

Natural Selection

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My mother and I sat at the kitchen table and listened to my father's newly adopted gymnastics for getting into bed. His bedroom was above the kitchen and Dad would begin at the far wall--over the stove, as it were--and, striding mightily, he'd take one step, a second step, and a last profound step which would send Dad, mid-air, over our heads in the anxious pause before he landed with a squawk of the bedsprings from the ancient twin bed he shared with Mom. Plaster from the kitchen ceiling beneath the bed salted down upon a shelf of little-used cookbooks and the kitchen lights flickered with his landing. But from the time I was ten years old, my father would not get into his bed any other way. At that time my mother began sleeping in my bedroom, in the small bed reserved for cousins or old aunts passing through town who stayed to visit--never for very long--in our small apartment above the Oriental restaurant on C Street.

My father leapt into bed to avoid the snapping jaws of the alligator which, Dad said, was living under his bed. My mother slept in my room to avoid Dad. Mom consulted doctors; their responses spanned the medical spectrum from, "harmless, really," to "medicate, most certainly." Mom and I took the advice of the homeopath who suggested we try to understand Dad's fear as Dad understood it. We went to the library and Mom checked out books on the delusional behavior; I checked out books on alligators. I ignored the shelf's neighboring volumes on crocodiles because Dad--while admitting to never actually having *seen* the creature--had determined by listening to the head-snapping and tail-thrashing beneath his box spring that his bedroom was afflicted by none other than *alligator mississippiensis*, the American Alligator.

I brought home an armload of borrowed books. Dad wouldn't let me in his bedroom, so he and I sat at the kitchen table, under the yellow light, and pored over the volumes on:

class: Reptilia
order: Crocodylia
genus: Alligator

We learned that you couldn't get much farther from the natural habitat of the American Alligator than the brownstone New Jersey tenement in which we lived. Dad got out a map of the nation and traced the waterways for me by which any determined reptile might navigate from Florida to New England. He paused, his forefinger on the Hudson River, and cast his eyes toward the ceiling, "Hear that?" I didn't. "I told you he was a big one! You can imagine how--with a tail that size--" Dad swished his hand back and forth in the rhythm he heard the gator's tail moving, "he could make it to New Jersey. Swimming upstream wouldn't be a problem for a fellow that strong." We learned that alligators can grow to 20 feet long, though a more useful length was about thirteen feet, culminating in a pair of jaws that could chomp a turtle shell in half as though it was a boneless chicken. Though he'd never seen the entire gator, Dad said he could see its eyes in the dark, glowing red in the thin light shining under the bedroom door from the hallway. Dad could smell it, too: a reptilian smell, like a humid day in the bayou. Mainly, though, Dad heard the alligator growling. "I mean it's the stomach I hear growling--stomach acids," he said. "That alligator has to eat soon." That's why I wasn't allowed in the room. Dad said that small children were too easy a prey, but, as we'd learned from our reading, a hungry alligator would eventually snap at anything.

We lived above The Red Dragon Restaurant. It was a high class place--too expensive for our family to ever eat there though we knew the aromas from their kitchen intimately. We knew that the cooks favored ginger and miso. And we knew that they served their poultry fresh; from our bathroom window we could watch Mr. Lee's brother drive up to the back door on the alley and unload a crate of live chickens every Wednesday. Then, on Fridays--the day before the night The Red Dragon did its biggest business--we would hear the butcher knife drop methodically across each clucking neck. Neighborhood kids would steal the chicken heads out of the dumpster

and use them as finger puppets. Dad and I read that alligators won't eat putrefied meat; they like it fresh--fresh enough to put up a fight. We read that if its meal was big enough, an alligator could go a week or a month without eating again. So on Thursday nights, after The Red Dragon closed, Dad would hoist me over the transom above the restaurant's alley door and I'd drop into their kitchen and descend the stairs into the basement where the live chickens were kept. Equipped with a canvas bag, I'd snatch one of the skittery chickens and creep, foxlike, back up the stairs. I'd toss the bagged bird over the transom to Dad and then I'd climb out myself. Dad handled the alligator-feeding himself. I'd listen from the kitchen table, but I never heard the gnashing and gulping I'd anticipated. The next morning, Dad would greet me at breakfast with a rap on the head and a wink, "Mission accomplished, kiddo."

We didn't tell Mom what we were doing. She never inquired about the alligator and she cautioned me against it, "If," she said, "you ever want to see your father sane again."

I worried over my actions, but I kept on stealing chickens.

It was only after Dad lost a hand to the jaws of his imaginary alligator that my thievery ended.

"Got a little too close to him with that last bird, kiddo," Dad smiled wanly, holding a bloody towel over his wrist as the paramedics rolled him out of our apartment.

After that, Mom couldn't cross the threshold of the bedroom without sobbing and she sent me to stay with an aunt while our belongings were moved to another apartment. I never saw the alligator. And I always felt guilty leaving the alligator to wait--growling ever more voracious--for the next tenants. And I regretted all of our research that would go unused: the fact that alligators can lay forty-five eggs at one time or that, evolutionally, they are more closely related to birds than to lizards. I never sought out alligators, have never even seen one in a zoo. But to this day--my father in his fifteenth year in the sanitarium, his mattress on the floor so that no Crocodylia can crawl beneath it--to this very day, I'm unable to eat Chinese food without imagining clapping my jaws around the whole platter of sweet and sour chicken as it is set before me, grazing the waiter's hand in a toothy reminder of the sweetness and sourness of life.