

STRANGENESS IN PARADISE

Tropic Hunters, Don't Lose That Number! by Gene Weingarten



"What's up, Doc?": Bugs Bunny (center) revealed which side of the dice to read.

You walk into a soccer stadium, right onto the field. You are supposed to be looking for a number, but there is no number in sight, not on the scoreboard, not in the stands, not on the grass. Around you are hundreds of milling people, similarly bewildered. Then you see it. The number is drawn on the grass in field paint. But it is too big to read: two numerals so gargantuan that they appear only as white lines tapering off indistinctly into the distance. The only way to read the number would be to climb high into the stands and look down, but the stands are off limits.

You walk out onto the beach, and there it is. Nothing hidden this time. A big bunny rabbit, munching a carrot, is lounging on the sand between two dice. The dice are the size of bungalows, twelve feet high by twelve feet wide by twelve feet deep. You know you are supposed to look for a number, but what number?

And what is the Goodyear Blimp doing all the way out in the middle of a field ... *on the ground*? Why have conductors suddenly appeared on the subway ... *punching tickets*? Why is the fat guy on stage demanding that you play Simon Says with him? You don't *want* to play Simon Says. (But why is it that everyone playing is getting the answer, and you're not?)

What does it all mean? Maybe there's a hint in the magazine. You be-



(Above) The winners of the first Hunt, Cathy Stutin and Mike Mattson, rush from the soccer field moments after getting the clue. (Center) Smart solvers realized the Goodyear Blimp had a porpoise.



gin by flipping pages. Here's the index, the letters to the editor, the ad for the fish cemetery . . .

The ad for the fish cemetery?

Welcome to The Tropic Hunt, one of the more peculiar events ever served up by any American newspaper. Created by *Tropic*, the Sunday magazine of *The Miami Herald*, the one-day treasure hunt has drawn some 20,000 participants into the streets of South Florida in its first two years. Simply described, it is a search for a hidden phone number; the first person to find and call it, wins. But to find it, the contestants first have to negotiate a minefield of odd clues and arcane hints and Mephistophelean misdirection. The theme of the event, if it can be said to have a theme, is sophisticated lunacy.

It is a game of skill and silliness played out on the world's largest game board, all of South Florida from Palm Beach to South Miami, a corridor of 80 miles. It is part road rally, part anagram, part riddle, part maze. It may be the largest-scale one-day contest ever devised.

But none of that captures it exactly. There is a certain eccentricity to the Tropic Hunt that defies easy definition or conventional analogy—even for me, and I run the thing.

My thoughts keep returning to one moment during the first Hunt. A participant came racing over to one of my colleagues, politely introduced himself, and allowed as to how he had

never in his life felt so confused, bedeviled, and tickled by his own ineptitude. Then he offered an observation.

"You guys," he said, "either belong in an institution or should be running one."

Which seemed to sum it up nicely.

Humor writer Dave Barry and I designed the first Hunt in 1984, loosely modeled after a yearly event run by Miami actuary David Harris as a fund raiser for a Miami-area synagogue. Adopting Harris's general theme—a road race to solve quirky puzzles—we added an element of deliberate madness, and a second element that would make the event unpredictable and intimidating: It would be open to everyone. Though the entry fee—the price of the *Sunday Herald*—was negligible, the prizes weren't.

We chose the prizes carefully. We wanted to attract dreamers, romantics, people who might not surrender an afternoon and their dignity for a shot at a car or a house or a matched set of Samsonite luggage, but who might do so for something a little more exotic.

In the first two years, winners of the Tropic Hunt have been treated to deli lunches in Paris, Honolulu, and New York.

Runners-up got corned-beef sandwiches.

Each year, the Hunt starts off easy, but weird. Readers first must solve a series of questions designed to bring everyone into the game. Some open-

ers from the past:

- Zoologists have determined that the fastest animal in the world, with a top speed of 100 feet per second, is a cow that has been dropped out of a helicopter. Traveling at top speed, how many seconds would it take the cow to travel 1,600 feet?

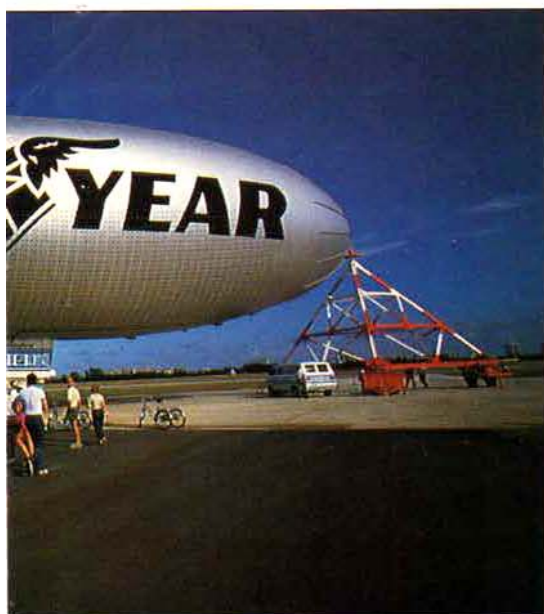
- Three missionaries and three cannibals are trying to cross a river, but they have only one boat, and they can never have a situation where one cannibal is alone with two missionaries, because the missionaries keep demonstrating the "missionary" position, and the cannibals are sick of it. Assuming the boat has 20 horsepower, how much horsepower does the boat have?

- One day the nine members of the U.S. Supreme Court decide to fill their ears with Tic Tac breath mints. If each ear holds three mints, what is the Court's total Tic Tac capacity?

- Assuming the average state legislator weighs 300 pounds, how many legislators would you have to throw out of a blimp to lighten the load by 1,800 pounds?

- Find the deodorant ad in this magazine. Take the number of the page that it is on and add to that its price, for *Tropic* readers.

And so forth. Once readers get their six starting numbers, they compare them to a cartoon map (see page 16) in *Tropic* containing dozens of numbered sites. The six correct answers correspond to six clue sites, five of which they must travel to. At noon, ready for anything, they hit the road.



At the Orange Bowl, a sculpture in the shape of the number four led to another clue, which led to another clue . . .

I suppose it was logical that if any city would embrace an event this fanciful and peculiar, it would be Miami. Miami is a place where the bizarre sometimes seems commonplace. Miami, it should be remembered, is home to deposed heads of state, the world's foremost arms merchant, and to four of the five Watergate burglars. Only in Miami does a dispute over a development issue result in one city politician challenging another to a duel.

Aglow in neon and pastels, stubbled and sockless, Miami is a city that has quite deliberately and self-consciously remade itself to conform not to some planned civic ideal, but to an image created by a TV show. Life imitates art. Here, the surreal abounds. Only in Miami are there signs in shops that boast, "We speak English." Only in Miami does even the common household roach assume mythic proportions. It is two inches long.

Miami, of course, loves the Tropic Hunt.

People arrive at each of five Hunt sites knowing only that they are looking for a numerical answer. Here are the sort of things they find, examples from the first two Hunts:

Miami Dice: Hunters had to figure out that dice, whatever their size, are customarily read by counting the dots on top. But, of course, they couldn't see the number on the top—the dice were 12 feet high. They had to figure

it out by observing the remaining sides and using the process of elimination. (The dice, so far as we know, were the largest dice in the world. Phil Lafer, of P. Lafer Design Studios, built them of Styrofoam and wood for a fee of \$5,000.)

White Line Fever: The only way to "read" the giant number on the face of the soccer field was to walk its path, and remember where you'd been. (At one point, a small group of mutinous hunters announced their intention of storming the grandstands for a better view. One of the monitors grabbed a bullhorn and told them that police had been instructed to "open fire" on anyone in the stands. Thus the rebellion was quelled.)

Train Of Thought: The only instructions that the hunters had been given was to "take a ride on Metrorail," Miami's new elevated rapid transit system. They weren't told where to get on, how far to go, or what to look for. When they arrived at any station, they were given a ticket with six numbers and this tease on it:

The answer to this clue

Isn't very hard

All you have to do

Is add two numbers on this card.

But when they approached the conductor, he punched only one number. After the next station, when they returned to the conductor, he told them, "Sorry, your ticket's already punched." They had to figure out that they were supposed to get off the train at that point, and take a car in the opposite direction. Conductors

Q. I'm seeing more and more magazine ads for brassieres these days and more and more women I know seem to be buying more and more of them. Is the bra-less look of the '60s dead?

A. We took your question to the experts, the lingerie manufacturers. Their answer was uplifting. Seems the bra is coming back strong. Bra sales in 1983 totaled about 200 million, the highest since feminism's onset (1950s sweater girls became bra burners). Ad writers for feminism.



Bob's Fish Cemetery

Disputes With Claws
We at Bob's Fish Cemetery have a very simple motto: We have simulated death grants our customers. We have a large stock of fish. We will give you a fishing hole cemetery on South...

COTTON SWEATERS



100% COOL, COMFORTABLE COTTON
IN NATURAL, WHITE, OR BLACK
MACHINE WASHABLE, XS - XL
\$37.50 POSTPAID
SEND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER TO

MAÑANA

319M WESTTOWN RD. WESTCHESTER PA 19382
OR IN MIAMI, CALL 383-6957



Blanche Is A Modern Woman

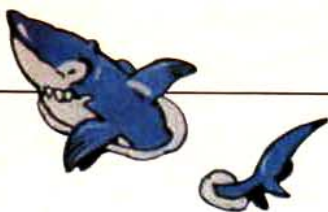
... a busy woman with today's active life style. By day, she's a mother of five, a best-selling novelist, a test-pilot neurosurgeon, the lieutenant governor of New Jersey. By night, she drinks herself blind and passes out in bowling alley restrooms. What kind of deodorant does she use?

Armpit Magic, of course.*

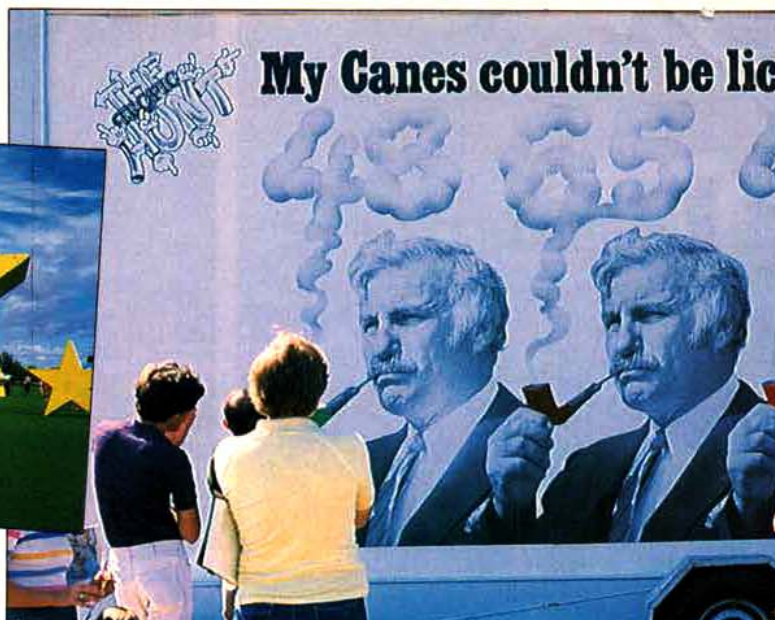
"Armpit Magic Deodorant... because a woman should not smell like a truck."

* \$5 at your local pharmacy. Special discount rate: one-third off for Tropic readers.

Buried in *Tropic* magazine, a section from the "People Etcetera" column and the top two ads shown above were key clues in unraveling the secret of the first Hunt. For Hunt II, those who recognized the bottom ad as a fake found the final solution with no sweat.



(Above) Figuring out that these stars form the constellation Cygnus was a small part of the solution. (Center) Which pipe-smoking man was relevant? Orange-tasting candy canes given away at the same site held the answer.



were punching one number on all northbound trains, and a different number on all southbound trains.

Misled Zeppelin: Next to the Good-year Blimp, four uniformed football players were running pass patterns, doing wind sprints, and performing tackling drills. A Miami Dolphins stat sheet was distributed. Hunters had trouble with this one for the same reason the Parisian police were bamboozled by Poe's *Purloined Letter*: The answer was too obvious. In fact, it was written in 15-foot-high letters above their heads. The numbers on the players' jerseys represented years, and the correct answer was the only number corresponding to a "Good Year," the season the Miami Dolphins went undefeated: '72.

Not-So-Simple Simon: Players arrived in a gymnasium to find a man on stage, demanding that everyone join in a game of Simon Says, baiting and taunting those who played. Most people joined in. Some stood by the sidelines, above it all, studying the Simon Says leader intently for clues in his mannerisms, the sequence of his motions, anything. These sophisticates didn't lose their dignity, but did lose their chance at Paris. The answer—the number 25—was flashed for an instant against a rear wall each time Mr. Simon Says instructed the players to turn around. (When people spotted the number, they would *roar* out of the gym in a giggling stampede. Now and then someone would exit, stop, and exclaim something like, "Omigod! We forgot Jason!")

As Hunt day progresses, things go from merely strange to seriously bizarre.

For each numerical solution, readers are directed to a page in the magazine that lists almost a hundred numbered clues. Their five answers, if correct, would thus lead them to five new clues that, taken together, combine to reveal the final secret of the Hunt.

This means we have to create nearly 100 bogus answers, and we do have fun with them. Last year, one read "IF U CN RD THS MSJ, U CN RD THS MSJ." Another said, "For Sale: one vastly overpriced VW Rabbit." Indeed, we had placed an ad in *The Miami Herald* classified section that day reading, "'78 VW RABBIT: Loaded, radials, headers, tweeters, goobers, no serious offer considered, \$55,500." The phone number belonged to one of *Tropic's* staffers. Callers heard a recording congratulating their thoroughness by noting that nothing in life is this easy. By midnight on Saturday—the day *before* the Hunt, the phone had rung two dozen times. Serious hunters get their magazines the night before and leave no stones unturned.

The first year, the five real clues led readers first to the magazine's gossip column, then to one specific answer in the column concerning brassieres. "But Rodney," the clue read, "an aardvark never sleeps without egg rolls." The first letter of each word spelled

out "bra answer," leading contestants to a rapid question and answer about brassiere styles in the "People Etcetera" section of the *Tropic*.

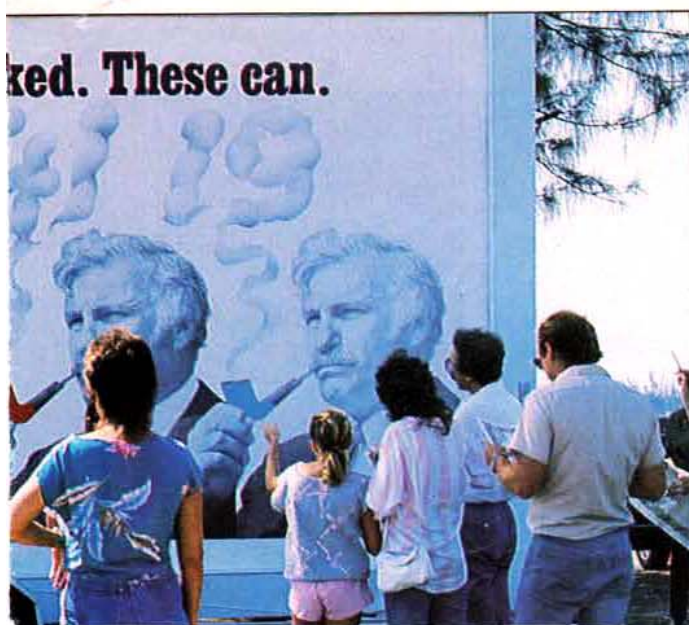
From yet another clue, hunters learned that they were looking for every sixth word in the bra answer, which formed this message: "The answer is in the sweater ad in the magazine." There was, indeed, an innocent-looking sweater ad tucked away in *Tropic*, and it included a phone number to call. Hundreds of people tried the number and got ... nothing. A phone out of service.

The final clue was this: "Wow, is mom upside down! Oh darn, is Rhonda mixed up! So what's laid?" The winner was the first person to realize that, just as "Wow" is "Mom" upside down and "Oh darn" is an anagram of Rhonda, the word "laid" is "dial" backward. They had to dial the number in the ad backward.

At *Tropic*, we worried—rather smugly—that we had made the final solution so tough no one would solve it. That was to lead to our first, but not our last, lesson in humility. Driving at speeds of up to 100 miles an hour, the winners—attorney Mike Mattson and his sister, Cathy Stutin—solved it in less than three hours.

In the next two hours, there would be 40 more calls.

The second year, we decided to change the final part of the contest to make it harder and to lessen the likelihood that people would endanger their lives by speeding. So we made it solvable in two parts.



It wasn't the clowning around that mattered, it was how the clowns were dressed. The colors of their costumes matched those of a two-digit number formed by cartoon clowns in the magazine.



Facing the music: The piano player inserted the Mickey Mouse theme into every song, an important clue for the perspicacious.

The first part, we told the readers, would take them out on the roads again, and would result in some sort of clue that they would need in order to solve the second part. The second part, to be delivered over the radio after the Hunt was over and everyone had returned home, would give people the final information they needed to get the winning phone number.

The solution to Part 1 led people to two words in the magazine—"more" and "shellshock"—and to this observation: "One flower can become Nero Wolfe." In combination, those three things were the answer to the first part of the Hunt. They had to figure it out.

Don't read the next paragraph right away if you want to try your hand at this. (Allow yourself 10 minutes. That's about the amount of time it took most of the successful hunters to solve it.)

Casual readers of detective fiction knew who Nero Wolfe was, and that helped. Mystery devotees knew that there is one flower associated with Rex Stout's famous sleuth—the orchid—but that, alas, was a red herring. What really counted was recognizing that just as "one flower" was an anagram for "Nero Wolfe," so was "more shellshock" an anagram for another detective hero—Sherlock Holmes.

Now, with that name in their minds, but no other hints, the hunters went home to hear the final clue on the radio. It was a poem:

The answer is the route I took
from my friend's tropic isle.
Remember, as the legend goes,
a miss is as good as a mile.
I flew nine miles, jogged ten
miles more
And then rowed home in eight.
Now call and ask for me,
Dial at your magic discount rate.

It had taken us—Barry, me, and *Tropic* staffers Tom Shroder and Doug Adrian—more than a month to come up with and polish this final part of the Hunt, and as before, we were concerned that we had made it too hard. To solve it, one had to use the map on page 16 to arrive at six separate insights, and see through several pieces of deliberate misdirection. Again, *don't read on if you want to try to solve it yourself. Allow half an hour.*

First, readers had to realize that the name Sherlock Holmes was, er, elementary to the solution.

"My friend," therefore, became Watson.

There is, a quarter mile offshore from downtown Miami, a place called Watson Island. We were referring readers not to the island itself, but to the drawing of the island in *Tropic* ("My friend's tropic isle").

Airbrush artist Otis Sweat had placed a seaplane in the drawing, facing southwest. We wanted readers to follow the plane in that direction for a distance of nine miles. But there was no scale of miles, no legend, on the map.

"... Remember, as the legend

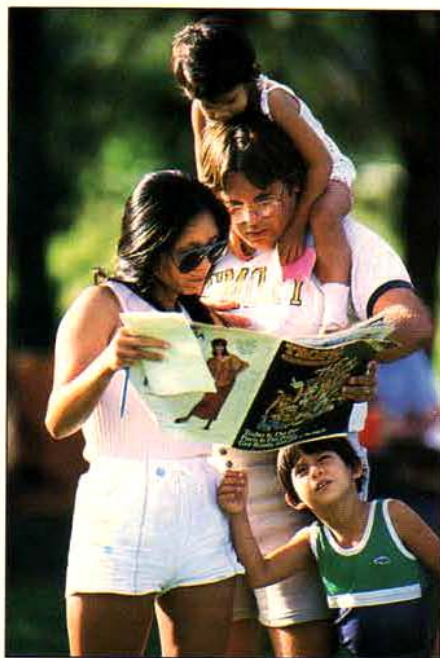
goes, a miss is as good as a mile..." This told readers to use as their legend the height of the Miss Universe character in the lower right.

Nine miles brought them to the Miami zoo, where a jogging ostrich ("... jogged 10 miles more...") was heading north-northeast. Ten miles in that direction took them to Hialeah racetrack, where they found a horse headed in one direction, and a rowboat headed in another.

If you think this is tough, it was worse for the hunters: "Rowed" over the radio was indistinguishable from "rode," and almost all followed the horse down a primrose path to a sign that said "No way." They then had to retrace their steps and follow the rowboat, which led to a final destination, a house on stilts.

So they made the trip. But where was the phone number? It was on the route. Each site they passed was numbered, and when these numbers were strung together, they formed a seven-digit phone number. This, however, proved to be a wrong number. Readers then had to figure out that the "magic discount rate" referred to an ad for a product called "Armpit Magic" they had seen in the magazine at the start of the Hunt some six hours before. Referring to it, they discovered that in order to get the correct phone number, they had to subtract one-third of the number they had from itself.

But that still wasn't enough. The



(Above) Four heads are better than one in solving the Hunt. (Right) To solve the cryptic poem for the second Hunt, it was necessary to consult this whimsical map of Miami.

poem also said, "ask for me," which was the final password. When calling, they had to ask to speak to Sherlock Holmes.

At *Tropic*, we took bets among ourselves as to how long it would take before we had a winner. (Low guess was 21 minutes. High guess was two hours.)

Dave Barry read the poem over the air at 6 P.M. At that moment, I arrived at the home of *Herald* computer programming supervisor Janice Kofman, where the secret phone had been installed. I began to explain to her the final, tortuous process needed to win. (Though the phone was in her house, not even Kofman knew the final solution. Hunt security is strictly need-to-know.) With each step, with each convulsion, Kofman shook her head. It was too hard, she said. All our time estimates were wrong, she said. No one would get it at all.

Miserably, I plodded on with the solution process. I had not yet reached the end when I froze in mid-sentence.

The phone was ringing.

It had taken 11 minutes.

The winners were brothers from Hollywood, Florida, Jim and Jed Jacobson, a lawyer and doctor, respec-

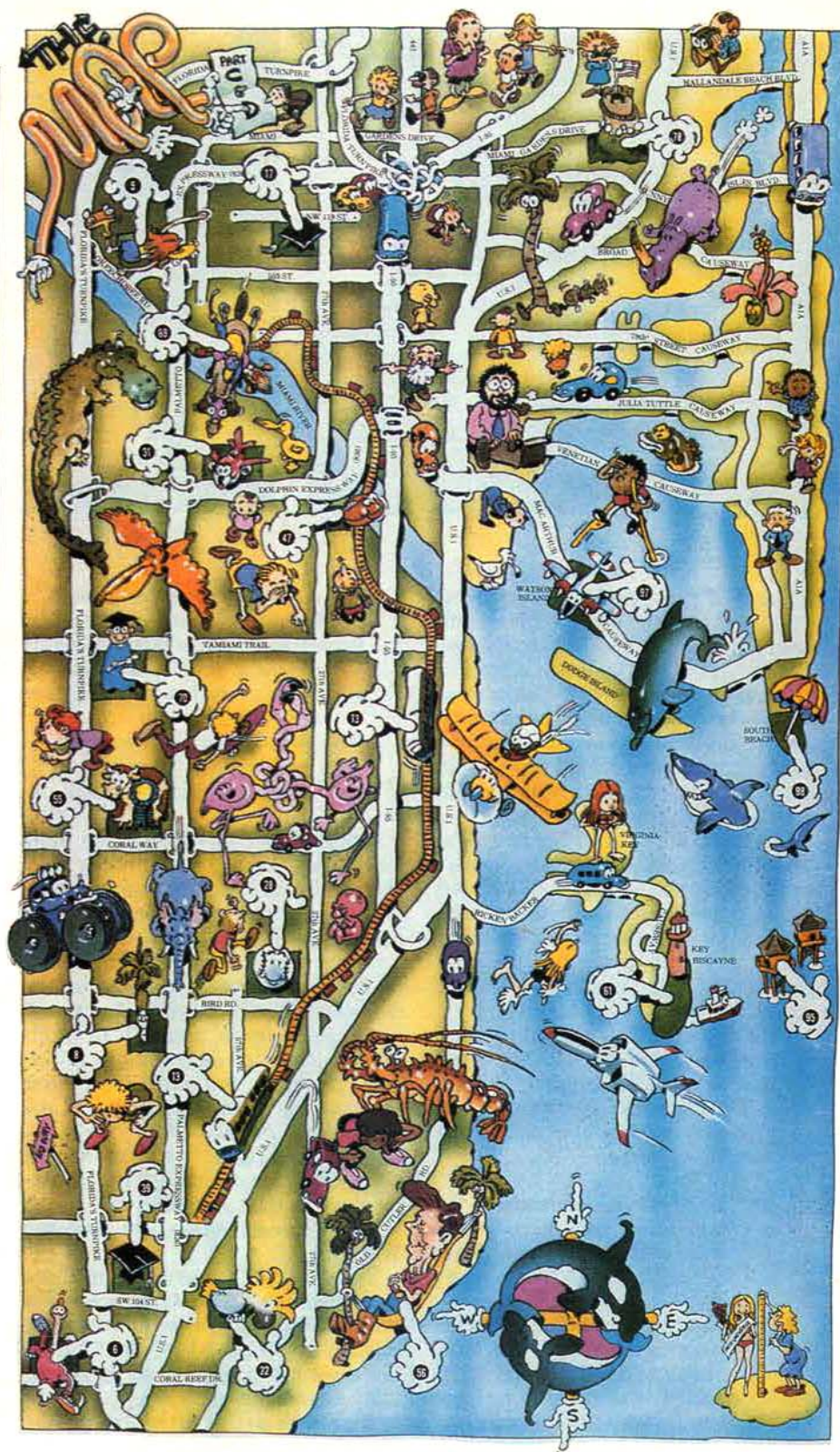


ILLUSTRATION BY OTIS SWEAT

tively. Within 90 minutes, we had received 73 more calls and another lesson in just how smart we weren't.

Hunt III is set for November 23. The author hereby predicts that it will be

so diabolically difficult that no one will solve it in under two hours. He will not, however, put money on that.

Gene Weingarten is the editor of *Tropic*, the Sunday magazine of The Miami Herald.