The Great Alligator Farm Standoff

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The best liars are those who sometimes tell the truth. Unreliability doesn’t make them lesser human beings, just less trustworthy. The man who taught me how to play chess was an outrageous liar and a gas-pump pirate, a compulsive-blinker I knew only as Pete. He’d always describe the most fantastic, most improbable events, then punctuate them with the fishy qualifier, “True story.” He told how he’d once saved former Texas Governor John Connally from rattlesnake bite by cutting an x into his arm and sucking out the poison, how he’d taught J. Edgar Hoover to play ping-pong, how he’d seen an alien spacecraft illuminated by lightning strikes in Marfa, Texas, in the middle of a June thunderstorm. I’ve always been something of a skeptic myself, and believed little of what he said. But the night of the Great Alligator Farm Standoff? I was there.

It was after midnight in my family’s honkytonk, the local hot spot of Fulton, a small town on the Texas coast. Having no two a.m. liquor license, we had to lock the doors, but still Pete and I leaned over the chessboard. The room glowed from Falstaff and Schlitz signs on the wall, one of them an elaborate shimmering waterfall scene, as if drinking beer had something mystical to do with rivers and not the lonesome country music tunes playing on the jukebox. The traffic along Fulton Beach Road was dead, save for wobbly red taillights fading as the occasional midnight cowboy weaved homeward from The Canoe Club.

Pete scrutinized the board with his thin-lipped smile, prying open his eyelids with two fingers when they clamped shut and refused to open. I had him in check.
When my parents went home they left me the keys to unlock the front door to let Pete out, and told me, “Now don’t keep Pete up too late. Some people have to work in the morning.” That was a dig at my college kid status, home for vacation.

Pete paid no attention to that. He traded his bishop for my rook and said, “People don’t understand the Alligator Man. If the police would put their guns down and look into their hearts, this whole brouhaha would be over, no blood spilt.”

This much I knew: The owner of The Alligator Farm had been accused of growing a field of marijuana plants on his proverbial back forty. The farm was south of town, a sadsack roadside attraction: its lurid, rusty sign featured a badly drawn ‘gator. When the police came for him, he’d bolted the door, grabbed a rifle, ammo, and fled out the back, rowed across the alligator-infested pond to a small island where he gave feeding shows, then challenged the coppers to come and get him. Like Jesse James or Pretty Boy Floyd, he’d supposedly vowed they’d never take him alive.

As we discussed it over the chessboard, Pete insisted he should volunteer as hostage negotiator. When I pointed out there was no hostage, unless you wanted to consider the Alligator Man holding himself, or the alligators in the pond surrounding him, hostage, Pete said, “Okay, police standoff negotiator. Whatever. That’s not the point. The point is I know the man. He’ll listen to me, I tell you. What if we drive out there? Are you game?”

I said something to the extent of Well yes but….It was after one by then. As we hemmed and hawed, our enthusiasm waned. There was no sense in making a fool of ourselves with the few policemen who must be drinking coffee and waiting for the Alligator Man to give himself up. We said good night and went our separate ways to sleep.

Now it’s important to realize the oddball nature of Pete. He pumped gas at a station just north of Rockport, near Fulton, on Highway 35. They said his eyes were ruined by a splash of gasoline, that he’d had an accident and dropped the pump, the spray poisoning his eyes. He always blinked afterward, repeatedly, constantly, enough to be labeled a town oddity. He never talked about it himself, never so much as referred to it, although sometimes he would sigh, groan even, when he had to reach up and manually pry and hold his eyes open to see the menu.
He also taught me how to play chess. I'd known moves before: Pete taught me to win. We held honkytonk chess tournaments and he could best most everyone. He once beat me twenty-one games in a row. I studied his moves and techniques, his openings and gambits, his rudimentary Queens Indian Defense.

Before long I gave him a run for his money. Sometimes I won. Sometimes I wondered if he let me win. On occasion I could tell he didn't, that I'd actually managed to outsmart him. I was never better than him, though. At best I'd make him pause a long time, his eyes blinking shut in frustration, before he would reach over with his bony, sunburnt hands to move a knight or pawn.

He was one to understand a man in a pickle. He knew what it was like to be a freak.

The next day the standoff continued. Pete found me in the early evening at my parents' place, after he got off work at the service station. He told me he didn't think he had a chance, but he was headed for the alligator farm, and was determined to try to talk some sense into the law enforcement officials. I agreed to tag along, get a behind-the-scenes look at the intricate workings of defiance plus foolishness.

In downtown Fulton, which was all of a few blocks square, Pete's car was famous. It was considered the rustiest, filthiest, most junk-filled car in a town whose parking lots held more than its fair share of rusting junkmobiles. It smelled like bad gumbo. A creature that appeared to be half mouse and half crawdad scuttled out of a paper Dairy Queen sack in the backseat, then disappeared beneath a lampshade decorated with a cowboy and lariat design. The tail pipe spewed a blue cloud of exhaust as we tooled down a back road toward the alligator farm. The cloud behind us hung in the air like mosquito control fog. During the ride I kept my feet suspended off the floor, in case that crawmouse tried to crawl up my leg, and the windows rolled down, so I could breathe.

At the turnoff to the alligator farm, a deputy sheriff's car blocked the driveway, wedged sideways just beyond the billboard, the farm's advertisement, with its smiling alligator urging the public to come visit, Feedings Daily. The Barney Fife
turned us away. Pete blinked and insisted that he knew the Alligator Man, that he could talk him out of this, but the cop wasn’t having it.

“This is a law enforcement matter,” he said. “And unless you’re the Donut Fairy with free samples for all, I’d back off and go home.”

Pete left without a word, but a half mile down the road he took a left off Highway 35, and said he had an idea. He knew a back way in to the alligator farm, and he figured if he couldn’t actually speak to the man one on one, maybe he could get close enough to yell something across the pond.

“Won’t the police see us?” I asked.

“They can go to hell,” said Pete. “You stay back, though, to play it safe. I’ll give you my keys, so if I’m arrested, you can drive home. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“You could get shot?”

That made him pause.

“Not likely,” he said. “I can always raise my hands and plead stupid.”

Pete parked the car on the back road, where he thought we’d hit the alligator farm if he simply headed south. It was dusk by then, fog hovering in the hollows of the marshes. We stumbled through a thicket of twisted live oak and palmetto, following a path in the knee-high swamp grass trampled by cattle, chupacabras, or the Alligator Man himself. At one point we came upon a turkey vulture perched in the top black branches of a dead oak tree, stretching out its dusky wings as if it were being crucified.

I kept bumbling into cobwebs, frantically pawing at them, afraid of those huge black and yellow spiders that spin webs big enough to catch warblers. It was impossible to walk a straight line south, picking and weaving a way through the tangled woods and swamp. Before long I had no idea where we were.

Pete insisted we weren’t lost, but he was blinking so much I doubted him as a reliable narrator. Night fell with a soft rattlesnake hiss. In the gassy moonlight, all the world around us appeared in silhouette. At the edge of a black pond, in the beam of our flashlight, a small log became animate, morphing into a water moccasin, slithering into the dark water.
We went on, stumbling frantically through the thicket of spiderwebs and mosquitoes. Eventually, when I was close to panicking, scratching and prickly, we came into a clearing in the oaks.

In the center of it knelt a black-haired woman before what appeared to be an altar, a reliquaria or makeshift retablo. She faced a semicircular arrangement of candles in wine bottles and aluminum pie pans, decorated with lilies, saint figures, and newspaper articles. She paid no attention to us, lost in prayer. I was dumbfounded, Pete nonplussed.

"His wife," he whispered. "I thought she'd be here."

In this aura of suffering, the candles illuminated one side of her face with their golden flames, and the blue hue of moonlight gave the other side a mystical glow. Pete assured me that beyond the field where the woman knelt was the island on which the Alligator Man was engaged in his standoff with the deputy sheriffs of Aransas County. The flashlight beam faded to yellow, casting dim water fracture reflections on the cattails and salt grass. I couldn't see any island, but I took his word for it.

Pete gave me his car keys. He told me to hang back in case of trouble. I wasn't particularly keen on this plan. He had the flashlight, and I realized I had no chance in hell of finding my way back through the swamp. If push came to shove, I'd have probably been nothing more than a warm target for mosquitoes, spiders, and water moccasins, with turkey vultures picking my bones.

Pete squatted beside the woman and, for a few minutes, clasped his hands in prayer. They spoke in Spanish, low voices full of sadness and remorse. The night air rippled with a chorus of croaking frogs. The candles flickered. After a while, he got up and hugged her. I watched as he said his last words of encouragement, nodding, and walked my way, leaving the woman to her vigil.

He stalked moodily through the salt grass and palmetto on the walk back, which seemed only slightly less maddening. By the time we reached his messy car, I was itching like crazy and glad to climb in with the crawmice. He drove slowly, blinking furiously, in a serious funk. At times his eyes closed so fiercely I wondered if he'd get them back open to see to drive. I even wondered if I shouldn't offer to take the
wheel. I didn’t want to hurt Pete’s feelings. He may have been disadvantaged, but he wasn’t a wreck.

Before he dropped me off he reminisced about the Alligator Man. Years before they’d been wade-fishing in Copano Bay and a stingray skewered Pete, its barb breaking off in his calf muscle. The Alligator Man—now approaching the status of America’s Most Wanted and an all-round menace to society—had driven Pete to a hospital. “He maybe saved my leg,” said Pete. “The man’s a crusty saint.” At one of the few stoplights in Rockport, Pete planted his foot on the dashboard and yanked back his pants leg. And there, a divot in his scaly skin, was the bullethole-like stingray barb scar.

The memories deepened his gloom. I’d never seen Pete that depressed. “What’s the point of anything?” he asked. “A man tries to make a living, a woman tries to love and take care of him? And what happens? The law throws a monkey wrench in the works.”

When he dropped me off at home, I asked where he was going. He said he figured he’d check out the doings at my parents’ honkytonk, maybe have a drink or twenty.

I’d like to report it all ended in peace, love, and understanding. That the Alligator Man was pardoned, reunited with his wife, returned to tend his ponds full of prehistoric behemoths. But that’s not the way the world works. There’s no sign sporting a friendly reptile left on Highway 35 between Rockport and Aransas Pass. Their time has passed. I remember now The Alligator Man turned himself in soon after our escapade. The standoff ended in embarrassment, as those things often do. He became just another perp on the TV news, in handcuffs, a deputy pushing down his head as he enters a squad car.

The rest is hazier. It seems we went back to our places: I returned to college, Pete pumped gas at the station. Over time, I lost track of him completely. I regret that. He was a good-hearted man who couldn’t stop blinking, but who could feel for a man trapped on an island of mistakes, surrounded by alligators and police. True story.