwanted flotsam, spewed onto private wealthy Belleair Shore. Or, on second thought, had it been there all along?



The storm might have exposed what was already there, just as the election had churned up the hidden anger of many voters. My husband and I encountered the tire while walking on the beach the day after the storm. Half of it stuck up in the sand like the tough black skinned exoskeleton of a sea creature. The other half was buried. I wondered if an excavation would reveal a whole monster truck. As the days passed, the wedged carcass did not move. The longer it stayed in place, the more it inspired me to reflect on how the tire

was a scar on the beach and how it contrasted with the white sugar sand. I wondered if I pressed my ear to its sidewall, would I hear the latent roar of heavy construction machinery?



There are so few people on this stretch of beach, if there are any humans around, the tide takes their conversation out to sea. This one-mile stretch of shoreline is protected from the hordes of tourists tossing potato chips to squawking seagulls. It still feels like wilderness here with the calming roll of the water ending with a satisfying sigh at the end of each wave. Above the warm Gulf waters towering white clouds fill the sky, turn brilliant pink on the horizon as gliding skimmers fly inches above the water's surface. This beach is a rare place of solitude hidden behind a wall of mansions, cut off from view by Gulf

Boulevard, the two-lane highway these houses front.

The waves usually deposit shells for treasure hunters. But after the storm, the beach was littered with piles of brown seaweed, bits of plastic, and the wooden stakes marking sea turtles' nests. A middle-aged woman raked seaweed into black plastic garbage bags, leaving dots like lumpy dominos between the boundaries of her property. When we encountered the tire, we simply walked around the eyesore. It was her bad luck that the tire had landed on her personal waterfront, and it was presumably her problem to remove it. It would take a city worker driving a tractor with a front-end loader to scoop it out. The storm had chiseled a three-foot cliff in the beach where it had previously been a gentle slope. The waves had sucked about 25 feet of real estate back into the Gulf, but the tire had stubbornly stayed.

The town evidently decided not to send a cleanup crew. Instead they let the unwanted squatter stay, hoping the tide would wash it back into the deep, or bury it under layers of new sand. From a distance, it was but a dot, a period at the end of a foaming sentence. Up close, the tire made a claim on the water's edge spoiling the

homeowner's pristine view.

All the neighbors in Belleair Shore share the same view from their window-walls overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Who can blame them for wanting an unsullied picture of paradise? They are the One Percent. These Florida beach residences are estates not quite on the same scale as Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago, but they are still appointed with the finest fixtures. Mr. Trump spent \$100,000 on gold-plated sinks for his Palm Beach Mediterranean club. By comparison, in 2014, *The Tampa Bay Times* reported that the owner of a new 17,602 sq. ft. house on Belleair Shore spent an estimated \$5.8 million in construction materials, including \$80,000 for doorknobs. This represents more than what most middle-income people will make in a year. The tire seems absurd, even comical dumped in the front yard of a palace; it was as if Poseidon had thumbed his nose at the One Percent to remind them Mother Nature crosses all boundaries.

Only 111 people live here. Residents hold claim on the property up to the high water mark. Legally, in Florida, they cannot restrict my access to the beach, so the gate to the access is open. A sheriff's deputy has not yet stopped my husband and me and

asked for proof of citizenship in the Town of Belleair Shore as we step across the threshold of the gated beach access. As of today, we're free to walk, swim, stretch out a towel, pick up shells, or just watch the sunset on the one-mile stretch of private beach as long as we don't stay too long. We're here on a temporary visa with an undetermined expiration date. But I wonder whether my two brown skinned brothers-in-law would be stopped as they walked past the gate of the beach access? Would they be nervous about beach-walking while foreign? One is Mexican, a chemical engineer for a Miami pharmaceutical company; the other is Pakistani, a practice manager for a Tampa gastroenterologist. Both have lived in Florida for over 25 years. By November of 2016, Donald Trump's promise to build a border wall drew wild cheers of approval at his rallies. Lots of Americans decried illegal immigration. It's an easy stance to take. But the "build the wall" chant sounds scary when it gets personal.

Belleair Shore has already built an economic wall by making it hard to get to their beach. Here, I'm an alien from Planet Middle Class. Signs greeting me at the beach entrance inform me that I'm a guest and then warn that trespassing, littering, drinking alcohol,

eating, building fires, using watercrafts, or inflatables, walking dogs, biking, climbing, and camping are prohibited. The parking lot is for residents only; they get a parking decal--all the others get a parking ticket. To get around this, my husband and I park a quarter of a mile away and walk to the access. The restrictions guarantee the homeowners a parking space, but the lot is almost always empty. My movements are constrained by inconvenience. It's only a minor irritant, but the message is clear: while telling me I am welcome, the rules say that I'm not.

On election eve, as we walked to the beach, we encountered Trump supporters crowding the sidewalk holding signs and blocking our way as we crossed Gulf Boulevard. Many drivers honked their horns at the sight of the supporters' red hats. The supporters weren't aggressive, more like energized. One look at my middle-aged khaki-wearing husband and me and they assumed we were Fellow White Republican Voters. They invited us to show our support. It was awkward when I declared myself for Hillary.



By December, post-election shock had set in. We were numb. On our nightly walks, my husband and I had made a point of looking for the tire that was nearly consumed in the sand. On this night, we were delighted to see that a passerby had decorated the treads with seashells as a token of acceptance, as if declaring that if the tire was going to be part of the neighborhood, it should fit in. The black sidewall reflected blue in the evening light, sculptural set against the smooth fine sand. With a little imagination, it might pass for abstract art, an ironic commentary on the workingman encroaching on this sublime natural landscape. On second thought, it still wouldn't have fit in among the resort style art of mosaic sea turtles, giant copper blue herons, or gray resin dolphin sculptures decorating nearby pool decks; it was too understated.

By the end of the month, the rubber intruder had almost disappeared into the sand, and, on this day I stumbled over it in my path. That's when I made the connection between it and why I felt conflicted. Giant waves had deposited it there forcing the residents to accept it and me as a permanent though unwelcome part of their seascape. I realized they would prefer to close off the beach access to me, an uninvited guest. That thought prompted me to ask my husband a question: *if-you-won-the-lottery* question: "If money were no object, would *you* buy a six-bedroom, five-bath, three-car-garage vacation house on the beach?" Without hesitation my husband admitted that he would. He reasoned, why not have it all and the sunset too? I, on the other hand, would rather have a simple clapboard cottage with a covered porch and a hammock strung up between two palm trees – life on Gilligan's Island as Maryann, where the weather is always balmy and life is simple.

Perhaps it's a matter of perspective and resources, Maryann and the millionaire Thurston Howell III *are* stuck on the same Island. Their fates *are* ultimately intertwined and they must share the natural resources. Certainly, Trump's victory represented a win for the Thurston Howell III

voters. After the election, I imagined the red-hat-wearing, campaign-sign-waving residents of Belleair Shore raising a glass of champagne in celebration. Immediately following his inauguration, Trump again promised to make building the wall a top priority once he took office. The economically powerful of the world control access to natural resources. So, every time we stepped over the track for the gate that closed off the beach access, I was aware that I might find myself locked out of my borrowed retreat at any time. In fact, after the election, I half expected to find it closed to mooching visitors like me. The tire on the beach was disappearing beneath the relentless washing of new sand deposits, a vanishing reminder of the September storm; conversely, the rust belt middle class hoped Trump's presidency would make them visible. After the storm, homeowners repaired their seawalls and posted no trespassing signs.



By Christmas, the tire was just a comma in the sand. It was barely a black mark on a white background. Like a comma, the September storm amounted to a pause in the fall season. Weak as it was, however, it left an impression. By January, the tire disappeared and so far, the beach access remains open. I assume it will stay that way unless an influential person questions whether or not the safety of the homeowners can be guaranteed if too many people discover the passage. Forgive me if I sound cynical, but privatizing public spaces can begin with an innocent request to remove a nuisance like a dock. That's what happened when a small group of people in a nearby town asked the city to tear down a dock situated on a right-of-way bordered by million-dollar waterfront homes. It was

a popular fishing spot and a destination for residents in the area who watched the sunset over the bay. One day the dock vanished without a trace that it had ever been there! Shocked, neighbors called city hall for an explanation; they were told the pilings were in poor condition and the structure was unsafe, so municipal workers tore it down as a safety precaution. I knew, however, the dock recently had been rebuilt. A neighborhood activist discovered that an influential realtor who owned a house near the short pier complained about the fisherman leaving trash in street and making noise. She had quietly asked the city to remove it.

On the beach, the imaginary lines drawn in the sand are wavy. The homeowners' legal rights extend to the high waterline marked by the heaps of seaweed deposited by the tide. Residents set the rules for acceptable beach behavior on their side of the line. But one thing is for sure; wealth crosses party lines. A surprising fact emerged months after the election. Within this one-mile private community of super-rich residents, in the 2016 election, voter tallies revealed that 48 percent of the population voted for Donald Trump, while 47 percent voted for Hillary Clinton. By one percent, this town of

multimillion-dollar owners voted for Trump. The one percent, whether Republican or Democrat, can afford to buy a slice of solitude, pass laws that restrict who can access it, and build a wall to keep out the 99 percent. And yet, one piece of construction sea trash washed up on a beach can destroy the illusion of a tropical paradise for everyone.