# Yella Gator

Out here on Cooter's Point where the turtles outnumber the people like the name suggests, life is locked in the past, and folks like Pop have made a point of losing the key. You have your local supermarket that sells boxes of cereal and fresh tomatoes, red like the lights you groan at on your way to the office. We have the Tensas, brown like the fish it feeds us. You have two stories in the suburbs with a picket fence whiter than your new tennis shoes. We have four handmade rooms that are browner than the surrounding trees, the ancestors of which built said rooms. You drive a stubby sedan painted with the same shade of blue that stains your toddlers' teeth after a trip to the snow cone shop. We have the jon boat, brown with years of hard use. Indeed, everything is brown and everything is simple. Let me tell you though — there are some things that turning back the clock can never set straight.

That morning I dreamed myself sitting out on the front porch frying catfish crusted golden brown like the river in the midday sun. A smile crept its way up my cheeks as heat from the skillet rose up into my face and out into the air to complement the hum of our swamp. "Our swamp" I thought again. "Ou—" I said aloud as I glanced down into the oil and was jolted to see what looked like Pop's face projecting from the cornmeal on a fillet. He eyed me with that crooked smile of his and said, "This could be it, boy, today could be the day," with pieces of his crunchy jaw breaking away as he spoke. I felt something cold and hard in the air then. I heard it knocking with a pitiful wooden hollowness on the wall behind me and I spun around, frenzied. I felt it lurch closer. I bolted out into the grassy glade behind the

house but the knocking only got louder and faster, coming from within me as I feared to know it was.

The dream ended with an especially insistent bang, no more a mere knock. “You deaf, boy?” chuckled Pop, as my bedroom door struggled to keep to its hinges. I inhaled sharply. “Rise and shine now! Hooks ain’t goin’ check themselves, now are they?” The floorboards groaned as I rolled over in my cot. Then from the back porch, “Hell, maybe today’s the day we get us that Yella Gator to bring home to your Mama,” Pop called to the trees. They could never stop listening as I had. He stood with his back to me waiting for the answer he reached for. After too long, he barked, “Let’s get rollin’!” and briskly clunked down the dock, my door still trembling. However wearying, his zeal and alacrity were impressive and unwavering. I had given up complaining some time ago.

I heaved myself out of bed and looked up to watch a fly meander into the mosquito net on my window as I bent over to stuff my feet into my rubber boots. It ricocheted from the net with a flurry of buzzes, and then hovered, propelling itself over and over into the hopelessly small squares that restricted its flight. It progressed to the left, trying each hole in the row before it, bouncing back to challenge the next as quickly as it was defeated by the one before. I thought I saw it crack a smile as it came to a rip in the net and scrambled through. It floated off into my room and ended up grazing my face as I stood up to leave. I blinked and scratched my cheek as I stepped out the door, and heard Pop start the motor and clear his throat.

I turned toward the water and hurried across the back porch onto the ramp, which connects the house to the dock. The river was low for an October day, so my way down was steep enough that I could see the top of the person-shaped cypress across the river for only six steps, instead of nine like normal for that time of year. Sometimes in the early summer, the water would rise all the way up to the back porch and we would dangle our feet through the railing and talk. We'd stopped doing that though. I looked away from the treetops toward Pop. He was in the back of the boat staring off across the water, gripping the steering handle in his left hand, his right knee nervously bouncing. I scuffed my foot on the mat at the edge of the dock and Pop snapped his head around at me with a wide-eyed smirk. "We burnin' gas and daylight boy, step on in here, will ya?" he urged. I vaulted over the side of the boat while Pop untied us, and had almost sat down when Pop cranked open the throttle, sending me with a thump back into position. I blinked on impact and a few times more at my sore tailbone.

Our house sits west of the Mississippi in a parish of northern Louisiana called Tensas. The past four generations of Perdues have wrestled a living out of the same soggy spot on the east flank of the area's namesake river. I'm not sure how we ended up where we've been, but there is a certain breed of wandering entrepreneur who comes into this world with a bothersome itch in his feet that has no foreseeable end. The itch jockeys him through the streets and down the highways, leaving him to sleep in cheap motels, strangers' homes, and in the shirt on his back on two oceans' beaches and countless riverbanks. Over the years he realizes that concrete and light bulbs make him dance around like he's barefoot on an anthill, and the smell of dirt

and the sound of water help him rest. He steps off asphalt onto a gravel road and sighs with relief. He steps from the gravel onto rotted leaves and smiles as he takes in a breath of thick swamp air. He sits down in the dappled sunlight and never looks back again. I suppose my great-grandpappy never knew for certain what it was that lured him out to Cooter's Point other than how quiet his feet were with the swamp beneath them.

Muddy water whizzed past as the Yamaha 15 bleated along with the cicadas and the pain in my rear faded. A few hundred yards later, Pop let up on the gas and we coasted up next to the float on our first catfish line. He slid to the edge of the boat and leaned over to begin taking it up as I crouched to gather it in a coil on the deck behind him. I set the yellow float down and guided the line around it counterclockwise. Six rounds; Pop grunted and river-bottom muck slid off the weight as he hoisted it into the boat. He set it down with a scrape behind my coil. It's a coffee can filled with cement — Pop was determined to get some use out of it after he had conceded twenty dollars to have it brought all the way from New Orleans. Twenty-five rounds; "Well, I feel somebody coming up here shortly," Pop grinned as my pile of line climbed past ankle height. With another partial round, the empty eyes of a Blue Catfish emerged from the murk and Pop took the line in two hands to lift the fish into the boat. He whooped with joy as he somehow always could, and laid the gasping creature down to coax out the hook. It flopped lethargically at my feet, having used up its all fight on the line last night. I sighed softly. Thirty-one rounds; Pop swung a Black Bullhead, stiff and unmoving, over the edge of the boat. He took it off the hook and kissed it with a light chortle. I didn't laugh. The rest of the

line was empty. Pop tapped his foot and whistled to quicken the pace of the cosmos as he re-baited the hooks. Before long, the last chicken heart was run through. I wondered how long it had taken, how many times he'd done it.

We went back upriver letting out the fresh line along the way. Pop dropped the coffee can into the water when we were even with the red ribbon we'd tied on the bank. The float on the other end of the line welled up to the surface with a slosh as Pop guided the boat back downriver. I used to ask him why we don't run our lines like everyone else — why we drift to take them in and pull them aboard when the drop lines can get all tangled up. "I don't want you drivin' the boat yet, boy. Besides, it's the way we've always done it out here, you know that," he'd say.

"Yeah, I know, Pop. But I could bring up the hoo—"

"Now you just let Jesse drive this train, okay boy?" He'd duck his head and swallow a bit.

"Okay."

We sped on to the gator traps.

Gator hunting is in our blood. It's how my great-grandpappy was able to build the house out where he had sat down that day in 1935. Eleven dollars and forty-seven cents had accumulated in his left boot over all the times he felt he might need it someday. He used the money to swindle a gun off of a fellow from Arkansas who was lost in the country returning from a stint in New Orleans. The story goes that he caught his first gator on a bullfrog stuck with a hook he chiseled out of a rusted pipe, strung on a branch over the water with his belt. He hitchhiked into Port Gibson with the carcass in tow and sold it for enough to return with fifty feet of rope

and twelve steel hooks. The next gator earned him a shovel and a pick, and the next a saw and nails. Three years of back and forth later he'd produced a basic house, a dock, a boat, and a wife, the clerk at the cordwainer's shop. They were the first to be from Cooter's Point, and I believe a Perdue someday will be the last as well. We certainly haven't had many neighbors.

The deck had begun to dry when we motored by Leroy Dubois, who was sitting out in front of his houseboat enjoying the swamp air and a glass of something questionably amber for the early morning hours. Pop slowed us to a drift and waved his ruddy cap. "Mornin' Leroy, ol' boy!" he boomed across the water. Leroy raised an obligatory hand to us without looking up. "You ain't seen any gators millin' 'round here lately by any chance, have ya?"

"Oh, sho' I have, but they ain't the kind you's lookin' fo', I can tell you that." Leroy gibed with a hint of Creole pity.

"Well, good to know you're on the lookout for me ol' boy," Pop beamed across the water. Leroy started to mumble something in response but Pop twisted on the gas before he could have been heard anyway. "Today could be the day," Pop mouthed. The last morning I remember when Pop had failed to remind me of the day's possibilities like that was — long ago. It was October again, so I reckon I'd heard the phrase about five-hundred times, give or take. He croaked those words out like a catfish in the dirt whenever he spied something promising in the river's rippling or in the sway of the mangroves. I wished like that sometimes too.

But I knew that day was different when Pop cut the motor again and I heard something strange coming from the bank.

Staccato wooden hammering. Faster than ever.

My heart sunk. I looked over in a panic, but was soon overtaken by awe as my eye met a radiant red spot among the leaves. Pop said there had been none left since great-grandpappy lived in the house, but I always believed I'd see one. "That Ivory-billed woodpecker sure is a pretty sight, Pappy told me — redder 'n a crawdad boil on the head parts, he said, but I reckon we'll have to depend on ol' Maker's Mark to get our red these days," he'd laugh. Pop was bent down rummaging through the box next to the motor when the red spot disappeared with a turn of the bird's head. It looked at us then flew back deeper into the thicket.

"Pop, there was a—" I blurted.

"What's the matter, boy?"

I knew he would never believe me.

"I thought I saw a warden up ahead."

"Oh! Well thank the good lord you didn't 'r we'd be in deep without those 'gator tags y' gotta have nowadays. Hain't been one of them wardens 'round here since—in a while."

"Yeah."

Pop had gone to school over in Wisner until the fifth grade. My pappy hurt his back around the time Pop was twelve, so he had to stop schooling and help out at home. Twenty years later, there I was in the same position, but five years younger than he. I suppose I felt the itch in my feet a bit during my year of kindergarten. It seemed school, or anything else in town, might end up being a waste of time with the swamp always calling me back.

We drifted past where the bird had been, and on toward the weathered oil can over our first gator trap. Pop paused and stood up to survey the surface of the water through a squint. “Well ain’t it awfully still out today. You know what they say ‘bout still weather, don't you boy?”

I did. How could I forget?

But I wouldn’t let him make me say it anymore.

“Gators ‘er drawn to the surface ‘s wHAt they say,” he answered for himself, his voice recovering from the jump it had taken. He cleared his throat and bowed his head a little to swallow, inhaling through his nose.

*They* have said this for over a year now, and similar things about high water and lightning.

I heard the woodpecker again from deeper in the mangroves.

I felt my heartbeat quicken. We inched along closer to the can. Twigs and leaves swished over my shoulders and my face as we slid up near the bank. I felt my heart beat again, this time all the way up in my throat, for the stained rope was pulled taut into the muddy unknown. The branch it was tied to looked like a leashed hound with its head down trying to back its way to freedom. I heard Pop breathing behind me.

I turned around and looked him in the face. “A’ight boy,” he said, “yank that line up there for me will ya?”

Sunlight from low over the land filtered through branches and leaves as I reached down next to the can and gave the rope a tug. It didn't budge. Solid. Pop cocked the rifle. We lingered there for a moment — two souls breathing, hoping,

dreading — silently screaming louder than the cicadas of a thousand swamps of a thousand years.

Today could be the day!

Oh how I hoped it would be! How I yearned for the end of it! For Pop. For me. For Mama.

I wedged the soles of my boots on the edge of the boat and heaved on the rope. The tip of the thrashing monster's snout crested the river's surface and shone dull yellow like a rooster's foot. Every last katydid and cricket in the state removed his hat and turned to witness the slaughter to come.

Pop was frozen for a moment. His eyes glinted strangely under the leaves and the sunlight. I looked closer into the reflections and saw spooling out before his eyes the twenty-six years he'd experienced since that day of grammar school in 1973 when he first saw her. Her childhood smile burgeoning into everything he never expected life would bestow him with, white like God's own gates — her squeaky voice sinking to that of all worth living for — her eyes telling him what to do and how to feel each day since the moment they found each other on the swing set years ago.

A small branch fell and rapped on the boat's edge. Pop inhaled sharply. I heard the noise echo through his mind and saw him hammering on the new railing for the back porch. A storm loomed in the distance and lightning wracked the sultry July sky, but the river was glassy, the air calm. She sat on the back porch swishing her legs through the water and then —

"Daryl?"

Knock, knock, knock, “Yeah hon—?“

Splash.

Silence.

“Kara?”

Pop looked into the eyes of the beast and knew she was gone and gone forever. Time stopped and the bullets flew. He heaved the corpse into the boat and slashed it with the pocketknife she had given him for his twelfth birthday. “YOU—TOOK—HER—A—WAY—FROM—US—YOU—BAS—TARD—UNH—UNH—UNH” and so on he howled, to each syllable a stab and a splatter.

But the blood would never flow as mightily as the tears.

The yellow gator was dead, and so was Mama. Still.

The swamp took a deep breath, and the insects donned again their headgear and went about their way.

He laid there, stained red and gasping for his old self while I started the motor to take us—me, and what was left of him—home. Leroy shot me a quizzical and then reverently piteous look as we plowed by his house, a doleful parade laden with an unthinkable freight no man or child should ever have to bear. Leroy removed his fishing hat and bowed his head.

I tied us up at the dock and we sat there for a long while. At some point he sat up. He faced out the front of the boat toward the house and I out the back, toward the water. There we were on the edge of a cliff, too afraid to step back and risk a slip, or to turn around and find another. But I wouldn’t wait anymore. Not again.

“Pop.”

"Andy."

"Can we go now?"

We sauntered across the dock and up the ramp. He shuddered when his hand brushed the back porch railing as we stepped past it. We sat down inside where we eat supper.

"We got him, Pop."

"Yep," he croaked.

"Now what?"

"Nothin'. Not a damn thing."

Silence.

He smashed his fist on the table and sucked in a broken breath.

"Pop."

He looked up at me breathing hard.

"It's over. Please," I sniffled.

He drew in a few more pained lungfuls.

"She was everything we had."

Silence.

"No, Pop. Not everything."

Silence.

He looked around the room, then back at me.

The swamp hummed louder than I had ever known it to . . .

Everyone out here on Cooter's Point knows the old tales. When a yellow gator shows up, so does everything we hoped never would. It's a curse, and a mighty strong one from the depths of time's first river. All we can do is our best to make livable the wreckage following the sweep of its divine tail.

Pop was never big on superstition.