



FIRST GATOR

A SHORT STORY

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by
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The warm winds of the September night swirled around the full moon. The bellow of frogs and the chirping of crickets echoed around the swamp as the stars above were reflected in its murky waters. At the end of a small wooden dock, a little boy of no more than ten years sat dangling his bare feet off its edge. The wood planks of the deck were rough and tugged at his dirty overalls when he jostled his feet this way and that.

Tommy Landry loved the swamps. His biggest dream was to be like his daddy, a trapper. Every year he'd see his daddy bring a boatload of gators back home during gator season and every year he wanted to go hunting alongside him. Tommy was fascinated by the gators. He knew how to bait them, what to use and even where to tie the bait. In Tommy's mind, he was ready for hunting gators, but his daddy told him he was still too young. In an attempt to dissuade his son, his daddy had shown him where he'd been bitten before, but Tommy had poked several with a stick, and to him, they didn't seem so tough. Of course, they were already dead.

This year he was determined to show his daddy that he was old enough go out on the boat. The night before, Tommy had snuck into his daddy's supply of rotten chicken and brought it out to the little dock away from the house where he'd already tied a line to a nearby willow tree. Tommy had taken his time to make sure the chicken was securely attached to the line and that the line was good and tied to the tree. He waited all night for a gator to come, but nothing ever came. He returned tonight hoping he'd caught something but faced disappointment instead. That didn't stop him from waiting on the dock hoping something would bite.

Tommy let out a huff and laid back on the dock to stare up at the stars for a while. Just as he started to daydream of riding on his daddy's boat, he heard a splash not too far away. Tommy jerked his

head toward the splashing and saw that his bait was underwater, and something was trying to keep it there. “Dang!” Tommy jumped to his feet all excited. He ran off the dock and toward the bank where the tree was. As soon as he saw it do a death roll, he knew without a doubt he had a gator on the end of his line. He stomped his feet in excitement and waved his arms. “I got one!” It was then the realization hit him. Now what? Listening to his daddy’s stories, his daddy always had someone to shoot the gator before dragging it into the boat. Tommy didn’t have anyone, and he certainly didn’t have a gun.

He gave the gator that was wrestling on the line a final look and dashed off toward the house as fast as his bare feet could take him. Tommy knew where his dad kept his .22. He tore inside the darkened one-story house, grabbed his daddy’s gun along with some slugs and returned to the dock as fast as he could. He didn’t even try to load the gun while he was running. His mind was focused on whether the gator was still on the line or not. When he got there, he was relieved to see the gator still fighting with the line. Tommy got to the edge of the bank as close as he could and pointed the shotgun. His daddy had let him shoot it before, but this time it wasn’t some old can sitting on a fence. It was a real gator.

Tommy cocked the gun using the lever and pointed it toward the gator. He mouthed the instructions his daddy would tell him before getting ready to fire like where to put the butt of the gun, where to aim and when to fire. He waited for the gator to surface and then pulled the trigger. The gun pushed Tommy backward, but he didn’t drop it, and he didn’t fall down. The gator was thrashing on the line. He hit it, but he didn’t kill it. Tommy’s hands were shaking. He was excited but scared. “I’m gonna get you dis time.” He cocked the shotgun again and re-aimed. He was too focused to see the front porch lights had turned on in the distance. Tommy didn’t

hesitate when he saw his next opportunity. He pulled the trigger. Again, he was pushed back but managed to stand his ground. The gator had stopped moving. He had got him. Tommy stomped his feet and yelled “Yeah! I got you!”

Tommy scrambled up the willow tree and untied the line. The gator was much heavier than he expected, but he pulled the gator onto the bank. It was a good 4 to 5-footer by the looks of it. He tied the line around its neck and pulled it toward the house, with the line over one shoulder and the .22 in the other arm. His daddy was standing on the front porch in a white tank top and tan boxers with a rifle in his hand. His daddy lowered his rifle when he saw Tommy come into view. His son marched up to the front porch with a big grin that went from one ear to the other. Tommy put the butt of the gun down on the ground and pointed at his catch. “I did it deddy. I caught me a gator. I told you I could.”

His daddy didn’t know whether to be proud or mad. He propped his gun against the porch railing, looked down at Tommy and the gator and shook his head. “I’ll be.” He went to his son and hugged him. “You did good dare son.” He wanted to fuss at him for doing something so dangerous, but he didn’t have the heart. Instead, he walked over to his flat-bottomed boat, grabbed a tag from a wooden locker chest and walked back over to Tommy.

“Dis is how you tag dem son.” Tommy was excited and watched his daddy put the tag on the gator. Afterward, the daddy picked up the gator and put it in his boat’s gator box.

“Deddy, can I go hunt’n wit you tomorra?”

The two of them walked into the house with the daddy carrying both guns. The daddy chuckled and patted Tommy on the back. “I think you goin’ have to talk your ma bout dat.”

THE END

NOTE: This story first appeared in [Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal](#), Volume 36 in September 2011.