

MT 1: Launching a Writer's Notebook

## **My Dad Tried to Kill Me with an Alligator**

By Harrison Scott Key

In the summer of 1987, my father tried to murder me with an alligator. He was always doing fun stuff like that, to see if we would die. Sometimes, he tried to murder us with other things, like gasoline, when we'd say to our Pop, "The leaves won't burn."

In rural Mississippi, my brother and I were always burning things like leaves and garbage and carcasses, and sometimes he told us to put gas on the fire, because he believed a fire could teach boys about life.

Sometimes, he tried to murder us with recreational watercraft. This happened on our way to fish in the Pearl River, where he enjoyed piloting our Venture bass boat at speeds typically reserved for cosmonaut training. He'd cut perpendicular across the wake, launching skyward, the bow of our glittering boat pitched so high that it'd obscure the rising sun, and we'd slam back down on the water so hard it felt like we'd landed on the interstate. To this day, I cannot injure my coccyx without thinking fondly of the man.

As a boy, my interests largely concerned the life of the mind, writing poems, reading about the origins of the Latin Vulgate, plowing through science fiction stories about Captain Nemo in his Nautilus. The only thing I'd ever seen my father read was a booklet about how to mask your odor in the woods with bobcat urine.

Sometimes, it was hard to believe he was even my father.

"Is it safe to go so fast?" I'd ask, after he'd try to outrun a Jet Ski with his boat. I didn't mind being in the boat with him. It was nice. But I did mind being out of the boat, especially when there were alligators in the water, as there were on that day in 1987.

"Get in," he said.

"Sir?"

"In."

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I was 12, and my brother was 15, and it was July, and we were bored.

"Hey, Fat-Tart," my brother said. "Want to go fishing?"

He'd started calling me "Fat-Tart" because he thought I was fat, which I was, owing to a glandular disorder that made me eat Pop-Tarts until I stopped feeling sad. My brother was tall and blond, and so we called him "Bird," as in Big Bird. It didn't seem fair, his being nicknamed for a character designed to give joy to children, while I'd been named for a food product designed to give children diabetes.

"Fishing?" I said. "Just you and me?"

Bird possessed the two key components to being a true adolescent badass: a driver's license and a mullet. He'd also been shot in the eye with a pellet rifle, which split his pupil in half and made him squint, which made him look like a pirate. It might be dangerous, going to the river with Bird, but it also felt like a badass thing to do.

"Okay," I said.

Pop wanted to say no, you could tell. It's written somewhere in boating safety manuals that you don't let people named Bird and Fat-Tart borrow your bass boat, even if they are your own sons. But some part of him must have been proud, seeing his boys ask permission to do something that could get them killed.

Pop agreed to let us go, and gave a stern warning that if anything happened to his boat, he would have our rectums surgically removed and turned into hats.

Mom warned us, too.

"Watch out for those giant catfish," she said.

We'd all heard about the giant blue cats in the Pearl River, the ones who'd swallowed scuba divers whole, although nobody could ever produce the name of the divers, or why anyone would choose to recreationally dive in a river not generally known to contain either coral reefs or visibility. Besides, there were realer things in that water, like massive knots of water moccasins, and snapping turtles the size of laundry baskets, and gar, a prehistoric fish with the face of a pterodactyl and the teeth of Gary Busey.

Also present: *Alligator mississippiensis*. They were everywhere, lying on the sandbars, slinking out of mudslides, heads pushing up through fields of lily pads. Sometimes, they'd bite your lure, if the crank-bait was fat enough. It was a powerful thing to find yourself fighting the heft of a 600-pound, 37-million-year-old brute.

"I bet a gator would like to eat you, Fat-Tart" Bird said. He stuck a finger into my fatness and made a farting sound, as though to suggest I was full of strawberry filling.

"You think we'll see one?" I said.

"I ain't scared of gators," Bird said. "Shit, gators ought to be scared of me."

The Pearl River is a lovely old thing, slow and coppery and traced in fine, sandy bars for 500 miles on its way to the Gulf. Off the main channel, it's home to wild peacocks and black bears and other things with mouths. Bird and I fished in the midmorning haze, and I watched the water with interest, trying to pretend like I was not looking madly for the thing I knew was down there.

"Let's swim," Bird said.

"No, thanks."

"You scared?"

"No, it's just that I don't want to die."

It's an interesting sensation, knowing there's something underneath you that could eat you, and all you have to do is fall in, and there it would be, this creature, terrible enough to be in the Book of Job, a thing that cannot be drawn out with a mere fishhook.

"There!" Bird said.

I turned, and saw it, the flat, wide, serrated head, scrutinizing us. We waited, frozen in the sodden heat, our poles dangling, the line growing slack, knotting up in the deep. We watched the black eyes of this biblical monster. When it looked at us, what did it see? Did it wish for some animal fellowship, some longing in its bones since the time of Eden? Had some metaphysical vibration drawn it to the surface to seek spiritual intercourse with these two brothers, so very near, this Abel and this Cain, all ages and epochs of earth collapsing into just a few feet of water and air? Had I read too many books, tried to build too much meaning into every moment? Was this merely a large amphibious predator who wished to eat us, or was it a metaphor drawing me toward something deeper, some truth that lay hidden under the black water?

"Let's catch it," Bird said.

"Catch it?"

"I got my pistol," he said. "A .22 is all it takes."

Bird wished to carry home the fiend, I think, and present it to our father as evidence of our being men and also insane. He cast his spinner-bait at its head.

"Please stop," I said.

"I'll bet you could ride one."

"You're making it mad."

"Good."

Bird cast and cast again, trying to convince the animal to bite, to come closer, the line zipping out, the lure plopping near its teeth. And then the beast descended and was gone. I turned my head to see where it would come up for air, and in all my twisting, a terrible thing happened: I knocked out one of the rods.

"Get it!" Bird said.

I lurched, threw myself across the gunwale, reaching out across the black. The boat dipped, rocked. If I leaned more, we might capsize. In seconds, the rod would be gone.

"I'm trying—"

"Get it."

"I'm trying."

The rod bobbed there just below the surface, its last bubbles escaping, and then vanished. We sat there for a long time.

"That's a two-hundred f\*\*\*\*\* dollar rod."

Two hundred f\*\*\*\*\* dollars sounded like a lot, like drug dealer money. It was an Abu Garcia, a birthday present from Pop, a heavy and beautiful rod built to last forever.

"What do we do?" I said.

"The f\*\*\* you think we do, Fat-Tart?" he said. "Go get it."

We stared at the water some more.

"Go," he said.

"I was waiting on you to go."

"I ain't going."

If an alligator attacked Bird, I believed he might actually have the ability to punch it in the head and get away, while my own defensive tactic was to go limp, as a courtesy to whatever might be trying to eat me.

"F\*\*\* it," Bird said.

"Yeah, f\*\*\* it," I said, trying to sound badass.

We'd reached the outer edges of our courage and found it wanting. Late that afternoon, we told Pop, and he did something even more upsetting than turning our asses into hats.

"Hitch up the boat," he said. "We're going back."

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Pop drove like a man possessed. He'd thrown a few strange items into the boat, but we couldn't see what. Did he really think we could find the rod? I sort of pitied him, or maybe what I felt was embarrassment, that this was the man who made me, this loud and reckless and ignorant man who did not read books.

Maybe it's obvious to suggest that there comes a time in a child's life when he stops believing that his father is Superman and sees that he is just a man with his own nameless spiritual diseases, and for me, I think this was that time.

When we arrived, what I saw in the boat disturbed me. There, he'd placed a large old stop sign we'd found years before by the side of the road and an assortment of industrial-strength hooks large enough to snag a leviathan.

We got the boat into the water.

"Take me to where you was," he said.

What was he going to do with a stop sign? Hit somebody with it? Threaten the alligators with traffic laws? Finally, we came to the quarter of our shame. The shadows were stark now, moving, darkening. It would soon be night. Everything was blue, the hour of day when bugs dance, when fish jump, when alligators feed.

"Alright," Pop said. "Get in."

"Sir?" I said.

Bird jumped in and went to the bottom, over and over, my big brother, already more a man than I would ever be. God love him. He wouldn't read a book, but he'd beat the hell out of somebody who did, if you asked him nicely. From where we were anchored, I could see at least three alligator slides, empty. The depth-finder said twelve feet.

"I can't," I said.

I took off my shoes slowly, giving Bird plenty of time to find the rod, or at the very least to be killed and eaten, which I felt would be the most loving thing to do.

"Go," Pop said.

What if I didn't get in? Would he throw me? Would he know true things about me, that I was still a child?

I jumped in.

Immediately, I formulated a plan, which involved surrounding myself with a protective cloud of urine.

At the bottom, what I touched with my hands and feet were skeletons and teeth and the hides of dinosaurs, or what felt like dinosaurs. Was he proving a point? Was the rod more important than our safety, our lives, our very own bones?

"Keep looking," he said.

I had been wrongly told that the safest place one could be when confronted by an alligator was underwater, as they could not bite you underwater, but wouldn't it be better to be somewhere even safer, like South Dakota?

Bird was already out, taking a break.

Suddenly, a splash, echoing off the cypress walls of the swamp. I grabbed the lip of the boat and tried to pull myself out.

"I didn't say you were done," Pop said.

I turned, and there it was, the head of the beast.

"Alligator!" I said.

"Where?" Pop said.

"Help me out! Help!"

I struggled, but my fat little Twinkie arms couldn't get me out of the water.

Bird reached down and pulled me out.

I turned, and the head was gone.

"You're a liar," Bird said.

"No, no," I said. "There was something."

It was then my father picked up the octagonal shield and affixed the enormous hooks to the bare steel post at intervals. In the very center, he tied a fat nylon rope and, without saying a word, lifted it up to the gunwale.

He had made a dredge.

It was a frightening device, as gruesome as it was ridiculous, a tool to find and punish heretics, nonbelievers. He dropped it into the water, letting it go to the bottom. Bird smirked. Look at the old man, the fool.

We had failed, and he would, too, and we would go home empty-handed, believing in one another just a little less. We sat there, all three of us steeping in our various disgraces, and we heard another great rumbling in the water.

"There she is," Pop said.

I looked up, and there, rising up from the black, we saw it.

The rod, clinging to Pop's dredge.

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When Pop died last year, we buried him beside a river near where I now live in Savannah, Georgia. I have no sons, only daughters. Their lives are filled not with danger, but with candy and glitter. Sure, I allow them to climb trees when their mother isn't looking, but never with buck saws, and I never take them hunting, because there are more affordable ways to bore your children.

In those days after the funeral, when the evening sun fell down and the world turned blue, I found myself growing tight in the throat and wanting to put my daughters in a boat.

"Hey, girls," I said. "Do you want to go to a secret island?"

I was talking about Little Tybee, which is not a secret, but was to them. I told them of the bobcats and diamondbacks and aggressive sea snails that lived on this island.

"For real?" they said.

We put the long kayak into the Atlantic on a hot July morning and we made our way to the island that I am sure had already grown mythic and storied in their imaginations, a wide piney thing across a mile of water.

"Could we die?" one of them asked, as the narrow yellow boat rocked a little.

"Yes," I said. "We could get swept out to sea, or drown, or be attacked."

"By what?"

"Sea snails," I said.

I want them to know that safety should not be the defining virtue of their lives, while they want me to know that being alive should be the defining virtue of their lives. I closed my eyes and tried to remember what it felt like to be scared in that swamp a thousand years ago. Had I truly believed the thing I saw in the water was a head attached to a body attached to a tail that, as the Lord said to Job, can make the deep boil? Would my father really have asked me to go near such a thing?

Of course not.

Maybe.

We buried Pop not far from here, and it would've been possible to turn the boat up into the channel and paddle all the way to his grave, through a few cuts in the marsh.

It might've taken all day, and we had so little water and no food, but what an adventure to arm our way through tidewater toward the man's body, to do a foolish thing in honor of the man who'd taught his children to love foolish things, a love that has led me to the waters off Key West and the gorges of the Gila Wilderness and the glacial waters of the Wind River Range, places I never would've gone without a father to make me get out of the boat that day, in the Genesis of my manhood. I am frightened of almost nothing now, except my brother's mullet, which haunts me still.

"Shark!" the six-year old screamed.

"Is that really a shark?" the eight-year-old said.

"It could be a dolphin," I said. "Let's see."

We waited, but no happy, child-friendly aquatic mammal breached before us. Just a fin, a single, purposeful, somewhat overly serious, perhaps ectothermic, possibly murderous dorsal fin, arrowing across the lambent ripples of midday while my children gripped the sides of the boat and asked me questions about the shark that I could not possibly know. What kind was it? How big was it? Did it want to eat them? Which one of them did it want to eat? What could we do so as not to be eaten by it? Could I kill it? Could they stay in the boat while I killed it? Can we paddle faster toward the beach? Is there a motor on this kayak? If so, can we use it to kill the shark? Why aren't you paddling?

"Get your knife, dad," one of them said.

"If one of you gets eaten, we will name the boat after you," I said.

The eight-year-old turned and gave me a look that said, Is my father an idiot for bringing us out here?

Of course not.

Maybe.

In the thirty years since the day I asked the same question, I know so much less than I ever thought I would. Every true thing has been stripped away by time and loss, but there's a thing I think I know, and it's this: fathers, when they are doing it right, often look like fools.

"Shaaaaaaaark!" the younger one said, the fin having reappeared only twenty yards away.

Would my children tell stories about this moment long from now? Would they tell themselves it was a shark, when we don't know? Would they make up stories about what they cannot see, what's under the water, under the earth, buried, gone?

"Paddle!" they said, trying their hardest to get to land.

"Girls, girls," I said. "Let's see if we can get closer."

"No!" they said.

"I won't let it hurt you."

They stopped and thought, frozen. I turned our boat, and we paddled toward the monster in the water.