

For Lack of Wood

Outside

A thin dusting of ash coated cars and shrubs, clung to trees planted smack in the center of square patches of grass. Coral Cay took on the feeling of having been submerged under water for many centuries. The community had been warned to stay inside and for their own protection, they did. The schools, just reopened from winter break, closed. The intersections remained empty as the lights went from green to yellow to red to green again and no one hit the brakes, no one punched a code to drive through gates. The guard went home to his gated apartment on the other side of town, out of the reach of the fingers of smoke that encapsulated Coral Cay.

Caches of unused hurricane supplies would see them through their confinement. A noxious fog clung heavily over the houses while the oil refineries continued to burn. The radio and television assured that foreign terrorists were not responsible, though a pert happy voice noted, "Eco-imperialists have not been ruled out."

Even in normal times, the swings only swung when the wind picked up. The ash had fallen over a sheer layer of dirt. A year before, a swarthy male, 6'2, in a camouflage jacket, had been witnessed near the small picket fence lining the playground. A notice was placed in mailboxes urging everyone to check online for the growing lists of pedophiles employed by the recent construction boom.

No one waxed the slide to make it faster, no one called Marco Polo from the pool the community paid to have cleaned every week. After a heated board meeting, an anonymous email had gone out about chlorine levels, communicable diseases, and amphibians inhabiting the filter.

Inside

Children did not grow cranky. They were not used to playing outside. They reached new levels on their video games and their parents joined the competition. Hands reached into large plastic barrels of bright orange fish crackers purchased in bulk at the warehouse store. They watched DVDs with special features. A few read books or did puzzles. Some practiced the piano. No one mentioned homework.

News

A young couple described as friendly and fit were found dead in their bedroom while their two year old played downstairs. Deputies found Mark Bartholomew, 28, and his wife, Amy, 28, around 7 a.m. yesterday morning at their home in the Butterfly Park development.

Talk

A phone rang. Then another. More. The clicking sound of call waiting. A chorus of cell phone tunes. Bright hellos turned to awkward silences, a whispered not in our neighborhood. The news fanned out across the curving streets as neighbors on Palm Circle told residents of Alligator Way who called friends on Graceland Pointe. There had been a murder, one of their own, behind the gates. Though few had ever spoken to the couple, recently arrived from the Midwest, they remembered seeing her on a run, watching him push their toddler's bright plastic tricycle. No one had ever waved and each neighbor, feeling grace swell in his or her heart, regretted the opportunity to know this couple, this young blond couple now lost to their world. They looked like a perfect family.

The citizens of Coral Cay looked out windows and saw the foggy smoke, the empty streets. They double-checked the locks on their sliding glass doors and turned surveillance cameras on. It could have been us, they said. It could have been us. The evening news was hours away. CNN did not cover it.

Online a forum had already started. The Coral Cay Observer sent out breaking news emails and fingers clicked on keys, mouses moved arrows towards inboxes. "What do you think of the Coral Cay Murders?" the forum asked.

Belief

My mother, who told me last Christmas that she has never believed in Jesus, ends her phone calls by asking when I last attended church. "It would take me 30 minutes to get to an Episcopal Church," I claim, using her own excuse for not attending. "Oh," she says. "I understand." Then she adds, "But is there a Lutheran Church near you? Because I read the two have merged." There is an Evangelical Lutheran Church a quarter mile from her house that she will not attend because the congregation sways its hands, whoops hallelujah. My mother does believe that it is unseemly to shout in public, especially in church.

Kinship

They cannot go outside. The Starbucks sits empty; there is no line at the bagel shop. They pull out their immaculate Braun coffee makers and plug in the cord. They extract bagels from the freezer to thaw. The grinder comes out from the cupboard and the sound of beans breaking up fills the kitchen. They sigh, preferring to pay for what they have already invested in being able to make expertly at home. Knowing someone has made the coffee for them makes them feel less lonely.

Update

Not much is known about the double homicide. Postings on The Coral

Cay Observer readers' forum speculate about drug use and a swinger's lifestyle. Someone accuses Mark Bartholomew of having an affair. Someone posits that the lover's boyfriend, a mechanic at Sea 'N Ski, is responsible for the gruesome crime. Other forum members immediately attack any efforts at impugning the dead, insisting that the Bartholomews' were an all-American family.

The Coral Cay Observer has allowed the messages to stand because it is a free speech forum. The editor responsibly cautions, "Just as free speech has its problems and pitfalls, so too, potentially, does content on our site."

Due to the forum, The Coral Cay Observer has had a record number of hits on its site and will be raising advertising rates accordingly.

Town Square

SoccerMom writes: Everyone lock your doors. Hug your children. Work hard at your everyday lives. That poor child was playing downstairs while his parents were murdered.

4KnaKtor writes: How do you think they could afford a house in Coral Cay? They were swinging. They were dealing drugs. I heard that Amy was a whore who cheated on her husband back in the Midwest. They were all doing everyone.

SunshineState writes: You are a very bad man.

Diversity

The Mayflower Colony, built with large stone gates in arcs like palms bent out from the receiving arms of the road, is noted for its diversity. Its neighborhood covenant allows for eight species of trees. There are six different house models to choose from and three exterior options: Berkshire Clapboard, Santa Fe Stucco, or Victorian Shingle. Exteriors may be completed in twelve shades of beige, yellow, or white. The other communities in Coral Cay have only four plans and very narrowly defined covenants for flora.

Family

JesusRox4Ever writes: As an indirect family member of Mark and Amy, I want to thank those who have posted positive messages and prayers. For those who do not know the couple, this story will fade away. But for those of us who love Mark and Amy, our hearts will never heal.

CastleInTheSky writes: I didn't realize you were so close to Mark and Amy. How is the child doing? What do you think of 4KnaKtor's comments? You knew them, so you must have something you could share with us.

JesusRox4Ever writes: By indirect family, I mean that we are all children

of God. I never met Mark and Amy, but they are part of my spiritual circle as is their child, for whom I pray. I have nothing new to share except that I should not have put on that Irish Rovers CD last night and I definitely should have had something to eat before drinking that whisky.

After Work

Patrick O'Brien's, advertised as an old-fashioned, family run Irish Pub, is the hangout of young urban professionals after work and on weekends. The game is visible from any one of ten plasma screen televisions inside the 11,000 square foot building, made to resemble a castle. Their Irish nachos and Angel Wings were voted "Best in Coral Cay" for four years running. In the center is a wood paneled room with a fireplace and a dartboard that does, at times, resemble an actual pub. Across the parking lot from O'Brien's is the cell-phone store behind which men get blowjobs and their wives won't know.

Coconuts in Cocoa Beach is the place to be on a Saturday afternoon. Live bands and free drinks if you know the owners. Their annual "Lemme Crawl to the Beach" bash honors the person who can still pull themselves down to the water's edge without passing out after consuming the most margaritas, of which there are three hundred variations on the menu. The girls with bright fingernails and tossed ponytails prefer strawberry frozen no salt. The stockbrokers take theirs on the rocks, with salt and upscale tequila with names like Two Fingers.

Hearties and Swabs, down by the beach, is for skanks and hos.

The Adam's Rib is a strip joint off I-75 where the tips pay for Hot4you's graduate program in elementary education. She knew Mark Bartholomew by face and by name: he was the only regular patron who put tips in her hands, not her panties. Like others, however, he often came by to talk and she knows how unhappy he was. She stopped contributing to the online forum when JesusRox4Ever accused her of being responsible for the decline of America's public schools.

Seasons

There are no seasons, really, in Florida. Hurricane season means it is wetter and hotter, winter means it is somewhere in the 70's, but the earth does not renew itself. Instead there is constant growth: of foliage, of houses, of people making traffic on I-75. There is no time to turn, no time for every purpose under heaven because there is always a To Do list divided into sections in a Franklin Covey planner consisting of Things I Must Do, Things I Would Like To Do, Things I Ought to Do, Nice Things To Do, and Things I Cannot Do. There is also a wish list, with a small guardian angel sticker affixed by the title. For the most part, the Things I Must Do is a non-evolving list because bills come every month. Estimated tax payments must be made quarterly. The grass needs consistent mowing and you will never finish your

laundry, truly, unless you do it naked and nudity is frowned upon. (See the dangerous repercussions of a swinger's lifestyle on The Coral Cay Observer murder forum.)

The Ecosystem

Most citizens of Coral Cay think of themselves as hardworking, middle class Americans. Whether they own a construction company, work as a mechanic or in an office, they know they are accomplishing the American Dream when they put the down payment on plan A, B, C, or D. They wash their cars in the driveway on Sundays, with specially purchased clothes and wax. They do not trust their shiny black or gunmetal or fire truck red babies to the uncaring arms of the car wash.

Methods of accrual, peculiarities in the tax code, the variances of meaning between city, state, and federal laws. All complications that create the need for the professional jobs that mean a house is 4,000 square feet rather than 2,000; an SUV is a limited edition with heated seats. Groceries can be bought at the local gourmet market: grass feed steak from Argentina instead of local beef from the region. The cattle in their neighborhood are only temporary residents put on the land to declare it a farm so the developers never have to pay taxes. Doe-eyed, sickly cattle moved from site to site, more valuable as a tax evasion than as meat.

Marketing comes up with a list of names. Advertising creates a campaign to convince the public. The accountants make artificial projections of profit and loss to manufacture an artificial picture that is presented in the form of artificial conclusions to analysts and shareholders. PR creates the buzz and organizes the opening event. The salesmen pick up the phones and sell. The landscape architect orders trees from another continent and has illegal workers plant them. A woman slips on an unfinished section of sidewalk at a ribbon cutting ceremony and the lawyer files a brief. The case is settled out of court and the woman no longer works. She uses her money to shop at the mall and pay for the products that will pay for the lights and the fixtures and the salaries of the cashiers. After all, idle hands do the devil's handiwork.

Prayer

My sister tells me that prayer does work. Just last week, she prayed she would get a legal job working for the state. The day of the interview, she prayed to find her stockings and when she went into her closet, a large walk-in where the carpet is invisible beneath the mess of clothes, shoes, and coats piled underneath empty hangers, she found a brand new package of nylons in exactly the color, black, she wanted. Then she prayed to find her shoes, which she never can find, and right next to the bed, not under the bed, were the very shoes she wanted: the Delman patent leather pumps she considers good luck. She prayed to find the right suit and hanging on a hanger in plas-

tic wrap was the DKNY suit her husband remembered to pick up from the drycleaners the previous night, even though she dropped it off two months before. She checked her computer before departing, only to see a new email from jobmonster.com advising on the ten dos and don'ts of interviewing. She got the job, where no one is allowed to work overtime because the state does not pay overtime. My sister had prayed to be able to pick her daughter up from daycare at 5:30. She assures me that prayer does work.

The News at Eleven

Directly in front of the scene of the crime, the local reporter stands in a large yellow slicker usually reserved for hurricane coverage at the beach. She has protective goggles over her eyes as she coughs out her report to the camera directly opposite her. The goggles obscure her eyes, so she resembles a large, shaking bug. The cameraman wears a slicker and goggles too, but he also has an oxygen mask to breathe. "Live from Butterfly Park, the Coral Cay murders demonstrate the fallout of failed relationships," Cindy Smith hacks out. "Jason Riggs, 27, of Castle Springs, mechanic, was a loner and a misfit. Mandy Harlow, 26, also of Castle Springs, mistress, was the mother of Jason's 5-year-old illegitimate child and a woman searching for someone other than a mechanic." The reporter clutches her microphone and gasps for breath. "Amy Bartholomew, 28, of Coral Cay, mother and jogger, was the innocent victim of her husband's infidelity. Mark Bartholomew, 28, also of Coral Cay, surfer and certified public accountant, told his wife of the affair on Christmas Eve, just two weeks before the murder. It's a cautionary tale about the loss of family values in our world. Now back to the studio." The camera shuts off as Cindy Smith reaches for her own oxygen mask and collapses from the burning smoke.

On Christmas Eve

SoccerMom writes: Mark told Amy he was leaving on Christmas Eve. What husband in his right mind would tell his wife on a holiday!

CastleInTheSky writes: I agree. They were the perfect family opening gifts and celebrating the holidays, but now they are dead. That poor child. Christmas will always be terrible.

SoccerMom writes: Well said, CastleInTheSky. Lock your doors, hug everyone you love, and work hard at your everyday lives or you could be Mark and Amy.

JesusRox4Ever writes: I can't believe he told her on Christmas Eve. I would kill my husband if he ruined the holiday that way. I know I'll never think of Christmas in the same way.

Counseling

Amy Bartholomew subscribed to a lot of women's magazines. She would search for surveys, quizzes that might help her save her marriage. She read the sex tips squeamishly, and wondered if good girls really did all that. She contemplated articles with titles like, "Are You Loving Too Much?" "When Being in Love Means Being in Pain," "Do You Make Excuses for His Moodiness?" or "Relationship Jeopardy." She highlighted the names of marriage counselors in the yellow pages even though her family, strict Catholics, did not accept psychiatry. Her mother believed in priests and when Amy was date raped at 14, her father acted as her counselor and guide. Her eating disorder has never been acknowledged, even in the confessional.

Identity Theft

What you wear, what you drive, how you twirl your hair around your finger, can you twirl your hair around your finger or is it too short, defines who you are. Fat or thin, athletic or not, you own sports attire. You wear pajamas to the mall and a baby-t that exposes your belly regardless of its girth. A Care Bears backpack and a pink I-Pod Nano with an inscription "Best Friends Forever" is one way. A vintage shirt for a YMCA camp in Iowa bought at the church thrift shop for \$12 paired with fashion sneakers that cost \$100 is another. New Balance because no one will wear Pumas since a rumor started at the high school that the leather comes from baby seals. A bake sale was organized to send money to protect baby seals from Puma hunters. Parents wear Pumas, so kids want something else anyway.

For everything you can imagine, there is a group, a cult of followers, a fashion statement worn devotedly by loyal participants who think this is it, these fur trimmed boots in a tropical climate are it, while mocking the person with soccer shoes and the person in soccer shoes mocks the kids who play soccer. It is cool to wear soccer gear. It is not cool to play soccer.

Evolution

GolfAddict writes: Jason is an animal. He has not evolved from higher than an ape. And if Mark wanted to have sex with someone else, he should have left his wife first or thought of his kid and stopped the affair.

JesusRox4Ever writes: There is no such thing as evolution. It is a lie perpetuated by the communist left, like global warming.

GolfAddict writes: Who calls anyone a communist anymore?

JesusRox4Ever writes: I know about you GolfAddict! You are one of those bleeding heart liberal lunatics for government health care! You're probably

an eco-imperialist like the people who started the fire. Move to Canada and get in line. Or to Russia and see what communism is really about. It is about the eradication of God. God Bless America!

4KnaKtor writes: GolfAddict is one of those anti-death penalty pansies. Wah Wah Wah! Whine me a river that some sociopath murderer is being electrocuted! Remember the bar-b-que they had when Bundy was executed? I miss the days when the radio played Electric Avenue whenever there was an execution. It's all those snowbird liberals moving down here changing this state. Welcome to Florida. Now go home! Anyone want to meet up at Hearties and Swabs for a drink once the smoke clears?

GolfAddict writes: Are you denying evolution JesusRox4Ever?

JesusRox4Ever writes: I am not related to apes!

SunshineState writes: I find it easier to believe I'm related to apes than to 4KnaKtor.

Business Model

Which came first? The box store or the house? The mega church or the followers? The cashier asks for your zip code so the company can build a new store closer to you saving you from a long drive. (You never would walk and there are no sidewalks). You might visit your relatives at Christmas, fly to another state for a wedding, but you never need to leave because everywhere is the same. Or, you feel safe leaving because everywhere you go has a TGIF and an Olive Garden. You're family.

The superstores look alike, but one gives benefits to employees while the other doesn't. Each store will match the other's sale price. Outside the Walmart, college students protest. The news reports a grocery store strike because the local chain can't give health care benefits if they want to compete. People smile, have sympathy, but walk right past to shop because time is money and who has five minutes to drive to another store? That is on the "Nice To Do" list and gas costs are rising. JesusRox4Ever calls the protestors unpatriotic communists. 4KnaKtor tells them to do their jobs or go home.

My sister continued to shop at Walmart anyway until the checkout girl stole her credit card and racked up \$750 charging groceries and baby clothes. My sister stopped shopping at Walmart because Walmart employees steal.

Appreciation

Mark Bartholomew took Art History 101 at the state college when his fraternity brothers advised him that the hottest chicks would be enrolled. In a class of 200, he ended up next to Amy, his future wife. Mark surprised

himself by realizing that he admired things of beauty besides his fellow co-eds. While he found modern art to be a snobby joke, he had a deep appreciation of artists within his reach, painters he felt comfortable with and able to collect. Painters who appreciated sports as he did like Leroy Neiman and an original Deborah Sampson image of a surfer cradled in the curl of a wave. Thomas Kincaid, Painter of Light (registered trademark) for Amy who was fond of Impressionists.

Art turned him on. The metaphor of creation and sex. A year before, he had enrolled in a painting class and ended up doing the teacher in the supply room after class. He liked to describe his affection for art to his lover Mandy using the four techniques of art criticism he had learned in college: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. He took her to a gallery by the beach and pondered which new artist they might collect together. He felt tacky sharing Thomas Kincaid with his mistress. The Painter of Light belonged to his wife and Mark tried to be considerate.

Conversation

While the oil refinery continues to burn, they do not grow antsy about leaving their houses. They are addicted to the forum and the passage of time is lost in the growing pages of posts. They worry about the start of work until someone sheepishly admits to perusing the Internet all day anyway. They realize that they can read the forum at the office too.

At the table during dinner, when they are forced together, their conversations are cut-off, lacking focus. They can't communicate with their children, their spouses; they prefer not to talk about real issues. On the forum, behind the mask of their avatar, they show their true colors.

The prior week, JesusRox4Ever complained to her husband and daughter about a particularly chatty co-worker. "She is so self-involved, always talking about herself," JesusRox4Ever had sighed. When the co-worker persisted, made vain attempts to have one linear conversation, JesusRox4Ever told her, "Look, if I cared about what you have to say, I'd read your blog. So either write it, or shut up."

Justice

LegalGenius writes: I visited someone in maximum custody prison and then the Earl Warren Work Release Center. Free as a bird all day. It isn't like those television shows where the bad guy serves his sentence in some dark cell. These guys hang out. They have picnic tables and green lawns just like we do.

JesusRox4Ever: What a warm fuzzy feeling of security that gives.

LegalGenius writes: In real life, the criminals are out there. That's why

I keep a list of my neighbors' license plates on a spreadsheet that I check on the Internet regularly. I also keep a list of wanted license plates and profiles of pedophiles and kidnappers in my glove compartment, so I can be aware when I am away from home. I Google my kid's teachers online. My wife and co-workers consider me to be a bit of a legal/forensics expert because I watch so many television shows about crime and justice.

CastleInTheSky: What do you think about the case against Jason, LegalGenius? It sounds like Jason is guilty, but I hope he didn't do it. Mandy is the one who should be in jail or on a slab in the morgue. She is deceitful and manipulative. She is old enough to know better. Did she think she was the first woman ever told, "My wife is mean to me?" May she burn in hell.

SoccerMom writes: Right on, CastleInTheSky! Is your man good looking? Watch out! I know women who've had their husbands stolen by a no class, no morals woman. If I had to choose between Jason and that whore Mandy, I'd have Jason on the streets. Mark would never leave Amy for such a skank. Woman watch out! I lost my first husband to a ho like Mandy Harlot.

4KnaKator writes: Amy is a whore, Mandy is a whore, and you are all idiots. So he did both of them. Who cares? Women are all cheating whores. Anyone want to meet up at Hearties and Swabs for a drink once the smoke clears?

SunshineState writes: 4KnaKator is a redneck!

JesusRox4Ever writes: I skip his posts. He adds nothing to this forum.

Feeding Frenzy

The forum grows like a beast and the victims' families steer clear of the Internet. They turn off the local news and tuck the small child left parentless into bed. They pull their blinds and pray to be left alone by the reporters who will blanket the street once the smoke clears and the area is declared safe.

The forum members turn on each other with random pleasure. They research online and call the home of the mistress, post the name of the child. LegalGenius pays \$19.95 for an online background check of the victims and the murderer. SunshineState tells them they are overstepping the boundary of privacy, so they attack her. JesusRox4Ever taunts her by writing, "SunshineState is clearly a communist idiot like GolfAddict." SunshineState stops posting, peers out the window wondering when she can go outside again. GolfAddict fields their abuse.

The rain began in the late afternoon. The already dark sky filled with driving lines. The water poured into the night and helped the effort to extinguish the fire, which had spread to surrounding brush. Businesses reopened, schools welcomed back begrudging children. Early, before the light fully pierced the day and the street lamps still shone in the grainy morning, a man walked out into the street, his dog prancing on the leash, pulling to sniff at the road. The air was clammy and fetid. As the dog yanked forward, closer, the man rubbed his eyes. The asphalt was slippery, seemed to move. He bent down and realized that catfish were flopping about, glimmering in the dim but growing light of day. He had been sleeping when the water rose through the drainage holes, filled the street so that the nearby lake flowed like a river, for no more than an hour, through the curving streets before receding and leaving in its wake the bedraggled and thumping fish. He leaned even closer as fish gasped for breath, shimmied across the road. An act of God, he thought with awe before returning inside to tell his wife, with no attempt to understand what exactly a sign from God would mean for him, a computer programmer who traveled frequently and had no time for church.

In their offices, the forum members were already logging on. **F**