

The Alligator.
By Daniel Eli Dronsfield

So, I work in a middle school. But that's not how I self-identify. I have been many things. I have squatted on the banks of a black river and gutted piranhas with small Indian men while caimans crept closer and closer, drawn by the bloody stink. I have kept the caimans back with stiff slaps on their snouts with the flat of my rusty machete. I have cracked a whip over the heads of roaring lions beneath the cover of the big top. I have stood hip deep in the sea drinking in sunsets with dear friends with funny accents on four continents. I have worked everywhere from down in the mines to the mountain's top. I do not say this to brag. I tell you these things so you may better understand the lips that are speaking to you.

I work in a middle school, and like every school in Oregon, at my school there are serious budget woes. Children share books, they don't have any art or foreign language classes, and there is talk of moving to a four-day week (an idea which I wholeheartedly support, not just for school but for all industry. I mean seriously, let's be civilized). I find the work to be generally quite boring, and hence, spend my days fantasizing about adventure. I dream of flying into the hurricane, of plying the darkened seas, of thunder atop an erupting volcano, of the weight of a blade in my palm... I see all the Cuban girls that I never got to kiss.

But me, a warrior no more, I sit, and I tell the mischievous youth to reign in their rambunctiousness. One day though, as I sat mired in monotony, things changed. One day, the adventure came to me. It came in the form of alligator.

It started simply. I was in the cafeteria, scowling sweetly and eating tater tots. It was a day like any other. It was a day like *every* other. All around me twelve year olds were screaming and being inordinately mean to each other. Amazing beasts these, so simultaneously sensitive and insensitive. I was there with a couple of older women. I am in my late twenties and a man, yet I do work commonly reserved for fifty year-old women. I will thank you not to use this fact as a way of judging my machismo.

So, it was like every other weekday, me, eating tater tots with matrons and telling Mowgli's to leave the jungle behind. The ladies speak of their pets or of their geeky grown children, while I have little to say, and repose myself in fantasy.

Just then, a scream goes up behind me. I am jolted back from fantasyland as kids start jumping up and screaming and stampeding. One of the old ladies sees the cause for the chaos and lets loose a pealing shriek that knocks the droplets of condensation off the windows. Her shriek is of such power that it quells all the other half-screams and yelps that were whimpering forth from the enormous crowd of scared kids.

In that moment of stillness and eerie silence I see it. I see him. The cause for all the screaming. On the floor, near the door, in a cafeteria in rural Oregon;
a fucking alligator. Seriously.

I have no idea how it got in here. Being a man of action, I took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves, knowing what had to be done.

I had to wrestle it.

By this point, most of the children had fled, trying to trample each other bloodthirstily all the while. When the old ladies realized what I planned to do, they tried

to stop me, they tried to hold me back. I gently shrugged off their restrictions, and moved slowly forward, licking my chops.

At that moment I had never before actually wrestled an alligator. As I worked that gorgeous little dinosaur back into the corner children started to trickle back in, to watch the show. The principal came in and he told me to stop, he shouted and waved his arms, yelling something about insurance...

I could barely hear anything by then, my blood throbbed so.

The alligator was only a little over three feet long and had a big toothy smile on his face. I reached down and grabbed him, right under his neck and then I snatched his mouth closed with my other hand. It was a classic pickup, I felt like Steve Irwin as I lifted the gator off the ground. The kids started cheering and then one of them said,

“Kill it!”

The other little dirtbags all liked this idea and before you know it I had three hundred twelve year olds chanting,

“Kill it! Kill it!”

It was a singularly horrifying scene.

The principal stepped forward and said,

“You don’t have to kill it. The cops are on their way. They’ll shoot it when they get here.”

This, I did not like. The children continued to chant and wail, building to something. I looked the alligator in the eyes. His eyes were beautiful and now he looked scared. His eyes were green and yellow and black and like nothing I had ever seen before. His eyes were shaded by dual eyelids, one of the sets of eyelids came in from the side and was near to transparent. He winked and blinked at me charmingly with his quadra-lids as I held his smile closed with what I thought to be a gentle authority. ‘It’s for your own good.’ I wanted to tell him, but alas, I do not speak alligator. I just stood there for a second feeling his crazy skin and marveling at this amazing creature that I held in my hands.

“Kill it! Kill it!”

I looked at the group of savages before me with unmasked disgust. One of the kids threw a cupcake at the gator, causing it to lash about violently for a moment, swishing it’s powerful tail like a metronome on methamphetamines. Whilst tail slashed about, some of the rough scales tangled into my shirt, tearing it open and then off, and leaving my chest bleeding quite dramatically.

At this point I turned my back on the throng and kicked open the door. It was hailing minute little beach sand hail and beyond the door lay a great sward of green between school and slough. I don’t remember when I made the decision, but by this point I had decided that this gator had come from the slough, and that I was going to put it back there. By now I had quite an entourage behind me, following at a distance, shouting their protests and prohibitions. I was shirtless and bleeding from the chest, head down against the hail, hugging the alligator tightly, who by now had sensed our collusion and ceased to struggle.

The principal’s shouts had gone from, “If you plan on keeping this job...” to “If you value your freedom...”

I kept going.

My shoes and socks were mudded and soggy. I kicked free of them. The hail increased to the size of marbles from boyhood. A flock of geese flew back and forth overhead, lowly honking in point, counter-point. About a quarter of a mile from the school there is a bridge going over a particularly deep section of the dirty little slough. I headed for the bridge. By this point the children had begun pelting me with dirt clods, now & laters, and dog-eared copies of 'Twilight'. As I set foot on the bridge a great thunderclap pealed. This rumble froze the twelve year olds cold in their tracks. I stepped to the center of the bridge and all the children were arrayed before me. Two hundred of them, staring at me all googely-eyed.

For a moment I scowled down at them, bloody, shirtless, and clutching an alligator to my chest, while the hail beat down and bounced off my shoulders. My gaze strangled the last murmurs from the crowd's throat (ever tried to keep a group of twelve year olds quiet?).

"I would sooner kill every last one of you than I would this magnificent creature. Your numbers don't give you power! This is power!"

I raised the alligator above my head, brandishing it as if it was a trophy I had won. The alligator took this opportunity to hiss at the crowd who had so wholeheartedly called for his blood.

"The only reason this alligator is here is because you have left him no other place to go. He is here because of you! Because of you encroaching on his habitat! (alligators native to Oregon?) You're a plague! A plague!"

Upon saying this I spit a mouthful and scowled a thunderstorm at all the kids, and then, having no more need to speak, having said all that I had to say, I leapt. I leapt backwards off the bridge. As I did the goose flew low and honked eerily and high-pitchedly, "Ooowwwwwwww..." A great lightning bolt cracked overhead. As I fell it seemed like slow motion.

When I hit the water I released the alligator and was surprised to see that when I surfaced he was still with me, with his little claws around my neck, hugging me like a baby. As the slough's current swept me away, I managed to raise a fist above the water and shake it at the kids on shore.

"A plague!"

I shouted as I rounded the bend. The hail grew to the size of ping-pong balls.

Post Script.

About an hour later I had pulled myself from the slough and hiked back to the school, soaked, muddy, bloody, and half naked. I was hoping to just get my car and get away, but when I arrived back at the school things were unsettlingly silent. I saw Tyrell, one of my favorite students, and asked him what had happened, what was going on?

"It was crazy, scary, kind of exciting. After you floated away, we were all silent for a while, and then Derrick (most popular kid, rich jock) started nodding his head, real slowly, up and down. His eyes looked down at the slough, where you had just disappeared and he said,

'He's right. He's right.'

Nodding his head. Then, he pulled out his graphing compass and stabbed himself three times in the neck, gashing it around, blood poured everywhere, and then once he

had done it, there was no stopping the flood. Kids pulled out rulers and slit their wrists, others were wiggling ballpoint pens into milky eye-sockets.

It was insane! To all sides, children killing themselves with unspeakable savagery, biting open the fleshy, veiny part opposite the elbow, thumbs in eyeballs, self-strangulation, kids were hanging from belts and jump-ropes. There were veins and bloody protractors everywhere, and when it was over, one hundred and seventy-four lie dead. A mass middle school suicide..."

"No!"

"Oh, yes. But it was only the popular kids, or the ones that wanted to be."

"Jesus. You kids are so impressionable."

"That alligator was cool, huh?"

Right then the principal came around the corner.

"Daniel!"

He shouts, and I cringe, thinking he is surely here to reprimand me, or place me under citizen's arrest.

"Daniel! I've been looking all over for you!"

"Here I am."

"Yeah. You know that class you wanted to teach about abstract installation art pieces and painting and scratching on seventy millimeter film?"

"How could I forget."

"Well, now you can teach it!"

"What? Really? I thought there wasn't money for such "frivolities"."

"Well... Due to unexpected tragedy... All of our budget problems are solved! Kids will now be able to have art classes, gym classes, and foreign language classes!"

The principal smiled excitedly and clapped his hands together, not unlike a twelve year old boy.

I just gasped, having trouble sucking air. I collected myself and tried to formulate a worthy response to this situation.

"Good?"