

10-27-2016

# Desert Palms

Carolyn D. Pledge-Amaral  
*fu*, carolynamaral@gmail.com

**DOI:** 10.25148/etd.FIDC001248

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Pledge-Amaral, Carolyn D., "Desert Palms" (2016). *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2977.  
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2977>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the University Graduate School at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

DESERT PALMS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Carolyn Pledge Amaral

2016

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Carolyn Pledge Amaral and entitled Desert Palms, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

---

Donna Aza Weir-Soley

---

John Dufresne

---

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 27, 2016

The thesis of Carolyn Pledge Amaral is approved.

---

Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

---

Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

© Copyright 2016 by Carolyn Pledge Amaral

All rights reserved.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel would not have been possible without the support of the creative writing faculty at Florida International University. I especially thank my thesis adviser and director of the creative writing program, Les Standiford, for his patience, insight, guidance and humor.

I would also like to thank my circle of writers and friends who read and offered comments to this work during its formative stages. Much love and appreciation goes to my family for their unwavering encouragement and to my mother whose love of adventure and RV travels inspired this work of fiction. I am truly grateful to my husband Frank, without whom this novel would never have been possible.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

DESERT PALMS

by

Carolyn Pledge Amaral

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

DESERT PALMS is a contemporary women's novel set in an Arizona RV park. When Miamians Margie Campos and her husband, Carlos, unexpectedly inherit Desert Palms, a rundown retirement community, Margie reluctantly agrees to stay in Arizona to overhaul the park. With the discovery of a secret letter that threatens to unravel the family, an unscrupulous broker determined to buy the park on the cheap, and a husband bent on hitting it big, Margie digs in and starts to find purpose amidst a desert microcosm.

Told from Margie's perspective in a closely attached third person, DESERT PALMS is a realistic and humorous narrative that falls somewhere between the style of Liane Moriarty in, "The Husband's Secret" and Anne Tyler, in her novel, "Back When We Were Grownups." DESERT PALMS offers an offbeat cast of central characters who help Margie gain a deeper understanding of herself and what makes life worth living.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Chapter 1 .....	1
Chapter 2 .....	18
Chapter 3 .....	30
Chapter 4 .....	38
Chapter 5 .....	54
Chapter 6 .....	66
Chapter 7 .....	79
Chapter 8 .....	95
Chapter 9 .....	117
Chapter 10 .....	127
Chapter 11 .....	136
Chapter 12 .....	150
Chapter 13 .....	152
Chapter 14 .....	161
Chapter 15 .....	171
Chapter 16 .....	177
Chapter 17 .....	186
Chapter 18 .....	194
Chapter 19 .....	201
Chapter 20 .....	214

Chapter 21	.....	229
Chapter 22	.....	231
Chapter 23	.....	243
Chapter 24	.....	249
Chapter 25	.....	253
Chapter 26	.....	259
Chapter 27	.....	262
Chapter 28	.....	271
Chapter 29	.....	279
Chapter 30	.....	283
Chapter 31	.....	290
Chapter 32	.....	300
Chapter 33	.....	307
Chapter 34	.....	310
Chapter 35	.....	329
Chapter 36	.....	336
Chapter 37	.....	352



## Chapter 1

Margie flipped her sunglasses and opened the tinted window to get a better sense of the color of the landscape. Outside, ironwood trees and desert grass sprawled for miles—a palette of grey on beige on faded green. Only an occasional cactus or spindly palm offered a break from the monotony. In the distance, mountains rose like giants luring drivers to head in their direction, but Carlos kept his eyes on the ribbon of asphalt until they finally exited off the 1-10 onto Cowboy Road and headed towards Desert Palms RV Park.

Margie pushed the button to close the window and then smoothed her hair. “It’s a vast wasteland—dry and dead.”

“It’s Arizona. What were you expecting?” Carlos glanced at the clock on the dashboard and grabbed his coffee from the drink holder. “This place is barely an hour from Sky Harbor. Maybe we can get out of here tomorrow night. Take the red-eye.”

“Why would anyone want to vacation here when Florida has beaches and trees?” She kicked off her sandals and propped her feet against the dash—being short had its advantages.

He shrugged and glanced over at her feet. “Don’t put marks on the dash, Margie. These rental companies like to nickel and dime.”

Margie looked at her feet and back up at Carlos, but her toes stayed planted. She intended to save her strength for Desert Palms.

Carlos tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel, breaking his rhythm every now and then to change the radio station. The last forty-eight hours had left him tired and

notably disheveled, but even still, he looked handsome. His deep-set eyes and strong jawline gave him the timeless quality of a Cuban version of Egypt's Great Sphinx.

Margie, on the other hand, looked a wreck—an abstract Picasso come to life. She didn't have to look in the mirror to confirm this. She could feel it. First, there'd been the unexpected call from the RV Park, the rush to make arrangements, and then the long plane ride this morning from Miami. All of this, not to mention the time difference, had created a perfect storm for aging. She felt as old and prickly as a one of those giant cacti that dotted the landscape.

"I hope Manny's on top of that job. I told him to give me an update." Carlos took one hand off the steering wheel and picked up his phone to check messages. "The guy doesn't listen."

Years ago, Margie might have told him Manny knew just as much about roofing as he did. Or she might have said Carlos was making a big deal out of nothing and should relax. Early on in their marriage she might have even added a quip like, "How hard can it be to rip some tiles off a roof?" But after twenty-eight years together, she said only, "That's the job in Homestead?"

"If someone had told me five years ago I'd have to go that far out of Miami for work, I'd have told them they were nuts. Things are getting better, but Christ—Homestead? If we could get ourselves in with one of those developers, that would be the ticket. Manny better not fuck this one up."

"The ticket." Margie nodded. "Don't want to miss out on that." She flipped her glasses down and stared out at the desert. Carlos had been looking for one ticket or another for years. While she admired his ambition, the intensity was draining.

“There it is.” Carlos slowed and exited onto a narrow road next to a cactus-shaped sign that read *Welcome to Desert Palms*. On one of the side arms in smaller print was the legend, *Age Qualified 55+*. Carlos reached over and patted Margie’s thigh. “Another what—six-seven years?—we’ll be legal. ”

“Great. Something else to look forward to.” She shaded her eyes with her hand as they followed the wooden arrows that pointed to reception.

Carlos pulled into a spot in front of a clay-colored building that resembled a rundown Red Roof Inn. Plants drooped in plastic pots casting shadows on the porch, and advertising flyers patch-worked the glass door that led to the reception. A tiny “open” sign dangled from a hook, although the tint on the doors and windows shielded any sign of life inside.

“It looks like a scene from *Gunsmoke*.” Margie checked her face in the mirror behind the visor and reapplied some lipstick. She turned to Carlos. “You ready for this?”

“Not really.” He leaned his head back against the seat. “How in the hell did the old man end up here—managing an RV park? Christ. We never even camped when we were kids. No pup tent in the backyard, no tent trailer, no nature adventures. Nothing. Our idea of a family vacation was a cheap hotel in the Keys.” Carlos sat up and finished the last of his coffee. “And how in the hell did I get elected to be the one to sort out his stuff?”

“Cut your sister some slack, Carlos. It’s twins. Adriana’s fragile.”

“She wouldn’t have come no matter what.” Carlos took on a high-pitched voice and bobbed his head from side to side. “Let Carlos go to Arizona. Let Carlos sort out

Jack's mess. Carlos, Carlos, Carlos." He ran his fingers through his hair. "And if they make me identify Dad's body, I swear I'm going home."

"One thing at a time. It's almost two now. We'll talk to this woman and then head into Casa Grande." Margie grabbed her purse. "Let's go."

She opened the car door and surveyed the property. The last time she'd seen her father-in-law was over twenty-five years ago, the summer of 1984, when he'd been close to Carlos's age now. She tried to visualize a Carlos-look-alike shuffling about welcoming visitors and organizing singsongs, or whatever it was an RV park manager did, but the image was ludicrous. But nothing Jack had ever done jibed with reality. Her father-in-law was a master of throwing wrenches into peoples lives. Even though this last chapter would be draining, in a way, she was glad he was dead. Maybe they could finally move on.

The heat from the midday sun seared through the sky and lined Margie's upper lip in sweat. "For an RV park, I don't see many RVs."

"It's still September," Carlos said. "In a couple of months, I bet this place will be overrun."

The park spread like a huge symmetrical grid, each potholed road edged with the tallest, thinnest palm trees and fattest cacti Margie had ever seen—a Laurel and Hardy take on landscaping. Smooth beach stones decorated the roads and at each intersection a miniature stop sign suggested at some point in the year there was actually enough traffic to warrant precaution. Cactus shaped signs marked each site, many of which bore the last names of people she assumed would eventually return. A pool ran alongside the building beside a shuffleboard court, and just behind that, lay what appeared to be a pool hall and

a Laundromat. Could this forlorn place really come back to life? She wiped her lip and fanned herself with her free hand. “I’m surprised your father didn’t get fired.”

“I’m surprised he ever got hired. How old was he? Seventy-three? Seventy-four? Why was he even working?” Carlos shut the door and took a deep breath. “Can death be a resurrection? Because that’s what this is—a resurrection of shit.”

“He was going to turn up at some point.” Margie twisted her necklace to center the zodiac pendant. “Maybe he’s left you a million dollars stuffed in a mattress as retribution for his sins.”

“It’s probably stuffed with bills.” He paused. “I hope you’re not liable for your parent’s debts.”

She turned and stared. “And when haven’t we paid his debts? How about how we took care of everything and everyone after he walked out?” Margie knew part of Carlos’ coping strategy involved repressing memories from the years directly following Jack’s disappearance, but her memory was alive and well. Margie tutted and headed towards the building. “I wish all he’d left back then were a couple of bills.”

Carlos followed. “We should have hired a private investigator years ago.”

“Even if you’d found him living as a missionary feeding lepers in Bangladesh, it wouldn’t have changed anything.” Margie looked over her shoulder. “Some things are beyond forgiveness.”

“At least we would have known what kind of a shit-fest we’re walking into.”

“How much trouble can someone cause when they’re dead?” Margie took a deep breath and started up the stairs. “What’s her name again?”

“Pao.”