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A Perfect Day for Caiman Hunting

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A Perfect Day for Caiman Hunting

The sun was blistering by midafternoon. It was the kind of day you would beg us to drive down to Galveston to play on the beach, then stop for ice cream at Bob's on the way home. I haven't been to Galveston in almost fifteen years now. I parked the truck on the muddy path right beside the lake. I got my catch pole and ice chest out of the bed of the pickup and started walking down to the lake. I passed the patch of bright pink lotus flowers that you used to run to as we were walking to the lake; the same ones you would cut and bring home to your mom after our day was through. My cap started to slip off the back of my head and my Ray-Bans down my nose; my neck was already drenched in sweat, my skin already beginning to turn red. I made it to the edge of the lake and readied my catcher.

The caiman were all strolling along the pebble and sand deposits where the water met land, unsuspecting and unquestioning. I snuck up behind one, slipped the loop around his neck, and snagged him. He started to squirm; he was definitely a fighter. I wrangled with him to get him in the ice chest, and finally I was successful.

Hours passed. I waited for more to come out of the lake, ready to snatch them. After my tenth catch, I decided to pack up and head back up to the truck. Right about then, is when you would start to whine and complain of boredom, ready to let your imagination run rampant elsewhere. I chuckled as I thought of you lighting up when I said it was time to go home; running up the hill, back passed the flowers, jumping up and down on the narrow dirt path, eager to get back in the truck. I gathered my pole, the ice chest, and our lawn chairs. I still put yours out. The drive home was always my

favorite part. You sat beside me in the truck, wiped out from a day in the sun, slouching peacefully against your seatbelt as we cruised along the long stretch of highway that would take us back to our front door. The sun would start to sink, leaving behind brilliant tangerine and lavender hues in the sky while a staticky Glen Campbell sang to us through the radio. The drive feels long, now. They don't play too much Glen Campbell anymore. Next to me, the passenger seat is empty.

I stopped along the causeway in my usual spot. I broke out the old cardboard sign that you helped me write out years ago. This was your favorite part of the day, if I remember correctly. We were just about to be home, but we first had to say farewell to all of our catches and send them off on their way to their new homes. Afterwards, you would beg for pizza, just about every night, and I would be able to hold you off until right before we got home, when we passed Pizza Palace in the shopping center on the corner before our street. I was able to get rid of all but one of the reptiles today. I was packing up, when a gentleman pulled next to me and offered me \$80 for the caiman. I couldn't believe it. Before I could tell him I only charged \$45, he stabbed four holes into the lid of his own ice chest and sped back down the road. I tossed the sign in the back of the truck and started home. When I walked in the door, I could smell garlic coming from the kitchen.

"Hello, dear," your mother called out to me from the kitchen. "Dinner will be on the table in just a minute."

"I'll be right in," I called back. "Just going to wash up."

We sat down at the table, three settings out.

"How was it today?" she asked. "It sure was a hot one."

"It was nice. Perfect day. Caught ten of 'em." I could only offer punctuated answers in between the huge bites of the pasta: I was starved.

"Ten? That's gotta be at least \$400."

"Almost five. Some guy stopped to buy the very last one—gave me eighty for it. He didn't stick around long enough for me to tell him I only charge forty-five."

"Well, he must have been in some hurry then. Almost five, you said?"

"Mhm," I responded, in between my chomping.

"That's lovely," she told me.

She smiled, but I could still see the hurt in her eyes. It never gets easier.

After cake and coffee, your mother heads to bed. I step into the office and sit down at the desk. I write out my weekly check to Dr. Roberts and Clearwater Medical Group. You loved Dr. Roberts. Every time we left his office, you said how much he made you feel better. He always offered you a lollipop on our way out. I remember you always went for the red ones. Dr. Roberts is moving along in his research now. "Any day now," he says. Fifteen hundred for this week. I place the check in an envelope, seal it, and turn out the lamp.

As I walk up the hallway, past your room, I listen for the creaks in the floorboards, the same creaks I would hear on Christmas morning or when you would sneak out to the kitchen for a midnight snack. I miss waking up in the night to the sound of the creaks in the hallway. It never gets easier.