





It's known as the Sunshine State, but they call it home. On Paynes Prairie, three little birds look into the open sky. The mother heron notices their hesitation. "Don't worry," she says sweetly, "Every little thing is going to be all right." She nudges them and their wings shiver. After a few moments, one of the little birds takes a step forward. Together they spread their wings, make the jump, and an alligator watches them as they glide into the distance.

As curiosity continued to orient them, the little birds begged their mom to continue exploring and head to South Florida. They glided wing to wing over the Everglades flying high above the earth as the marshy ground grew into a coastal city right before their eyes. Their mother chuckled as the three clamored for the best view of the bustling city and people below. Finally stopping for a rest, they waded on the sandy lagoon banks of Fort Lauderdale's historic Bonnet House where their mother whispered "Don't worry about a thing". A strong coastal breeze then forced them from the branch back into the sky, and away they went.





This family of birds headed north to an area in northern Palm Beach County that provided a respite for other little birds to heal and gain strength after some catastrophic event in their lives. Several of their little friends were healing at the Busch Wildlife Sanctuary with other indigenous creatures of the native habitats found throughout the state. In fact, a couple of them were to be released in a few days and could join them on their adventures in South Florida. After a brief visit, again they were in flight. As they swooped about the sky along the lands kissing the great highway, they happened upon a new attraction to many of their kind. A place that had massing of beautiful trees to rest in and waters that were so turquoise crystal clear they could see their reflection as they preened in the recycled waters of Green Cay Park 2.

Fully rejuvenated from the healing waters, the family of birds continued their migration north. Johan, a very rare Florida bird, joined them leaving behind his sanctuary for the first time. On the way, Johan paused to circle over Reiter Park, brimming with native plants and littoral habitat. A flock of folks gathered in the park. A tower near the amphitheater immortalized the city's favorite bird, the Sand Hill Crane. "Have I stumbled upon bird Mecca?" Johan wondered. Landing, he was greeted by the sound of hundreds of migrating birds swaying and singing along to a song called "Free Bird." A few overzealous humans began snapping photos of the mysterious and strange *Johanicus dixhitii*. "Please, no photos. I'm just here to rock!" Johan squawked. The park was beautiful, the band was incredible, and Johan decided he would not be migrating this year. He loved Florida's landscapes far too much.





After a weekend of rocking at the Sandhill Music Festival in Reiter Park, Johan's best friend Alberto Cordova Francisco Juan Diego de Caiman IV heads home to St. Augustine, returning to the family tour guide business. Alberto comes from a long line of alligator guides, and though he occasionally gets chompy with tourists, he's well-known as the City's best storyteller! Alberto's tour starts at the Colonial Quarter and ends at the Bridge of Lions parks where he tells of the arrival of British Privateer Sir Francis Drake. His great-great-grandfather told tales of Spanish Settlement, his great-grandfather of the Civil War, and his grandmother of Flagler-era architecture. Alberto continues the story, telling of St. Augustine's resiliency efforts amid climate change. Alberto explains "As we write St Augustine's newest chapter, the landscape, and ever-expanding seascape, remains the defining character in the story."

“Oh, the sites we’ll see!” I exclaim as we board the train in St Augustine headed to Central Florida on the old Seaboard Line. The most beautiful landscapes come into view. First, the pine flatwoods, who give way to the Live Oaks and Cabbage Palms in the Hammock.

“Is that a Florida Panther?!” my traveling companion states. I shrug, “It would be far north if it were.”

Then we get closer to the St. Johns and viewshed gives way to scrub. We cut through a cypress dome, and back into the scrub again.

“Look! A Scrub Jay?,” I point. She nods with a smile.

As we pull into Orlando, I breathe a sigh. I nod to my companion, “I’ll miss those natural landscapes, they’re unlike anywhere else in the world.”

“Don’t be silly,” she says, “We can always walk and bike them!”

Thank God for that I think to myself.





In the old bistro overlooking Lake Eola, the gnarly, gray bearded man commented to his companion, “Those folks think that our precious landscapes will last forever, but they’ll soon forget, and my images of the beauty of the swamp will survive to remind others to preserve that environment.

When I was a youngin, I’d take my cameras and spend days soughslogging through the 8 foot high, alligator infested sawgrass of the Big Cypress looking for just the right composition of the water and storm clouds to frame our Florida landscape.”

On the black and white checkered floor he noticed a tattered magazine explaining how water flow and nutrients were killing the ecosystem. On the last page of the National Park brochure was a photograph of the fast disappearing Everglades Park wildlife with the headline:

### **Conservation is Everyone’s Responsibility**

“Perhaps tomorrow, we might go on a guided tour through the swamp habitat behind my gallery”.

A tattered magazine blew through the open door of the café and fluttered down the street. Jogging a few steps to pick it up, she glanced around for a place to throw it away, when the image on the cover caught her eye.

60th ANNIVERSARY OF  
THE HISTORIC MacARTHUR BANYAN

She grinned, thinking of the stories she had heard about the challenges encountered when this massive tree was relocated including spilled molasses, snapped wires and delayed trains. At the time it was moved, the banyan was already 80 years old and 75 tons of leafy splendor. This mighty tree has since remained in place and has impacted and influenced landscape and development for the next 60 years and counting.

I can only hope that the impression I leave on the landscape will be as lasting and as important, she thought. She slowly thumbed her way through the pages of the magazine when suddenly her grin grew into a full smile of surprise as she discovered her own project and design highlighted on page 30.





She found her way to an empty bench in the café's patio, and sat down slowly while her mind pondered away. As she walked down the memory lane, reminiscing glimpses of her juvenile inspiration.

It was the park hidden somewhere between the tall apartment buildings of her neighborhood, an oasis away from the hustle bustle of the busy city street. The park was densely planted, light trickled in it highlighting the color and vibrancy of the flowering understory; like traversing the jungle. It was hard to tell whether the park existed for real or was a figment of her imagination. One day while walking with her father in the dappled shade, he picked up a seed from the ground and said

“Every seed has the potential to sprout and grow into a mature tree if you nurture it with love.”

Suddenly, the sound of thunder jolted her out of her thoughts, it began to pour heavily.



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Too late to seek refuge in the closed Café, she dashed to the nearest area of shelter – a grandiose Southern Live Oak in the neighboring park. As the rain intensified and visibility of her surroundings quickly faded, her circumstances compelled her to observe the intricate subtleties of her sanctuary.

The chaotic twists and turns of the branches in every direction left the girl with a curious, yet simple thought – “Where could they possibly be going?”. For a tree so deeply rooted – or cemented, rather - in place for hundreds of years, it has been witness to many different scenes and stories throughout time. Before the inception of the park, the neighborhood, or even the town– the behemoth Oak was one of many in its Hammock ecosystem, dominating the vast untouched landscape. So, maybe the question is not where the tree is going, but where has it been?

Prairie land to dirt roads, dirt roads to paved roads, paved roads to developed communities – the Oak continued to travel through the ever-changing Florida landscape without moving an inch. How many storms had this Oak weathered, providing refuge to those caught in the rain? How many developers had this tree conquered to preserve the picturesque nature of the park? If the Oak could talk – oh, the stories it could tell. The world around it refused to stay in place – yet, the Oak found a way to persevere and remain.

As quickly as Florida summer storm had begun, the rainfall ceased, and blue skies began to seep through the dark overcast. The girl emerged from her cocoon of safety, and quietly thanked the tree for its dutiful service. It was that moment she noticed a meandering path of water running through the park that she had not noticed prior to the swift downpour. Indulging her curiosity, she began to follow the newly formed system - hoping to see where it may take her next.





She watched the raindrops converge and flow throughout the park becoming aware of the contours of the land. The park, which had seemed flat and still at the beginning of the storm, came alive with streams and puddles in mass migration. She decided at that moment that she, too, would become a raindrop and follow the path of the water. In the soft light of the cleared storm, she could see the water glistening and softly trickling down the slope.

Channels became streams which, in turn, became a small creek. and she found herself in a quiet, wooded area surrounded by oaks and the sweet smell of blooming gardenias someone had planted long ago. Suddenly, she realized she could not hear the street anymore. The noise of cars had been replaced by the sound of whistling birds and squirrels jumping from tree to tree. The world around her became green and lush. Where had she been transported to? Had this been here all along?

As she kept walking along the open path, she came across a beautiful old bridge – others have walked here before her after all. The bridge, although showing its age, was carefully crafted to withstand the test of time. Others had walked here before her, no, they had cared for this land and shaped it into their own urban oasis. She wondered which stones had been dragged by the creek and which had been carefully planned and plotted to blend into the scenery around her. Visions of men and women in 1920's garb carefully planting gardenias and azaleas among patches of saw palmetto danced before her eyes. Kids running and climbing the branches of the old oaks to get a look at the sabal palm fronds swaying in the wind. However, today it was quiet – nothing but her and the butterfly that crossed her path as she looked down at her reflection in the creek.

She crossed the bridge and found herself at the foot of concrete steps nestled among the ferns of the bank. As she climbed each step, she felt herself pulled back into the city. The familiar, car-filled street appeared before her eyes. The quiet air was replaced with the chatter of people out for an evening walk. In the dream of her urban oasis, she had lost track of time and direction, just where had she emerged?

She realized she was on a street that was not too far from her office. She checked her watch. It was almost the end of the school day. She would need to go pick up her daughter. The school was nearby. After picking up her daughter, they decided to stop at a playground they both loved. The playground was in the middle of a native oak hammock. Play areas were immersed in a landscape of tall mature Live Oaks and Sabal Palms, with an understory composed of Saw Palmetto, Wild Coffee, and Sword Fern. Birds and butterflies were everywhere. Children were climbing on boulders, traversing logs, and running on hills. After they finished at the park, they walked home. Experiencing beautiful Florida landscapes was not over though.





On the walk home the canopy of live oaks filtered light into irregular soft beams that coated the surface of everything like an illuminated abstract painting. The two found their attention captivated by the native flowers such as columbine, black eyed susan and blanket flower. It was as if walking through a quilted blanket made from the Earth herself. In a stark transition, we passed from under the canopy to see the bright blue sky silhouetted with swaying cabbage palms that played music in the wind. The sidewalk relented to small swaths of sand with beach sunflowers and sea grapes that bathed in the sun. Swallow tailed kites danced above with their curious split tails, contrasted with the ever humble gopher tortoise slowly retreating into his burrow in the dune down the path. Mesmerized by nature, we had to choose to venture down the path or continue home as planned.



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