

Behind

the

Wall

**By Dame DJ
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PART 1

Miami here I come.

Dragging suitcases from baggage reclaim in the heat of Miami airport was always a potential heart attack, and I scanned the lounge amazed that no one was physically slumped over their trolley, overcome with stress. One of the baggage handlers might have tossed them down some revolving carousel if they looked that vulnerable.

The freezing air-conditioning never helped the intense atmosphere as this was the gateway to South America, with bad tempered immigration officials who stared through glassy cold eyes treating us like felons, regardless of which flight we came in on.

I ignored the customs agents and lumbered with determination towards the exit door hauling over-packed, bulging suitcases.

Heading out towards the beeping, chaotic traffic the electric doors opened, throwing me against a wall of buzzing heat, and the first breaths of humid, still, thick air filled my lungs like syrup.

This was Jurassic, like the beginning of time; when the earth was bubbling hot, insect-ridden and dangerous.

Suntanned Spanish drivers hooted and braked like emergencies and fought for position as if arriving with dying patients. I lumbered past them all.

Then whisked away in a white limo I fell back into a world of still motionless cold air, tinted windows, gentle noises and relative safety.

He hit the pedal, I hit the vodka, and we headed top speed up the I-95.

The Interstate 95 gleamed like the *yellow brick road*, generously accommodating thousands of screeching cars and trucks rushing north and south like escaping insects.

The race was on... 'hello Florida'.

* * *

Early the next morning, the sun rose to a perfectly clear blue sky and I jumped out of bed, grabbed the car keys and set out for supplies.

I bought a ludicrously small amount of food and some fresh rolls to ensure I would *have* to return the next day and every day from then on.

Florida was bathed in a late November golden morning glow; the air was crisp and a few little puffs of white clouds drifted overhead like small children going to school.

This was the beginning of their winter season with crisp morning, a few showers, blue skies and gentle breezes; a climate the rest of us only dreamt about.

Water sprinklers angled in all directions, dribbled and spat watering the pathways like mini waterfalls in an aqua show without the dancers. Dewdrops clung to the Colombian emerald grass; shimmering in the sunlight it looked succulent, nourishing yet untouchable.

Pulling into the empty parking lot, I headed for a large primrose-yellow supermarket with eyelash awnings in striped black, white, and yellow. Young palm trees stood in line waiting endlessly, slim, proud, with green feathery tops and not a hair out of place.

I pulled in wide, with the choice of any parking place I wanted. Overhead the sound of melodious music and native birds competed with each other, or perhaps the birds all knew the chorus to the songs that were playing?

Electric doors parted and a blast of freezing air slapped me hard in the face, like an invisible iceberg.

Abundant pyramids of fruit and vegetables lay before me in perfect array all brightly polished, the same size and facing forward.

Every one was a jewel, a fine specimen, a perfect replica of each other, and too beautiful to touch. They looked like family.

Avocados, red peppers, oranges, bananas, and lemons; a rainbow of colors with not a hint of soil, dirt or farmers hands on them to be seen.

I stopped, stared, appreciated and admired but I passed on as I today only needed two bread rolls for breakfast but I would be back tomorrow at same time for the same thing.

This was heaven, but I couldn't stay too long.

Welcome to Florida.

* * *

Unpacking in someone else's house was exciting, especially one as pretty and well taken care of as this which we had rented for the November to April winter season.

As we entered the security gate of the golf development, another smart security guard carefully inspected our details, made a call, and lifted the barrier.

Heavy with gold brocade and black cap, he looked like he had fought in the last war, but had missed out on the medals and was now in command of a golfing community.

At the junction was the biggest Banyan tree I had ever seen which became an important landmark; we turned left, continued past several identical turnings that felt surreal like a Levittown development.

They had the same gardens, same driveways, same post boxes and front doors but with different small black numbers.

We were at 125th Avenue, two houses in from the right like a huge parking lot just full of the same houses. It looked like Lego land made of geometric shapes, angular roofs, some round windows, and equal driveways.

The gardens were all landscaped exactly the same way but with a few very subtle variations of about six different plants so they matched up like uniforms.

I looked for open garden gates, children climbing over and under; young mothers chatting to neighbors, baking fresh cookies, and everyone being part of a close community but I saw none.

Cream garbage bins stood like pillars to the left and right on the drive, and a little paved path ran down the side of the house for pool access, but there was no individuality.

I was going to have to learn that *was* the point - smart, simple, and designed living not cluttered by lots of messy 'individuals'.

There were going to be signs of life, but this was a Florida Gated Golf Community, behind a wall, and they were not going to be what I had imagined.

* * *

Moving into our cappuccino-cream contemporary new house with white floor so clean you could role pastry out on them, was exciting, fresh, and sheer pleasure.

We had a white corner bath, with a Jacuzzi, double sinks, and a huge walk-in shower all lit up from a skylight above so we could see a galaxy of stars at night. Tall mirrors on each wall reflected us naked, and into infinity.

The bedroom had two walk-in closets, one on each side, and a piece of large decorative furniture for a huge TV and two bedside tables with elegant lamps.

Most importantly, we had French doors leading straight to a screened in pool! How romantic, how sensational, how thoughtful of the builder! He could have simply put in windows and saved the money.

The outdoor screens puzzled me at first as they dimmed the view, and I didn't see any bugs so immediately opened them and the windows up, but Tim quickly slammed them shut and mumbled about air conditioning.

No matter, I was still happy, so I ignored it all and never thought to wonder just how cold-blooded Tim really was.

The small pool wasn't heated but I imagined lovely evenings, Martinis, music, and midnight swims.

For a girl born in the tropics, taken to England to shiver and freeze, I was now close to blue skies, yellow sun, and fresh air, but the doors and windows had to remain firmly shut so we could live in a fridge.

This was a Florida Golf & Country Club community and I was naïve - happy, but naïve.

* * *

Passing the magnificent clock tower at the gate on the way out I didn't bother to check the time as it was like being in Disney World, and time would not have mattered.

The immaculate security men, clothed in brocade and military style coats waved us on as we left; they were not in the business of keeping people in.

The automatic barrier lifted and we drove passed rich green hedges, fountains, and flowerbeds, and headed for the outside world.

It felt like time passed by differently out here, and we only went out for necessities like petrol, food, newspapers, haircuts, and anything else that didn't revolve around country club living.

One could lose a couple of days, miss world events, forget the date, and only watch the selected American news they chose to air including snippets of useless adverts or information mixed with an unusual amount of local violence.

There were no seasonal changes here, just slight temperature changes that could throw a day's activity into turmoil.

People originally from huge distances away that had been used to extreme conditions in the Northern USA or Canada, were now suddenly very indignant that a golf tee-off time might be postponed if some rumbling nebulous grey clouds gathered on the horizon.

Bad weather put fear into men's hearts, and frizz into women's hair. The car parks emptied like War of the Worlds, and golf carts were abandoned on grass verges.

In the odd storm palm trees panicked and swayed, thrashing their green limbs about. Rains fell like a tantrum and manicured shrubs begrudgingly gave up a few odd leaves to the wind.

This picture perfect golfing community was not succumbing to climate change, as in a few hours, everything went back to normal like nothing had happened.

The weather was pure emotion; unpredictable, intense, then exhausted, submissive, and tranquil.

No wonder ancient man worshipped the sun.

Rules of the Game

It was time for another glass of freshly squeezed Florida orange juice that I had discovered like manna from heaven, and I headed for a pink tubular empty table.

"Morning"

"Hi there"

"Hello"

"All right today?"

"When is your game?"

...Rang out all the greetings, and I was grateful to everyone for being so friendly.

I sat down and scanned the terrace for a waiter, while nodding at anyone who looked my way, regardless if we had ever been introduced.

My isolation was short-lived, as this was club life and everyone clustered into groups as quickly as possible as if they couldn't breathe alone.

For them making the right alliances from the beginning was crucial, as slipping down the social ladder was a constant fear, and moving back up was near impossible. I was an outsider and I didn't take it seriously.

Mistakenly, I had thought that allegiances were made between people that liked, respected, and were fond of each other, but it was more about being financially compatible.

Rich people rarely mixed or socialized with poor people, unless they were something interesting like artists - that had been exhibited of course.

The quickest of interviews were being given all around the club, and dismissal depended on your first reply.

Exchanging names was not an immediate formality, as that could wait until you had made up your mind, if or not you wanted to continue the conversation.

It was like 'speed dating' but in couples, and at a golf club.

"By the way, my name is John, and this is my wife Joan" was a typical introduction that could follow 45 minutes *after* quite a lot of detailed discussion on a huge range of topics.

Thinking people were friendly and open was partially true, but it was the quickest way of trying to place you socially and economically, and in order to do so, a lot of silly questions needed to be answered first.

"Are you living here?"

"Are you visiting and for how long?"

"Are you a golf or tennis member?"

"Where are your other homes?"

"Where do you eat?"

"Who do you know?"

"What broker do you use?"

...And so on.

The wrong answer to one or more questions and the conversation was terminated, like a game of multiple choice, while scoring points put you into various categories.

It was something Tony Blair did not even remotely grasp when he was with George Bush, the sad fool thought we all spoke a common language. We do not - the words are the same but the meanings are different.

Jumping from a low score up to a higher score was possible if you had an overwhelming advantage like being famous, foreign, stunning, or a mafia family member.

Living in the right village was the 'color of your passport', because they assumed every human being on earth would buy the best possible house they could afford.

* * *

Where to have dinner was the most important decision of the day, and it normally took all day to decide.

"We went to Renato's last night," called one person to another in the middle of playing tennis.

"Ball please! Oh, really...how was that? I heard they make good pasta."

"It was the best! I had the stuffed shells with ricotta," came a reply during a serve.

"OUT! That ball was out! Did you see that out?" came an irritated voice from the opposite side of the court, insisting in an authoritative tone.

Silence returned as they continued play back into the rhythm of the game, consumed by thoughts of shells and ricotta.

Having started at 8am, with nothing to eat or drink but a small juice, most of us were starving hungry.

The south of France had the aroma of lavender and perfumes, but Boca smelt of chips, BBQ ribs, muffins, and coffee, depending on what the hotel chefs were preparing.

The only way to avoid thinking about food was to think of something even more overwhelming - sex, but as most people in country clubs were ageing, over medicated, and heavy, this was not a great solution.

I noticed during tennis the minute the opposition team were behind, they would shout "the veal chop was this thick and it cut like butter!" showing fingers to show just how thick.

Chasing a small lime green ball, in the heat, hungry and for no obvious reason, was something I had to learn to enjoy.

This was Florida and it would be a long winter so learning and observing their rules was going to be important.

Nibbles with Kitty and Scott

The members' committee spent all their waking hours dreaming up activities to keep hundreds of people of all ages and abilities amused.

Another body of people had ordered half a rain forest of paper to print up activity sheets and brochures to get the sleepiest members to sit up, join in, and take note.

Brochures filled with photos of palm trees, couples holding hands on golf courses, tennis courts with happy children and the obligatory golden sunsets.

They must have been snapped by paparazzi, hiding in bushes and waiting for those tender moments; none of which I ever saw in real life, except for the sunsets.

The monthly newssheet showed photos of sunburnt faces and revelers at the last Latin, Samba, or Calypso evening, all taken after cocktail hour.

These photos enforced a feeling of envy in anyone who missed the event, forgot to buy the ticket, or left early, as the events were so well promoted to have not gone would have been a sin.

The Friday night Happy Hour, from 5.30 to 8pm at the main clubhouse, was the very high point of the week.

Arriving was like gatecrashing a party; you had no idea who was the host or hostess, as no one gave any introductions, and it was each to his own.

It was up to us to approach strangers, introduce ourselves, find common interests, and end up being the best of friends.

I was good at this; I worked the room as if it was my own party, and ended up introducing couples to other couples. It gave me a freedom, and I needed it.

Everyone looked clean and smart at last compared to his or her previous wet and sweaty exercise clothes.

Wearing shoes, covering up bandy legs, hiding sagging bottoms was all a visual relief long over due we all owed each other.

Large gold earrings, lots of bracelets, a huge diamond ring, the longest glossy set of fingernails topped hands with delicately held chilled white wine glasses, as the ladies smiled and chatted amicably.

The handbags studded with enough metal to look like weapons; oversized belt buckles with animal heads squashed in thick waists topped by bouffant hair that never moved out of place.

None of the women were flat chested as they were either fat all over, or very thin with protruding, exposed silicone breasts demanding attention in their own right.

A few stragglers had lost the slimming war to anorexia or bulimia; with emaciated bodies serious enough to warrant a Red Cross visit to save the poor souls.

I wondered if some men had a silent terror of large breasts, and were actively searching for small ones.

Sporting bright reds, greens, yellows, and the crispest of whites, they paraded about like exotic parrots in warring colors that signaled a possible nasty peck.

The men looked like a pretty clean, neat, and well manicured lot, even if Mother Nature had not given them the best of looks.

A few showed a fabulous sense of humor by wearing 'rugs' plumped on their heads, like nesting sites for a passing sparrow.

The classic 'golf shirt' had saved many hours of wardrobe decisions, and they wore them in every shade of every color imaginable.

We walked over to the bar, already two rows deep, and four hundred pairs of predator eyes followed us on swiveling necks to take in all our details.

"Hello. How do you do?" I said to the woman on my right, as I outstretched my hand towards her. She was young with short brown hair and deep brown eyes.

She looked at my open hand, then back at me, and stared in shock.

"Oh, hi there. How are ya?" She replied.

"Fine, jolly good. It's so busy here - I didn't expect such a crowd." I smiled, and as she picked up my English accent, all the irritation of being interrupted immediately left her.

"This is my husband, Scott," she said, and she leaned back in her chair so I could get a better look at him.

"She's from England," she said to her husband, patting his arm like a secret sign that I was okay.

"Oh! *Top of the morning to you!* I was in London in 1989. Great city. Great. Love the people too. I was staying in Kensington, do you know it?" He asked.

I smiled, as no one had ever said 'top of the morning' to me, and probably never would.

He wanted to relive his trip and I was happy to hear about it. So much had changed in that great city, but they think it's all frozen in time.

I suppose in all of London's deep history, the passing of a few years later was nothing much to remark about.

Her husband had a huge body, with very wide shoulders that were used to pumping iron and topped with smallish head and boyish face. His beady, pale blue eyes focused on me eagerly staring out from a grey-colored damp face and he broke into a smile easily.

“You would love London honey,” he kept saying to her as he recounted his happy days, during which I suspected there must have a couple of English girls who showed him the hotspots.

Business alone could never have been so much fun.

“I’ll take you one day, I promise,” he said and she patiently listened, nodding in agreement which indicated to me that must have been newlyweds, as her attention span had not yet gone.

“These are friends of ours; Eric is a scratch golfer, and this is his wife, Penny.”

And so it went on with lively animated conversation. The drinks came and went, as did the piles of greasy morsels, and we felt we belonged somehow.

The room filled to capacity, and voices rose higher and higher, competing with each other in octaves like excited birds at feeding time.

8pm came quickly, and we had a dinner reservation nearby so we started to say our goodbyes.

As I stood up to go, I suddenly realized whom the girl Penny was.

Last week at the ladies’ tennis clinic, I had noticed a short, petite blonde, whom I took to be about 24 years old, with tight Goldilocks hair and a slightly grey face. I took her under my wing, as I felt less conspicuous being protective of someone else.

“I remember you. You look so different out of tennis clothes!” I exclaimed.

“So do you,” she replied through a smile, and I wondered what she meant.

“See you next Monday on the court!”

On the way out we said goodbye, kissed people we had never met, and waved at strangers; it felt like the natural thing to do. What a few cases of chardonnay can do for a crowd!

That was Friday nights taken care of for the season, and regular morning tennis game for me set on Monday’s, which satisfied Tim’s constant questions about possible games. I could not even play tennis but he chose to ignore that.

Things were looking up, we were settling in, making friends, finding our way but the patio doors remained tightly shut.

Iced water for Lee

“How are you doing today?” asked a middle aged, bronzed, male tennis player.

We were all sitting on a terrace by the courts; I had got the table first and was waiting for Tim to finish his game.

“Very well, thank you,” I said in a matter-of-fact English accent, hoping he would leave quickly.

“That’s real great. I’m Lee, in case you didn’t know,” he said, already moving off with his eyes on the courts ahead.

“No, I didn’t know. But I certainly do now,” I smiled to myself, knowing the accent can repel as well as attract depending on the pitch.

Bloody Limey he probably thought.

I had seen Lee many times at the gym; he looked like he had rebuilt his body through sheer perseverance.

If he had noticed me, it had not been by looking in my direction, so I assumed he hadn’t seen me before today.

He played tennis with the same dedication as he pumped iron, and was good at both. His steel-framed glasses enlarged his fading watery blue-grey eyes, and they gave no hint of warmth. His perfect teeth were a fairly new physical addition, and he exposed them often in a kind of ritual smile to get his money’s worth.

Next to the terrace was the tennis shop and booking office where all the courts were reserved and allocated.

On a slightly risen podium behind a long desk, the two blondes who ran the 28 courts competed with each other for dominance.

It was a daily beauty contest, and for most of the other women, it was quite inhibiting.

Their long fine tresses twirled into ponytails; sun visors and caps always looking immaculate, with tennis skirts, frilly white socks and tennis shoes they looked like overgrown sexy schoolgirls.

They had the power of the pencil, topped with rubbers that could ‘rub’ you off a court if you didn’t pay sufficient respect and homage.

Everyone did, all of the time...or you never got to play.

The average middle-aged balding male player crawled in with his tongue hanging out, flirting desperately and trying to make an impression, but seldom achieved anything.

The women were either too menopausal, slightly pitiful, aggressive, or asked too many questions that needed too many replies, asked all their friends and then changed their minds.

I found my own balance with no help from the blondes. By being friendly, courteous, and genuine ensured me a warm welcome and considerate service.

“Court number 8, and you are the first! Have a great game!” She called over to me.

“Thank you,” I waved, feeling good in yet another new outfit. I couldn’t play very well, but I sure made an effort to look like I could.

Humiliation on court 8 was soon to come and bent down to pick up a million small lime green tennis balls and swore at every one of them.

I had to find someone who played as badly as I did and simply didn’t care what a liability I really was.

A nice plump older lady came wandering over.

“Hello, I’m your partner this morning,” she said.
God help you, I thought.” I hope you like the English.”

Villages

Coconut Boulevard, Palm Tree Drive, Willow’s Creek...were whimsical names of the individual villages in the enormous golfing complex, all built around the central golf course.

A most wonderful concept! It didn’t exactly replace the ancient village green, but given most English people could no longer afford a house overlooking a village green, this was an excellent idea and gave so many homes wonderful views.

The internal road was wide with undulating, smooth, rippling bends, edged with external green grasses that never died, alongside footpaths for the odd jogger.

These paths were never cluttered with pedestrians and never grew weeds or had litter. They were serene, empty, calm, and decorative. Why couldn't the whole world be like this?

Between the gym and the jogging, people burnt off enough spare and unwanted calories to feed a small African country.

Squirrels darted and ran for no good reason as there were no predators here they were in no danger. Had they not been in the overall master plan they would have all been exterminated immediately, but they could stay if they didn't bury nuts on the golf course.

I lost my way as each perfect boulevard ran into the next and all the palm trees swayed in the same direction.

Clusters of houses in individually architecturally- designed villages branched off to the left or right in intervals of about half a mile.

Whispering Brook, Green Reeds, Barbados Sun, or Vintage Court all had a different price bracket, size of house, style, and location to the clubhouse. The names themselves made no sense at first, but when they came to represent a cluster of \$2-3 million golf-view Spanish-style villas, it was surprising how quickly a name could become significant.

All the villages basically competed with each other with different grand entrances, gold lettering, fountains, marble entrances, and Italian-style ponds, but the price of the houses inside was set.

Majestic palm trees, arrays of endless flowers, lakes that never dried up, and tall grasses were only disturbed by the occasional visiting egret.

Underground pipes apparently connected the lakes, but I never saw a huge dinosaur of a gator basking motionless on a golf course as golf carts whisked around. I wondered how the club would have dealt with that.

Every day that passed, this place became more real. We were here and you could touch, feel, and smell the nature around you, but it was the outer world on television and people in far off places, bombing, starving, fighting, and burning that become the more unreal.

Florida and our life behind the wall which was actually beginning to keep us in...voluntarily, of course for now.

* * *

Back in the supermarket, Frank Sinatra and I waltzed between the pregnant chocolate muffins, trotted passed the sea green pickles, and swayed in front of exotic fruits and on towards the checkout girl, carrying, as usual, very little to eat.

They always avoided looking at my face, and only ever said “have a nice day,” which they could very well have not meant, but I didn’t care.

I was in heaven, happy to be alive; the world had no starvation as we lived in abundance and this was becoming my reality.

All human misery was a thing of the past. Man could organize himself if he had the will, money, the right architects, and people with straight white teeth could organize it all.

The vast selection of fabulous food only confirmed the system in the USA had worked, as there was plenty for everyone, enough to give away, and plenty spare.

It was like living on a film set for a propaganda film and no one ever said, “cut.”

Waxed apples, flaunting their pale-green skins like thick Rolls Royce paint, lay next to bunches of radishes flushed with embarrassed. I ignored the perky carrots - all the same color and length - the wispy bundles of dill, soft and feathery-like seaweed and the light, springy parsley waiting for fish.

The stock was never depleted or disheveled, and the odd tub of blueberries or a banana would drop into my basket.

We never cooked in the kitchen and I fantasied about making dishes that I had no idea on how to really make.

These were ingredients that longed for an experienced cook, and I wanted to be that person, but Tim wanted dinner out every night, and I was terrified of ruining his meal.

I could have jumped into the salad leaves and played boule with the letterbox-red tomatoes, but instead I bought a cauliflower with a creamy-white bumpy pure face and took it home with me and put it in the fridge.

Alone, on a shelf, it beamed back at me for about five weeks before decay spoilt its lovely face, and that’s when I realized foods here were irradiated, and they did not know what the long-term effects were.

This was a bizarre, unnatural type of longevity, and I was sad when it died.

All the fizzy drinks in lime green plastic bottles, too big for a normal human to lift, stood next to packets of chips and tacos as large as pillows for homeless people, except there were no homeless people around here.

Buying cleaning products demanded some serious study, as each bottle was completely confident of its own success, and I wanted them all to help me.

I never did get to try out their promises, as Tim arranged a nice Spanish lady to come in to clean, what was already still clean, and who spoke no English but enjoyed the messages on the bottles.

This was life in the USA, my friend.

Sales Office

“Stay in the car, I want to look at something,” said Tim as he pulled into a grand entrance and took a sharp right turn onto a no-through road with a roundabout at the end.

He stopped outside a low temporary building covered with generous tropical plants, stepped out of the car and dashed up a few shallow steps, disappearing inside and leaving the engine running.

I swung my legs across the long deep red leather Cadillac seats and looked out of the windows towards nothing but scrubland.

Eventually two figures, deep in conversation, appeared on the steps, and as I leaned forward I saw a tall young woman of about my age. There were a lot of hand gestures.

I was about to open the car door when he glanced in my direction and feverishly beckoned me over.

“Here, come with me. This is my wife, Mel - Mel is in real estate and is Gary’s wife.” She was full of vitality and stared at me with curious big brown eyes.

We went inside a large open planned office, in the middle of which a huge scale model of the entire development was mounted, including golf courses. Around the room drawings, maps, and large photos displayed the stunning architecture of each of the villages.

This was Florida living; buying a plot off plan in a golfing community that offered a house and a lifestyle between three-hundred thousand and five million dollars.

On top of that was an annual property tax (a percentage of the value of the house), owner dues for upkeep, plus a golf membership (at least \$60,000 and a tennis membership about \$5,000 per year).

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