

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

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

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

As a boy, my his 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 Scott had ever seen my his 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 his father.

" Is it safe to go so fast? " I Scott would ask, after he his father would try to outrun a Jet Ski with his boat. I Scott did not mind being in the boat with him. It was nice. But I he 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. "

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

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

He'd started calling me Scott " Fat-Tart " because he thought I he was fat, which I he was, owing to a glandular disorder that made me him eat Pop-Tarts until I he stopped feeling sad. My his brother was tall and blond, and so we they 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 Scott** had been named for a food product designed to give children diabetes.

" Fishing? " **I Scott** 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 Scott** 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 them** go, and gave a stern warning that if anything happened to **his** boat, **he** would have **our their** rectums surgically removed and turned into hats.

Mom warned **us them**, too.

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

We they'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 Scott's** fatness and made a farting sound, as though to suggest **I Scott** was full of strawberry filling.

" You think we'll see one? " **I Scott** 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 Scott fished in the midmorning haze, and I Scott watched the water with interest, trying to pretend like I he was not looking madly for the thing I he 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 can not be drawn out with a mere fishhook.

" There! " Bird said.

I Scott turned, and saw it, the flat, wide, serrated head, scrutinizing us them. We they waited, frozen in the sodden heat, our their poles dangling, the line growing slack, knotting up in the deep. We they watched the black eyes of this biblical monster. When it looked at us them, 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 Scott 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 them, or was it a metaphor drawing me him 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 Scott think thinks, and present it to our their father as evidence of our their being men and also insane. He cast his spinner-bait at its head.

" Please stop, " I **Scott** 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 **Scott** turned **my his** head to see where it would come up for air, and in all **my his** twisting, a terrible thing happened: I **he** knocked out one of the rods.

" Get it! " **Bird** said.

I **Scott** lurched, threw **myself himself** across the gunwale, reaching out across the black. The boat dipped, rocked. If I **he** leaned more, **we they** 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 they** sat there for a long time.

" That's a two-hundred fucking dollar rod. "

Two hundred fucking 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 **Scott** said.

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

We they 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 Scott** believed **he** might actually have the ability to punch it in the head and get away, while **my his** own defensive tactic was to go limp, as a courtesy to whatever might be trying to eat **me him**.

" Fuck it, " **Bird** said.

" Yeah, fuck it, " **I Scott** said, trying to sound badass.

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

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

Pop drove like a man possessed. **He**'d thrown a few strange items into the boat, but **we they** couldn't see what. Did **he** really think **we they** could find the rod? **I Scott** sort of pitied **him**, or maybe what **I Scott** felt was embarrassment, that this was **the man** who made **me him**, 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 him**, **I Scott** think thinks this was that time.

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

We they 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 they** came to the quarter of **our their** 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 Scott** said.

Bird jumped in and went to the bottom, over and over, **my his** big brother, already more a man than **I Scott** 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 they** were anchored, **I Scott** could see at least three alligator slides, empty. The depth-finder said twelve feet.

" I can't, " **I Scott** said.

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

" Go, " **Pop** said.

What if **I Scott** did not get in? Would **he his dad** throw **me him**? Would **he** know true things about **me him**, that **I he** was still a child?

I Scott jumped in.

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

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

" Keep looking, " **he his dad** said.

I Scott 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 Scott** grabbed the lip of the boat and tried to pull **myself himself** out.

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

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

" Alligator! " **I he** said.

" Where? " **Pop** said.

" Help me out! Help! "

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

Bird reached down and pulled **me him** out.

I **Scott** turned, and the head was gone.

" You're a liar, " **Bird** said.

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

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

" There she is, " **Pop** said.

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

The rod, clinging to **Pop's** dredge.

When **Pop** died last year, **we they** buried **him** beside a river near where I **Scott** now **live lives** in Savannah, Georgia. I **Scott** **have has** no sons, only **daughters**. **Their** lives are filled not with danger, but with candy and glitter. Sure, I **Scott** **allow allows** **them** to climb trees when **their** mother isn't looking, but never with buck saws, and I **he** never **take takes** **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 **Scott** found **myself himself** growing tight in the throat and wanting to put **my his** daughters in a boat.

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

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

" For real? " **they** said.

We **they** put the long kayak into the Atlantic on a hot July morning and we **they** made **our** **their** way to the island that I **Scott** **am** **is** 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 **he** said. " We could get swept out to sea, or drown, or be attacked. "

" By what? "

" Sea snails, " I **he** said.

I **Scott** **want** **wants** **them** to know that safety should not be the defining virtue of **their** lives, while **they** want **me** **him** to know that being alive should be the defining virtue of **their** lives. I **he** closed **my** **his** eyes and tried to remember what it felt like to be scared in that swamp a thousand years ago. Had I **he** truly believed the thing I **he** 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** **his** father really have asked **me** **him** to go near such a thing?

Of course not.

Maybe.

We **they** 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 **they** had so little water and no food, but what an adventure to arm **our** **their** 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** **him** to the waters off Key West and the gorges of the Gila Wilderness and the glacial waters of the Wind River Range, places I **Scott** never would have gone without a father to make **me** **him** get out of the boat that day, in the Genesis of **my** **his** manhood. I **Scott** **am** **is** frightened of almost nothing now, except **my** **his** brother's mullet, which haunts **me** **him** still.

" Shark! " **the six-year old** screamed.

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

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

We they waited, but no happy, child-friendly aquatic mammal breached before us them. Just a fin, a single, purposeful, somewhat overly serious, perhaps ectothermic, possibly murderous dorsal fin, arrowing across the lambent ripples of midday while my his children gripped the sides of the boat and asked me him questions about the shark that I Scott 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 they do so as not to be eaten by it? Could I Scott kill it? Could they stay in the boat while I he killed it? Can we they paddle faster toward the beach? Is there a motor on this kayak? If so, can we they 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 Scott said.

The eight-year-old turned and gave me him 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 Scott asked the same question, I he know knows so much less than I he ever thought I he would. Every true thing has been stripped away by time and loss, but there's a thing I he think thinks I he know knows, 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 his children tell stories about this moment long from now? Would they tell themselves it was a shark, when we they don't know? Would they make up stories about what they can not see, what's under the water, under the earth, buried, gone?

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

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

" No! " they said.

" I will not let it hurt you. "

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