

LORRAINE AND THE ALLIGATOR
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Category: Fiction

Nobody wants to talk about how Great-Grandma Lorraine died. Nobody in the family, anyway. Everybody else in six counties is laughing about it over beers or watching it on the six o'clock news. My video is all over the Internet by now, too. And here's me not making a dime off of it.

It was another family reunion; something like one every three years they schedule these things — just long enough apart so that the swelling goes down and the scars fade from the brawls and ass-kickings that happen when that many relatives get together in one place. You'd think that after six or seven of these messes we'd learn that bad blood and strong drink

Let me put it this way: when we play 'rock, paper, scissors,' we bring our own rocks.

This year's reunion was hosted by the family's southern branch. These people are so far south that they refused to put the word 're-union' on the invites: it was a 'get-together' held in Burlingame, Louisiana, a tiny town somewhere southwest of Baton Rouge, simultaneously beautiful and creepy as hell — and that's during the day when you can sort of find your way around and see the bugs and other monsters that want to eat you. At night, forget it. The backyard, with the trees drooling Spanish Moss and the moon on the water, looks like an old movie set just waiting for King Kong and the camera crew.

Obviously, I'm from The North. (Though you have to sneer to say it right. And have a hint of rage-y bile flavoring that wad o'chaw tucked up 'tween your cheek-n-gum. Now try it again: *Th'Nawwth*. There ya go.) Pretty much the entire trip, I was either in the house or in my air-conditioned rental with the slightest excuse to drive into town.

"We're out of barbeque chips? I'll run to the store."

"We're out of fireworks again? Damn. I'll head to Wisconsin for a trunk-full. Don't wait up!"

All that time in the car, I got to know a few of my younger cousins. I even let Terry drive a couple times. He's not bad behind the wheel for being only twelve.

Terry, Chauntelle, Bobby — they're all good kids looking to get the hell out of Burlingame. They wanted to know how so I told them the usual: study their asses off, get good grades, go to an out-of-state college, and lay-off the weed. Just because folks around there grow it as a secret revenue crop doesn't mean they ought to be smoking it all day. They nodded in the right places but I don't know how much of my Big City bullshit they bought.

Today, Sunday, was supposed to be the final day of a week-long series of picnics, softball games, and bonfires. But before that got started, the entire clan had to, and I mean *had to*, go to church.

Now I go to church — x-mas, Easter, and a couple other days — and I pray when it counts, mostly because it works. God kept my fiancée from finding out about that dirty girl from Macy's shoe department, didn't He? But the church I go to and the God I worship believe air-conditioning. None of this sweating my ass off in a suit while pushing hot, humid air around with a hand fan. That's physical activity! So now you've got 100 sweaty people flapping their mitts trying to stay cool but all they're doing is making themselves sweat more, for God's sake!

I was already in my car waiting for everybody else to get their asses in gear. Terry tapped on the passenger window. I popped the lock. He got in and gave me the once-over.

“Kinda over dressed, ain’tcha?”

I took in his cargo pants, work boots and what seemed to be his only logo-free t-shirt. “I thought we were going to church.”

“Yeah, but — never mind. Follow them.”

Twenty-two cars and pick-ups full of family were lining up to make the long drive down the ruts connecting Granny’s house to ‘the highway.’ As I got close to the road I could see each car make a left off to the two-lane blacktop, away from town. I gave Terry a what-the-hell look. He dribbled chew-juice into his Mountian Dew bottle then used it to point at the caravan. I turned.

Twenty minutes on, cars were braking for another left down another rutted strip into another part of the swamp. Then, from somewhere up ahead came the explosions. I nearly drove off the causeway. I wasn’t the only one, either, because, as far as I could tell, every rental or vehicle with out-of-state plates jammed on its brakes.

Terry hadn’t seemed to have heard a thing. “Whatch’all stopping fer?”

I said it might have something to do with the explosions. When he told me, “Don’t get all post-traumatic,” it was everything I could do not to punch him in the face. “They’s clearing the landing.”

The landing turned out to be a wide space at the end of the road. To the right, an old pier on rotting pilings stuck out from the shore into a slow-moving river, maybe 200 feet wide. Left of the clearing was a graveled lot for pick-ups and trailers, then a wide, stony path sloping into the water for people to launch their skiffs and fan boats.

One fan boat was out, roughly twenty yards from the shore, motor off. The hull was Rustoleum gold; someone had painted a picture of the Crucifixion on the fan’s giant blades. At the front of the boat, a short man in white vestments lit another stick of dynamite with his cigar then flicked the red cylinder into the water. The explosion sent up a thousand gallons of water and dead fish followed by Amens and Praise-The-Lords from the congregation. The shockwave pushed the boat to another part of the river where Father Kaboom took another shot at Blowin’ Shit Up For Jesus.

“He likes to do four,” Terry said. “For the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

‘He’ was the Reverend Martin Goodall, who, by some strange coincidence, had been at every family meal to bless the bounty which God had placed before us.

I asked Terry exactly how the Rev was related to us. “He ain’t. He’s over t’the house enough that we ought to go ahead and adopt him, though. That man *eats* and Granny won’t turn out a holy man if he’s over at suppertime. Which is almost always.”

‘Clearing the landing’ turned out to be a multi-purpose affair: the earnest prayers and deafening explosions banished Satan’s hordes from the area (apparently alligators, water snakes, raccoon, deer, fox, and every other living thing not there for the expressed purpose of Glorifying The Almighty are ‘Satan’s Hordes’), and the hundreds of concussed fish and frogs floating on the surface were scooped up and hauled away to be cooked for lunch. More proof of God’s eternal goodness.

After the guy at the controls beached the boat, Rev. Goodall ground out his Churchill and gathered his flock for a heap of fire and brimstone the like never seen on Sunday morning TV. As soon as he opened his mouth, Goodall was off and running — with almost everybody there keeping pace. I thought the man had been red-faced and sweaty when I’d seen him standing on the boat, but once he started railing against the sins of the flesh and the Iniquities of Man, his whole head looked ready to pop.

The landing was S.R.O. and he stormed back and forth in front of the crowd, patrolling the shoreline like a rabid guard dog. The reason became clear soon enough.

Just like our dirty clothes go through the wash and we rinse from our bodies the dirt and grime of life, so must we also cleanse our souls of the daily stains and stench of unholy sin. Prayer, He said, was not enough. Prayer is as brushing away hair and crumbs. Prayer, those greedy mumblings to the Lord for His Divine Aid and Forgiveness, is like washing your hands before supper: it's good for you but it don't get you all the way clean, especially with God. For that the soul needs a true and meaningful soak — like those delivered by John at the River, like the Holy Dunking received from him by Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior! Amen!

Goodall got a big round of Amens and Hallelujahs right back at him. Some of my relatives must have been part of the regular church choir. Either that or they were moved by the Spirit and started singing the same hymn. Whatever it was seemed to be the Rev's cue to back into the river, arms up and praying to the sky, until the water reached the top of his beer belly. He was maybe ten feet from shore. A pair of burly yokels in their go-ta-meetin' overalls waded in to plant themselves on either side of Goodall who was already waving in the first penitents.

It was like watching a gang of neighborhood kids pick up the same game they'd been at the evening before, which was a continuation of the one they'd been playing all summer, and the summer before that; the same game their older brothers had been playing for years. Everybody knows the rules, knows their positions, knows the big rock was 3rd base and when to throw all the way home. And even if you were new to the neighborhood, you already knew the rules, too, so all you had to do was find a place in the line-up — which was exactly what most of my extended family members seemed to be doing.

They'd stand on the shore — these people I belonged with only by the virtue of some common DNA, most of them near-strangers to me — their pockets empty, a distant uncle holding purses and cell phones, nervous but excited to be part of something they'd maybe only seen in a movie, but something *meaningful*. After being around each other nearly every hour for a week, they were finally coming together, all together, as a family.

I flipped over my phone and pointed it at the crowd. Terry told me not to bother; there weren't a cell tower for miles. I told him I wasn't calling; I was filming.

“What fer?”

“Because when I tell this story, nobody will believe me.”

I got a few seconds here and there of cousins getting dunked, my mom getting dunked, a group of relatives trying to stay on-key through “The Path To Heaven Is Steep and Narrow.” And I had to keep deleting good stuff in order to make room for the better stuff that kept on coming. I wished I'd had a camcorder so I could just let it run and run and run . . . Somewhere along the way I'd lost Terry, which was fine since I wasn't too sure the pier would hold both of us.

Back in high school, I'd been a photographer for the school paper. It was a great gig made even better when I figured out deadlines could be invoked as an excuse to get out of class. The thing was, though, that I was really good. Over the years I'd won several awards because I was the guy that did what it took to get the shot. Naturally, some of it was dangerous and stupid, but most of it was acting on instinct that got me the pictures I needed.

It was those same instincts that had me on a dilapidated pier twenty–five feet from shore looking at the landing, seeing the backs of Rev. Goodall and his dunkers and the line of family still waiting to get into the water.

He'd ask, "Do you take Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" And before anybody could say more than, "Yes, I —" they'd be grabbed, leaned backward, dunked under water, whipped upright and shoved toward the shore with a, "God bless you! Amen!"

It was a weird combination of religious ecstasy and ruthless efficiency, a perverted and joyless Slaughterhouse For Jesus.

Quiet took over the crowded landing. It started somewhere in the middle then rolled out in every direction. And as the last voices died I could see a hole open where people stepped back into each other, making way for something to get to the water. The final row of family parted and there was Great–Grandma Lorraine, our 91–year old matriarch, climbing out of her wheelchair.

Great–Grandma Lorraine. I didn't really know her but I'd heard the stories and managed to get her Christmas Family Newsletter every year, even after I quit sending her my new addresses.

She'd started smoking filterless Lucky's at fourteen. She drank Jack Daniels and knitted bandages for the lepers up in Carville. She kept a shotgun next to her bed, kept a garden out back and drove her 1973 Chrysler Newport to town twice a week — on Wednesdays for groceries and VFW Bingo, and Sundays for church. She buried three husbands and swore like a golfer. My Aunt Ruthie said the only the only reason Gran had the electric wheelchair was that there was so much family to take care of and so much to oversee, Lorraine figured her legs couldn't move fast enough to get it all done.

In all my time down here I'd managed to stay out of her orbit. Being from a part of the family she didn't much like made it necessary — and made the time I was called into an audience with her very unpleasant.

The short version is that I asked her if she ever felt bad about the way she treated my parents.

She told me no, she didn't. They were sinners and I was a child born of sin.

That's when I told her she was a hateful old bitch and that the only reason these people were here was to make sure they stayed in her will. Not that I was telling her something she didn't already know.

She pretended to be thoughtful for a second then said, "Surely that is not why you are here."

I said, "No, ma'am. I maybe young, but I've learned that, once someone is dead, it's a little late to spit in her eye. Especially since it's glued shut. Best to do that kind of thing to the living. Don't you agree?"

Great–grandma Lorraine made a show of adjusting her glasses and tilting her head to make me think she was seeing me in a new light.

It used to be back in the days when people actually wrote letters to each other, that closing with "Cordially" or "Very cordially" was considered a well–mannered insult. It was the epistolary equivalent of "Please, fuck off."

That's exactly the smile I got from Great–grandma Lorraine: The cordial, please–fuck–off kind that stretches the lips but doesn't go anywhere else on the face because it's shut tight like a stilt house in hurricane season.

“Thank you for the visit,” she said. “Perhaps we’ll do it again.”

That was supposed to be my cue to get lost. Instead I returned her smile and said, “Not bloody likely.”

“You,” she said, “are a rude young man.” Said it flat, like she was mentioning it, without heat or malice.

“Really?” I laughed. “What’s it to you?”

“Good manners make all the difference in the world, especially when dealing with those we find most contemptible. Now, if you will please excuse me.” She steered her little scooter off to another part of the house.

I’d been prepared for her to get the last word in, but for her to call *me* contemptible? After the way she treated my parents? That was really more than I could take. But before I put together a stinging reply, I realized my dad had been right all along: nothing I could ever say would make the slightest difference to her. Because of her faith, there was no room in her heart for someone like me. Which, if you go by The Book, is not remotely Christian. But try pointing that out to her.

My bags were packed and I was on my way to my car and the airport Hilton when I got roped into ‘one last game’ of football with some of my cousins and uncles and wound up drinking and toking away the rest of the week.

That had been Tuesday. Now it was Sunday and I had the camera in my phone pointed at a rickety old bitch readying herself for a down-home baptism. I couldn’t tell you how glad I was that I’d stayed.

The landing was dead quiet. One uncle/cousin/nephew/son held onto the wheelchair while Grandma Lorraine hoisted herself off the seat. When a couple of other family members tried to help with the operation she slapped away their hands.

She took her time crossing the few yards to the waterline, careful to feel each step before putting all her weight into it. Before she got much farther, Rev. Goodall flapped his hands round his head. Grandma Lorraine unpinned her church hat and handed it to someone on shore. Then she waded in.

It was clear from the way the dresses and vestments billowed that the water ran slow in this part of the river. If it’d been any stronger, there was no way she’d have made it even a couple feet in. As it was, she took nearly five minutes to reach Goodall and his goons. On shore, somebody tried to get a hymn going but was hushed before anybody else could pick it up.

Another minute for her to get into position, another for her to catch her breath.

This was it, the family’s defining moment, the one we’d all remember. We were all there, so many from so far away: young, old and oldest of all. Everyone knew without saying that it’d never be like this again. Hats were off. Eyes were wet, including Grandma Lorraine’s. She smiled and gave Goodall’s hand a squeeze. He glanced at his helpers who stepped away, then looked to her.

“Mizz Lorraine, do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

She glanced to Heaven, said, “I surely do,” then closed her eyes, pinched her nose and leaned back so the river could wash away her sins.

When you see the video — and you will — that sound you hear right after all the splashing starts is me, laughing. Laughing my ass off. Reverend Butterfingers loses his

grip on my 91-year old bitch of a grandmother and drops her in the water? Why wouldn't I be laughing? That shit's *funny*! I could already see myself finding the perfect frame for my computer desktop. Telling this story was never going to get old.

Then comes the blood. And the screaming from shore. And Reverend Goodall dropping my grandmother's headless body and running from the water, shrink-wrapped in gore-spattered vestments.

Back the video up to where Goodall and great-grandma Lorraine are talking. See how they're staring at each other? This is a solemn occasion, a religious moment, a family moment. The picture doesn't show it but every eye was trained on those two. Which is why none of us caught the alligator lurking in the water.

Back the video up again and play it slow, frame-by-frame.

Wait . . .

See it? Right there. Right behind Goodall. It was eying his white billows floating in the water, ready to take a bite when Goodall practically shoves my great-grandmother's head into the alligator's mouth.

The sheriff's office or the coroner or whoever investigates these things down here wrote it off as some kind of accidental death. What else can they do?

There was no wake for Great-grandma Lorraine. There didn't seem to be a point. No one's been able to find the thing that ate her head, and believe me, they've been looking. Even if they did get it back, there's not enough mortician's wax and makeup to get her presentable. So the funeral will be closed casket. That's on Tuesday.

Some of the family is staying around. Most of the out-of-towners, like me, have unbreakable Monday travel arrangements, so Rev. Goodall pulled together a last minute memorial service where he tried his damndest to make everybody feel better about the head of our family being killed by an alligator.

He went on and on about 'God's Inscrutable Plan' and, "though we cannot fathom why The Lord would take Sister Lorraine from us in this manner, she was none the less called to Glory with a soul free of sin, cleaner than that of a new-born baby."

Which is bullshit. Watch the video again. She doesn't go under. Her head never touches the water. Her soul was never rinsed.

It's begun already, the family canonizing the dead while fighting over who gets what and how much of it. I go from room to room and see empty places where there used to be a clock or bronze bookends or a carved box that had been full of cracked photos, foreign coins and old casino chips. I hear the whisper of conspiracy and get the stink-eye of suspicion. They all think I'm looking for a cut but none of these people have anything I want. There's nothing for me here. It's time to get my phone back from the sheriff and go the hell home.

It was another family reunion; something like one every three years they schedule these things — just long enough apart so that the swelling goes down and the scars fade from the brawls and ass-kickings that happen when that many relatives get together in one place. You'd think that after six or seven of these messes we'd learn that bad blood and strong drink

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