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## Alligator

Kevin Clouter

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## Kevin Clouter

is the author of [\*We Were Flying to Chicago: Stories\*](#). He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska Omaha Writer's Workshop, where he is Program Coordinator of the [MFA in Writing](#). He lives with his wife and two children in Omaha.

## Alligator

Nick had liked Andrea a long time when Billy said he was seeing her. Maybe he didn't say *seeing*. They were sharing a joint. Nick got the idea. He lost.

Billy seemed apologetic about winning. He was so accustomed to winning, he could wear it lightly. This was its own kind of annoyance.

But the joint was taking all of Nick's bad feelings and putting them in a bowl and mashing them into something else—not good feelings, exactly. Billy was smart to get them high before bringing up Andrea.

"You asked her out," Nick accused.

"I like talking with her is all," Billy said.

"You like talking with me."

"You're high."

"I'm saying talking isn't everything. And I'm not that high."

Billy liked talking about how high people were. He leaned against the fence. They were standing behind tennis courts, or what used to be tennis courts. The surface was busted up with weeds, and Nick had never seen a net.

"She's not the way she acts in school," Billy said.

"I know that."

"She's—"

"You just brought the one?"

Billy was a reliable repository of joints. He lit the second off the first, which he dropped into the grass.

"You were pretty into Lara," Nick said.

"Lara." The word appeared to pain Billy physically.

"I liked Lara."

He pulled philosophically from the joint.  
"Everybody liked Lara."

This, too, was a kind of annoyance.

"Andrea isn't like Lara," Billy added.

Lara wasn't like anyone. Neither was Andrea. That was the point.

"Did you ever take Lara here?" Nick asked.

"No."

"What about Andrea?"

Sometimes Nick and Billy would step on tennis balls, springy beneath their sneakers. Nick would hurl the balls into the trees that stretched beyond the fence. He'd listen to the balls fall. There were cigarette packs and bottles among the trees, reminders that Nick and Billy weren't the only ones to come here, though they'd never seen anyone else

"Let's go already," Billy said.

They extinguished the second joint before emerging from behind the tennis courts. What would other people think if they saw Billy and Nick then? They never worried. That was for other people.

Smoking made Nick nostalgic, which embarrassed him, as if he hadn't lived long enough to miss anything. But Nick missed a lot of things: the bagel place that locked its doors one Tuesday and never opened them again; the green bathing suit whose elastic surrendered; the cereal bowl with the chip he studiously avoided when slurping milk (how many times had he carried that bowl to the sink before it crashed to the linoleum?). And Nick missed people, like his uncle who before driving his car into the Intracoastal one Friday taught a parrot to say *fuck off*. Or the girl who shoved her tongue down his throat after school and then stared into his eyes, as if to say, What do you think about that?

Nick didn't know what he thought. He felt nostalgic for Andrea, though she hadn't gone anywhere. She wasn't pretty in the way other girls were pretty, or in the way boys talked about other girls. Truthfully, there was something a little strange about Andrea. Her face seemed

like the wrong shape for her eyes. Nick had never seen someone with such big brown eyes. She had big brown eyebrows too, which Nick had come to revere. He thought he was alone in recognizing Andrea's beauty until now.

Nick walked behind Billy, who led them down the path they'd been down many times. Was the grass matted from other people's sneakers? Had Andrea walked down this path too? Nick didn't want to ask about her again. He wished Billy hadn't told him about Andrea, though maybe that would be worse. Better to acknowledge reality, except Nick wasn't interested in reality. What had reality ever done for him? Nick preferred his own reality, where many things—like Andrea's falling for him—remained possible. What was possible here, walking behind Billy?

He turned around then, as if he knew Nick was thinking about him. "I did bring Andrea," Billy said. "Just one time."

"What time?"

"We didn't stay long."

"What did you do?"

Billy stopped. "Talk," he decided.

Nick was barely high by the time he got back to his house. He could have a conversation, so long as nobody looked too closely at his eyes. His mom could be counted on not to do this. Dale was the one who worried Nick.

Dale had been dating Nick's mom for three months. In that time, Dale didn't exactly move in, but he was there more than he wasn't. He said he was between jobs. He always wore the same blue-gray pants.

"Hey," Dale said, as soon as Nick closed the front door.

"Hey," Nick said.

"Let me show you something."

Nick walked to the kitchen slowly. Dale was sitting at the table, which was empty, save a tall glass of beer. Dale liked to drink beer in glasses rather than cans like a normal person.

"Where's Mom?" Nick asked.

"Your mother's on the way."

When Nick sat at the table, Dale stood. He removed two cans of beer from the refrigerator.

"You want a glass?" he asked.

Nick shook his head. Dale opened both cans. He filled his glass with one can.

"You know." Dale pointed to his head. "You aren't between your face and the back of your skull."

"Where am I?"

"You have to wake up."

Nick was awake. He was awake, for example, to the way Dale leeches off Nick's mom, flattering her constantly, so she wouldn't mind his staying in her house, eating her food, drinking her beer. Nick didn't reach for the other can. Any minute Dale might take a keener interest.

"You have to meditate," he said. "I've been meditating a lot. Your mother has been meditating too."

Nick had no idea what to say.

"Well, I think she's on the way," Dale continued. "She might have been held up. Do you not want that beer?"

Nick did want the beer, of course, but Dale had never offered one. Nick wasn't stupid. He wasn't about to walk into a trap.

"I think I'll go to my room," he said.



"You're kidding."

"It's a school night."

Dale liked that one. He made a theatrical gesture with his arm that said: Rest up for school. But also: We both know you're full of shit.

Nick locked his door. He closed his blinds. He brought his eyeballs to the mirror, and in the room's dim light, they looked more pink than red. He applied eye drops liberally, or rather he tried to; he always snapped his eyelids shut before the liquid hit. He gave his shirt a frantic sniff and was relieved to discover it smelled okay, a combination of sweat, industrial detergent, and secondhand smoke. Not firsthand, which smells different.

He had a phone in his room but not his own line, which he desired above all material possessions. To be able from his room to talk with someone without worrying that someone else was listening—Nick couldn't imagine freedom like that. His plan was to graduate from high school, leave, and never come home again. Or maybe come home occasionally to give his mom a gift, something that both showed how much he loved her and how far he was from forgiveness.

He didn't know where he would go, only that he was gone.

He heard Dale banging around the hallway. Nick didn't understand why Dale couldn't leave him alone. He'd developed, between-jobs, a paternal streak that did nothing but point to the absence of Nick's actual father, currently doing a stint (his word) in a state correctional institution. Or maybe it was a halfway house. Nick was never sure where his father was on the prison continuum, only that he was never completely out of prison. He was never, for instance, here.

Nick slid a finger between two blinds and separated them enough to see into the driveway, but only Dale's truck was there. Dale said the window decals of cartoon characters peeing on corporate logos were ironic, but he laughed at them every time. At least there wasn't a confederate flag, a favorite among pickups like the kind Dale drove, which is to say shitty. Nick had a flag of Ireland on his wall, not because he'd been to Ireland or knew anything about the place but because his father had talked about being Irish with a faded, imprecise glory like it was nothing to be proud of but also obviously was. Nobody talked about Broward County that way.

Nick had a recurring fantasy. The details changed, but the story always involved his father's coming back from prison, kicking Dale out of the house (and, often, kicking Dale's ass), and then living with Nick and his mom until Nick left. It never occurred to him not to leave. Nor did he imagine what life with his father would be like. It had always just been Nick and his mom. There had been boyfriends before Dale, but they never stuck. Nick assumed that Dale wouldn't stick either. In Nick's fantasy, his father stuck.

If his mom didn't come home soon, Nick would go to sleep. He'd rather be hungry than have dinner alone with Dale. What would they even make? Both men relied completely on Nick's mom, who relished this power, even as it held her back. From what? Nick didn't think that one was his responsibility.

He decided to brave the unsecured line. He got lucky: Andrea and not her mom answered.

He said, "Billy told me he's seeing you."

"That's funny," Andrea said, "because he didn't say anything to me."

Nick carried the phone to the mirror, where his eyes remained unchanged.

"What about the tennis courts?" he asked.

"The tennis courts are gross."

Nick didn't dispute the claim.

"Are you with Billy now?" Andrea asked.

"I was."

"Doing what?"

Nick didn't want to get into that. What did he want? He wasn't sure. Or maybe he was. Maybe the things he wanted—for Andrea to fall in love with him, to leave this house forever—didn't matter because they weren't things he could ask for. Except they felt like they mattered.

"The usual," Nick said.

"You know what I think," Andrea said. "I think you're both morons."

Nick detected hurt in the declaration and, as such, an opening.

"Morons how?" He pretended not to know.

"I'm getting another call," she said. "Probably Billy."

Nick could wait. Of the innumerable things that might happen in that moment, waiting was among the most appealing. If he was waiting, he

wasn't having dinner with Dale. Nick was in his room, where he could only get into so much trouble, barely any trouble at all. He returned to the window, but there was nothing new to see. He consulted his walls, which were empty, save the flag and a couple of posters, already outdated in the interests—fast cars, mostly—they announced. Nick would take the shittiest car if it were his own. He imagined picking up Andrea from her apartment in his own car. He imagined her sitting in the passenger's seat and putting her hands in her lap before looking at him and saying, Now what?

The one time they kissed, they were in Nick's mom's car. Andrea let Nick kiss her and then looked sad. When he apologized, she looked sadder. He didn't hold this against her. If anything, it strengthened her credibility.

"It wasn't Billy," Andrea said when she came back.

"Who was it?"

"Someone for my mother."

"How's your mom?"

Andrea didn't acknowledge the question, as if to strike it from the transcript.

"My mom is out," Nick said, irrelevantly.

"You want to do something?"

"There's one problem."

"I don't mind walking."

Not for the first time, Nick wished he had the kind of window you could open and crawl out of. The prospect of walking past Dale and acknowledging or even ignoring his dumb, expectant looks was nearly enough to keep him inside his room. But Nick had a philosophy he followed: when someone offers you something good, you take it. You don't invent reasons not to. This philosophy had served Nick well, maybe because he didn't get offered much.

Or maybe he did. Maybe he needed to appreciate what he had, or might have. Hadn't his mom said something to this effect? He checked the window one last time: nothing.

Nick said, "Meet me at the golf course."

Dale wasn't in the kitchen. The cans of beer were gone, and the glass was in the sink. He didn't answer when Nick called his name.

Nor was Dale in the driveway. Nick looked through the truck windows, and Dale wasn't in the truck either, though his keys were. Could it be that easy? Nick didn't see Dale until Nick reached for the door.

"Where'd you come from?" Nick asked.

"I wasn't trying to—what's the word—*entrap* you."

Dale walked toward the truck. He must have been in the backyard, or what Nick and his mom called the backyard, though there weren't any of the things one typically associates with a yard there, such as grass.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Dale said.

"I wasn't going to do anything."

Dale nodded. "I'd go too," he said.

For a panicked moment, Nick worried that Dale had listened to his phone conversation. But then Nick remembered he hadn't said anything. All the important transgressions happened in his mind.

"Next time, ask." Dale reached into the truck and took the keys. "Because I might say yes."

Nick walked toward the golf course quickly. He didn't want to make Andrea wait. She got there before he did. They always met on the ninth green, which was beneath her apartment, which had been conceived of as a luxury building. But when the money disappeared for the golf course, everything around it fell into

disrepair. Now the golf course was unused and overgrown, and the buildings around it were inhabited by people like Andrea and her mom, which is to say people like Nick and his mom, which is to say broke people.

Andrea said, "There's nothing going on tonight."

"There's nothing going on any night," Nick said.

They walked in the direction of the clubhouse, or where the clubhouse would have gone, were it completed. The clubhouse had walls but no windows or doors. It had a roof but not one that kept out rain. The inside of the clubhouse was always wet. There was no furniture inside. Nick and Andrea liked to sit on the windowsills and talk about what they would do, where they would go, next. Andrea wanted to leave Florida. She thought Virginia sounded nice, not too hot but not too cold either. She thought there were probably nice beaches in Virginia.

Nick didn't care about where. He didn't think Florida was so bad. He didn't even care about what. He thought he could be happy scraping barnacles off the bottom of a boat. Once Andrea got going, he listened. He imagined himself wherever she was.



The clubhouse was private. More private than the tennis courts. There was no evidence of other people at the clubhouse. Animals but not people. Raccoons or opossums or armadillos—something four legged and low to the ground—lived in or beneath the clubhouse (Nick and Andrea only went when it was dark). Birds streaked their shit across the roof (the absence of windowpanes made it easy to climb onto the roof). Bugs were invisible in their ubiquity; you only really noticed when one darted into your eyeball.

"I should have known," Andrea said. "You're high."

Nick realized he hadn't said anything for a long time. It was getting dark. They nearly walked past the clubhouse.

"You can smoke," Andrea said.

"I didn't bring anything."

She shrugged before walking inside. She sat on the windowsill. Nick sat on a different windowsill. He looked for armadillos but didn't see anything. He wished he had something to smoke. He was acutely not-high in the way you can only be right after you're high.

The wood on the windowsill was soft. Andrea always sat up when it started raining, as if the rain gave her permission to be melancholy, insisted that she be.

Sometimes she said, "I can't help that I'm sensitive."

Nick would nod from his windowsill.

Now she said, "What the hell is that sound?"

"Probably a raccoon."

"No. *Look.*"

Andrea hopped off the windowsill. Nick did the same. He walked toward her. Together they peered out her window. Something large and dark was approaching. Too much grass was moving for a raccoon. This thing—Nick couldn't make out what—was really going. He looked at Andrea, and she didn't look frightened so much as curious.

"What do you think it is?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You think it sees us?"

Nick didn't know. He felt an urge to protect Andrea followed immediately by an urge to protect himself.

"You think it can get inside?" she asked.

That was another thing he didn't know. But he knew one thing: it wasn't a person approaching. No person moved like that. Thunder clapped above them, and for a moment, he let himself imagine it was wind moving the grass.

"Should we get out of here?" she asked.

Nick nodded. But where? How? It was getting closer, the grass moving faster, the shape growing larger. Soon it—whatever it was—would be before them. There would be no wondering then.

"Did you know alligators can run eleven miles per hour?" he asked.

"Is eleven miles per hour fast?"

"They're good climbers too."

She looked at him because she knew about the climbing. Everyone in South Florida knew about that. But you couldn't run in zigzags, like people said. Alligators had been around since dinosaurs for a reason. They were so still in the nature videos before they pulled the bird, the animal, the baby into the water.

Things could change just like that!  
Everything you thought you knew, like that,  
could change completely.

But whatever it was never revealed itself.  
Nick wanted to feel relief, but he only felt  
disappointment. He wondered if Andrea felt the  
same, though she didn't say anything, and he  
didn't ask. She said she should probably get  
home, and they walked back to her apartment in  
silence, his sobriety insisting on the world's  
ugliness.

He berated himself on the walk to his house.  
There had been a moment to show courage, and  
in that moment, he'd done nothing. Why?

He imagined how his father would have  
responded. He would have walked out of the  
clubhouse like he owned the darkness. He would  
have punched or kicked—punched, Nick thought,  
was better—his way to a resolution. Then his  
father would have gone back inside and  
explained that the threat was gone, that they  
could get back to the way things were, knowing  
things were irrevocably different because he'd  
revealed his soul, and once you see something  
like that, you don't forget it.

Nick wasn't sure about his soul. It was in  
there—he was sure of that—but what it looked

like and where it would take him, he had no idea.

Dale was sitting at the kitchen table when Nick got back. His mom still wasn't home. When Dale put a glass of beer before Nick this time, he took it.

"Rough night?" Dale asked.

"I messed up."

"You'll get another chance."

"What if I don't?"

Dale drank from his glass. "You will," he said.

Nick drank from his beer at the same pace Dale did, a slower pace than Nick would have preferred, though even this was a risk. His mom wouldn't approve, which Dale must have realized.

"Let me show you something else," he said.

Nick followed Dale to the backyard. They brought their glasses with them and sat in lawn chairs that overlooked a pile of dirt, allegedly the prelude to a garden.

"What should we grow?" Dale asked.

"I don't know," Nick said, "tomatoes."

"You're not thinking big enough."

Nick didn't believe the pile of dirt would ever turn into a garden. He didn't see why Dale, who didn't even live here, should get to plant a garden. Nick preferred the backyard the way it was before Dale arrived, a place Nick could ignore completely. He resented having to think about the backyard at all.

"How should I think?" he asked.

"No," Dale said, "that's not what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

Dale stood. He planted both feet on the dirt pile and looked over the fence. Nick had never bothered to explore this space, which consisted of long grass and showy weeds.

"Everything is so alive," Dale said with reverence.

When Nick thought about growing up, he thought about the world's getting bigger, but for people like Dale, the world got smaller and smaller to the point where you cared about dirt. Moments ago Nick had been about to confront an alligator. How was he supposed to care about dirt now?

Nick finished his glass of beer and felt a rush of courage. It had eluded him earlier, but it wouldn't next time.

"I think you should build a shed," he said, "as big as the county permits."

Dale turned around slowly.

"Then I think you should fill the shed with dynamite," Nick continued. "Can you just buy dynamite? I'm thinking big."

"What would you do with dynamite?"

"Blow it up. The shed, the garden, the fence. All of it. But not the house. We need somewhere to live."

"We should probably run it by your mother first."

Nick's mom worked long hours at two jobs to feed him—to feed Dale, too—and what gratitude did Nick show? He sulked around the house, disappearing when he could. He completed only the most basic chores and didn't volunteer for anything, arguing that he needed to focus on school, which he ignored. He imagined his mom's returning to a hole in the backyard, her boyfriend singed, her windows black with soot.

"Forget it," Nick said.

Dale stepped off the dirt pile. He was smiling, which was unlike him. Dale treated humor as a luxury he couldn't afford. He couldn't afford most things.

"Your mother thinks you're so clever," Dale said.

"I have a test tomorrow," Nick said.

He brought his glass to the kitchen. He washed the glass and dried it and put it in the cabinet. Then he took a can of beer from the refrigerator, though he'd never done that before, and brought the can to his room.

He locked the door and sat on his bed. He opened the can of beer and opened his social studies textbook. It was an old textbook, and Vietnam and Korea were introduced under the heading *Small, Hot Wars*. In the accompanying black and white photograph, soldiers with large helmets grimaced at each other in the mud.

When the phone rang, he waited for Dale to pick up, but he didn't. He was probably still outside. Nick answered on the fourth ring before the call went to the machine.

"I was hoping you'd pick up," Andrea said. "I can't stop thinking about it. Do you think it was an alligator?"



"I don't think it was an alligator."

"What do you think it was?"

Nick took a long drink from the can.

"Hold on," she said. "I think Billy's calling."

Nick looked out his window, but it was too dark to see anything. He looked at the flag of Ireland on his wall. He didn't know what the colors stood for. He didn't know where his father was, or if he was even Irish. Nick didn't know anything, but Andrea didn't care about that. She'd called him. She'd gone back to her apartment, where the night kept going in her mind, and why not? The world was full of danger. You couldn't just turn it off, not if you were paying attention. Andrea didn't want to face the danger alone. Neither did Nick.

He thought: This is my second chance. Then he thought: Don't blow it.

"It wasn't Billy," Andrea said.

Nick kicked the textbook to the floor. He sat up straight on his bed.

"We angered the gods," he said.

"What do we do?"

"Make an offering."

"Of course."

His mom would come home soon. Dale would come inside soon. But Nick was alone with Andrea now. Together they could construct a universe where anything was possible, even the future, especially that.

"Flowers," she suggested.

"Not enough."

"One of the teachers."

"Too much."

"What do the gods want?"

Everything was about to happen for the first time.



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