DAWN

It was at the end of March during mild weather. Sign of the Ram. Crocuses had been in bloom -- purple, white, golden yellow -- pushing through dead leaves for over two weeks. Oaks were all in heavy bud; squirrels ran back and forth along the branches seeking food, insatiable. Soil was soft and easy to dig. Robins were a common sight.

People were walking around town with their jackets off. They sat around the square to eat their lunches, jumped in cars to drive down to the lake, kissed in public. Baseball was back in the news. The Sox seemed to have a real shot at it; the Cubs would certainly improve. Joggers were barelegged on the streets. It was March 28.

Between three and four in the morning -- that time when some say the deepest sleep occurs -- the most vivid dreaming -- the first alligators were seen.

Alligators. In case you don't know, I can tell you now that alligators are not associated with our part of the country. Alligators are tropical reptiles, dinosaur holdovers that live in swamps and bayous. They can't tolerate cold weather and here, around the Great Lakes, it gets very cold.

Ernie Spychalski figured they had escaped from the zoo. As he later told it -- in an underground room close with cigar smoke -- he was getting off his watchman's shift at Joy Mfg, in his car past the gate, when he saw three alligators pulling themselves out of a drainage ditch and onto the road he had taken home every morning for fifteen years. In that time Ernie had seen plenty of dead coons and cats; shiny red pairs of eyes from the tall grass. Never an alligator. He braked hard and held his breath. Three alligators headed down the road, monster shapes

in the breaking dark, their three long tails making three long streaks of wet black on the concrete. Ernie threw his car in reverse and back through the gate at Joy. He got on the phone to the police and told them they better call somebody from the zoo.

But the man from the zoo told the police that they didn't keep any alligators there. It was a small zoo without much money and alligators were too exotic for their budget. He suggested the cops might make sure that Ernie was all right.

A squad car with two officers went out to Joy. One of these cops knew Ernie and wondered what was up because he had never seen Ernie too drunk or acting strange. He yawned and asked his partner what Ernie might have seen to make him think that three alligators were trooping down Roeske Rd. His partner smacked his lips and shook his head.

Ernie was standing at the gate.

The cops told him there were no alligators in the zoo.

Ernie knew the cops were studying his eyes, the way he stood, the tone of his voice. He felt that tension in his head that comes when you have to show someone else that you are normal, just like they are.

"Come with me," said Ernie, "please."

The three men started walking up Roeske Rd. The air was cold and blue, there was light without shadows. No one spoke. There was the sound of the footsteps of the men on the concrete. They walked three abreast; Ernie in the middle with his hands in his pockets. They walked about one hundred yards -- the length of a football field. None of them remarked the total silence, absence of birdsong, cricket or frog chorus.

They all stopped at once. Ernie pointed, his hand was shaking and

he couldn't stop it, at the streaks on the concrete, shapes in the road.

"There."

They began walking faster, hurrying. One of the cops unsnapped his holster, felt his gunbutt. They were close; close enough to see, to know. "Their tails are weapons," said the cop.

"Look," whispered Ernie.

The men were close enough to touch them. The alligators were moving slowly, heads bobbing groggily from left to right. The men could now walk slowly too, bringing up the rear. The alligators seemed to pay them no heed. Together, they all proceeded down Roeske Rd.

One cop said to the other, "You better go back and call, ask what to do."

His partner nodded and turned back. Then he stopped up short. There was another alligator. It was coming behind them. The cop stood and watched it for a moment. Looked at its skin, broad snout and vertical eyes. Its little legs carrying it nearer. It stopped.

"Hey," the cop's word met the air like a piece of wood dropped in a metal bucket. His partner and Ernie turned and saw the fourth alligator. The alligator made a hissing sound. It startled the men; it sounded hot, as though steam might follow but there was no steam, just the long exhalation. It hissed again. The other alligators stopped, were shifting themselves around.

"We better kill 'em," said the cop Ernie knew.

"Yeah," said the other, taking out his gun, thinking of Jungle Jim, of hats with leopardskin hatbands, of beautiful women in sleek canoes exclaiming with fear at the sight of open jaws.

Ernie said nothing. He really didn't know what they should do.

He put his hands back in his pockets and wondered how many more alligators there might be. Who they belonged to.

DAY ONE

Alligators were on the front page of the evening paper. Five of them -- the men found another one climbing out of that drainage ditch -- in a row, lined up like a gang of gunned-down outlaws. They were laid out on the sloping grass in front of the gates to Joy. The cops were posing, standing on either side of Ernie Spychalski who was gazing down at the huge corpses, his hands in his pants pockets. The headline over the picture read: UNHEARD OF. The story was continued on the back page. It appeared with news of a conflict of interest scandal involving the Mayor; a scheme about turning garbage into oil; proposals to redevelop the north end of town; and the robbery of a Chinese restaurant near the shopping mall where I work -- the owner was pistol-whipped.

I was on the job when I saw the paper. I manage a franchise bookstore. It's the only bookstore in the only shopping mall in town. The mall was opened some years back and it's the place where most people shop. It's on the south side of town -- that's why they have to redevelop the north end. Business hasn't been the same there since this place was put up. It's big, a lot of the name stores are here, nationally advertised brands, plenty of parking. My store has done a fair trade in gift books and magazines, gothics, sci-fi and mysterys. A lot of self-help: guides for the pre-occupied with stress and guilt, phobias and overweight. I hold a little corner open for poetry. I wrote poetry when I was in college and still enjoy reading it; especially translations from the Orient. I am moved by the clear imagery and simple language, the intuitive way connections are made.

I was reading about alligators.

No one could guess where the five dead alligators in that picture had come from. A biology teacher from the junior college claimed alligators could not live in our part of the country. The zookeeper pointed out these animals were too big for pets. The Chief of Police said he knew of no circuses that had passed through town. The head of streets and sanitation stated that, contrary to popular mythology, there were no alligators in the sewers of New York and, likewise, there certainly were none breeding here.

I had the newspaper spread out on the counter by the cash register. There was no one in the store. I was by myself, waiting for Ted the Teenage Clerk to come in and take the nightshift. I turned to the back page and finished the account of the morning's alligator incident. Even then the words seemed blind as meat: "We hated having to shoot them all, they were such impressive animals. We had no alternative. There was no place to sequester them and they were creating a public hazard. Since no one was there to claim them we had no recourse but to destroy them."

An hour before, a guy I knew had come in the store. He was a lineman for the utility company; he and his gang had been east of town all day, climbing poles. They had driven Highway 20 home and five miles from the city limit he told me they saw the damndest thing...

His hands were large and windburned. They made the paperback he was thumbing through seem tiny, like a Crackerjack prize. Fieldguide to Reptiles. He froze. Inadvertently broke the binding pressing pages down on the counter between us. He looked at me. The skin around his eyes was winter pale where his sunglasses had been. I remembered how

once he told me of seeing a silver fox cross a meadow near his house. "I was lucky," he said then, "real lucky. You don't see them every day and when you do it's like a gift." We were sitting on his porch. He was soaking up a clear blue sky with half-closed eyes.

Now his eyes were wide and bright, irises like blasted wheels of gold and grey. Ring finger tapping the picture of an alligator.

"I swear to God there were two of 'em. We almost hit 'em with the truck."

His was the third alligator story I had heard that day. The first had been just after lunch. A woman in a blue windbreaker and boater's Keds had started laughing as I counted out her change. Her eyes shut and then her palm jerked up to her brow. Pennies, nickels, dimes clattered on the floor, rolling off in all directions. Her face burned red. She apologized, eyes overflowing with tears. As she had left her house an alligator had crawled around the corner of her garage. She had run back inside and called her husband at his office. She said: "There's an alligator here."

Her husband figured she was depressed again and didn't believe her. She went back out and got in the car. The alligator had not moved, just closed its eyes. It lifted one horny foot. The woman fled to the mall to shop. She had nowhere else to go.

A teenage girl with a briefcase size cassette player and lips red as cherry twists had browsed through magazines around three. She asked me, "Have you heard about the alligators?"

"No," I said.

"They're all over," she said.

I told her to turn her music down and she flipped her ass at me

and left without saying any more.

Ted was late. I had been working all day, hearing stories about alligators. I wanted to go to Rea's, have some dinner, drink a little wine and then, if she felt like it, make love. I was thinking of how long Rea's arms were, how thin. The night before she had stretched those arms across her dining table -- one arm on either side of the candlesticks, sea-green candles that were burning -- her face was obscured for me by flame -- her hands, those long fingers, had taken hold of mine and squeezed. I blew the candles out.

Ted the Teenage Clerk was late. I checked my watch. Very late. He was at home watching the National News, trembling slightly at the uncertainty that affected the voices of his favorite media personalities. They were reporting alligator sightings across the country -- Washington D.C., Fargo North Dakota, Marin County California, Anchorage, Bangor Maine. Ted sat on his parents' couch watching the news and forgot about what time it was.

Before I called his house I called Rea. Her phone rang twice, she picked up her receiver and, trying to be clever, I asked,

"Seen any alligators lately?"

"Yes," she said.

REA'S STORY

After Ted got to work I drove to Rea's apartment. I felt out of it. Evidently I was one of the few people in the United States who had not unexpectedly seen an alligator. I told Rea this and she laughed a little harshly, poured me a glass of Bardolino from a bottle she had already begun. She sat in a bentwood rocker and tilted toward me so that our knees were almost touching; I felt the warmth of her face. The alligator she had seen had been a block away from her, crossing a street at lunchtime.

"I was alone and at first I thought I was hallucinating. Here it is, a perfectly lovely Spring day — I'm enjoying green grass and clean sidewalks; Robins pulling up worms and then, out of the corner of my eye I see — what? — an alligator! Twelve feet long and it's bopping away like it has a train to catch. It crossed the street and passed out of my sight down the next block. Now it would have been one thing if there had been other people around, traffic. But I was alone — the only one. I thought to myself that if this was a hallucination it was a very vivid hallucination and it demanded my attention. You don't get a vision every day — I was curious. I mean: alligators? I decided I'd better step into this and find out what was going on."

Rea drifted off the sidewalk into the middle of the empty sun-filled street. Lanky young woman in a bank employee's skirt and blouse; moving, poised in the open air. She quickened her pace when the alligator left her view, all the while expecting some sound or sign to make a fool of her, to prove that lunchtime still was

lunchtime and that alligators lived in Florida.

But nothing like that happened. The street remained deserted, the sun was shining, breeze blew a slant of hair across Rea's face. She got to the corner and looked down the block. The alligator was hustling. Its skin looked dry as a cinder. It was crossing another sidestreet, making incredible time. Rea stood and watched, her head inclined slightly to one side, her mouth open a little.

An electric whoop behind her shook the air. Police. A black-on-white with red lights whirling passed on the right, smearing Rea's peripheral vision. It bounced to a stop parallel the alligator. Two cops jumped out. Short-sleeved, midnight blue perfectly pressed, she saw a badge catch a line of sunlight. Guns: a clamour of shots. The alligator belly-flopped on cracked concrete. Rea's ears were ringing.

She turned hastily, began walking back the way she came. Still she saw no one. She went back to the bank; only seven minutes had passed. She had twenty-three left of her lunchbreak.

I SEE MY FIRST ALLIGATOR

I had not seen an alligator and I felt cheated out of the new reality. It was as if, in the course of one day, everybody had seen ghosts but me. I left Rea's in a funk. I had drunk too much wine, come too quickly in our lovemaking. I stood outside her building and looked for the moon and stars but found neither. The sky was black.

I drove home in a hurry, gliding through stop signs and flooring it through yellow caution lights. I rolled my window down and cold air cut around the windscreen. My muscles tensed. I breathed deep, swallowing cold air and blowing it out, trying to relax.

I live in a carriage house. It's behind an old mansion -- built, I'm told, by the robber baron who invented barbed wire. It's a Queen Anne style building, chopped into cheap apartments so that now the most comfortable and private livingspace on the property is that which was once a servant's: my place. To get there you drive beneath a porte-cochiere, hard right around the northwest corner and into a carpark. My headlights bumped up the driveway, swung over an expanse of red brick, a row of tall darkened windows, and came to rest. I saw my door -- it needed painting -- mailbox, a rusty snow shovel left out from winter.

An alligator.

It was an open pair of jaws. 80 white teeth, the roof of a mouth that was three feet long and pink as my grandmother's plastic gums. The jaws stayed open and I stayed in my car, wondering if an alligator could eat it.

The jaws slapped shut.

The alligator was black and marked with gold. It closed its eyes -- glaring red -- against my headlights. Then it bellowed.

Its mouth was shut but the sound came forth like thunder. It rattled the plastic fixtures in my car; I felt it through the soles of my shoes, along my shins, behind my diaphragm.

It bellowed again. And from all around us -- from adjoining yards and down the alley, from the next block for all I know -- the bellow was joined, multiplied, brought up to a headbanging rumble. Lights flipped on all over the neighborhood. Bellowing, like a sacrificial chant, quaked the narrow spaces between buildings and rolled over soot-thickened rooftops. At last it echoed away, making the night suddenly empty.

A powerful tail scraped the pavement beneath my car. I realized that I'd been laughing. Laughing until tears came.

NIGHTLINE

At 11:30 on Nightline the topic was "Alligators: Plague or Miracle?" Ted Koppel's Anglo-style face filled my video screen as he drily described the day's events. The camera dropped back and an alligator head was inset in the corner of the picture. Ted intoned that alligators had turned up all over the country but how and why were unknown. Tape was run from New York, where alligators on the streets had snarled traffic and forced Wall Street to close early; from Washington, where they were seen reflected in the black marble of the Vietnam Memorial, scaring people off the National Mall; in Chicago a cop was able to cross the river there by hopping from one scaly back to another; and in L.A. an alligator bore its teeth in front of Graumann's Chinese Theater, its tail sweeping over Marilyn Monroe's footprints with alarming nonchalance. The Secretary of the Interior stood at a podium with hot lights blazing off his glasses, a general on one side of him and a scientist on the other. He said:

"We will take whatever action is necessary to rid our communities of these creatures. Their numbers are such that it is clear that, in spite of their previous Endangered status, they have over-reached the bounds of managability and presently constitute a greater problem for us the public than society does for them."

Ted Koppel appeared to say that after some commercial messages Nightline would continue with three scientists who would talk about alligators and try to explain this extraordinary phenomonon.

There were commercials for airlines, for pain relievers, for

German cars, for a new television series about a priest who is seduced by a beautiful young girl. She was shown taking off her clothes. He was shown kissing her violently.

The three scientists were in Boston, New York and Atlanta. Each, by turn, told something about alligators.

Alligators, it was explained, are cold-blooded. They live in wetlands with tropical climates. Only two types of alligators are known to exist: Alligator Mississipiensis, the famous American breed commonly associated with Florida's swamps and another, far rarer variety known to live in only a small portion of China. The Chinese alligator was said to be shy and of smaller size than its American counterpart, growing up to just six feet in length.

"Well," snorted Ted Koppel, "these alligators certainly aren't shy and now they are associated with our entire country."

"That's right," said the scientist in Boston.

Perhaps the season had something to do with this. Alligators hibernate in nests of leaves, sticks, grass, mud and sand. In Spring they go courting. Their bellow has been thought to be a love call, although it has also been found that certain sounds or tones -- B-flat in particular -- can set them off. Alligators can be surprisingly vocal. Every adult in a given area will answer a distress call.

"Are these alligators breeding?" asked Koppel.

"This we don't know," said the man from New York, a representative of the Bronx Zoo. "An interesting thing is that all the alligators we have seen so far have been adults. We haven't seen any babies."

The first picture of an alligator was drawn by a Frenchman,

Jacques LeMoyne, in 1564. He and a group of fellow explorers had set sail to Florida to see what riches they might claim for their king. Unfortunately for them, Spaniards had already been in Florida for some time. Some of them met LeMoyne and his party and volunteered to act as hosts and guides. Then, on the very first night, they murdered the entire group. Only LeMoyne managed to escape. He somehow crossed the Florida peninsula and got back to France where, in addition to telling hair-raising tales, he sketched the reptilian monsters he claimed to have seen in the New World. He drew them big -- at least fifty feet in length -- veritable dragons.

"We know they're big but not that big," smiled the man from Emory University.

"Actually they may have gotten a little smaller over the years," said the man from Boston.

"Yes, that's true," agreed the Southerner.

Koppel cut in for the People Out There:"Are we going to be in great danger because of these alligators?"

New York: "Damage to property is a greater problem I would say. Alligators are not generally aggressive although in these numbers it is very hard to predict their behavior. The thing is, they'll eat anything."

"I'll say," chuckled the man in Atlanta. He wore a moustache and he was pulling on it, curling it. He stopped when he saw himself on a monitor. He said, "License plates, blocks of wood, pieces of pipe. They use it for ballast."

Koppel bent forward,"Like sharks?"

"A little like sharks I suppose. Yes."

Koppel leaned back in his chair. "Gentlemen, you've told us a lot about alligators but one thing: what can we expect?"

The video screen was filled with a powder blue map of the United States. Little boxes were superimposed on Boston, New York and Atlanta. A scientist's head appeared in each of these boxes. None of them spoke.

"C'mon gentlemen," urged Koppel, running out of time, "Mr. Farmer in New York, what about you?"

"I just don't know."

"Mr. Kezich?"

"Ted, I can't predict at this point."

"Mr. Howard?"

"No, Ted. You won't catch me."

God, all I watch on TV now is the news and that's such a drag.

ALLIGATORS ALL OVER TOWN

In spite of the goofy smiles they seem to wear when their mouths are shut, alligators give people the creeps. They are very hard to ignore and they have no respect for privacy. Their ubiquitous presence made people tense then paranoid then angry then violent.

At first it seemed there might be a kind of monstrous opportunity here; a battle that couldn't be lost. The alligators provided an easy vent for a lot of bottled-up biped rage. Open season was declared and alligators became like living punching bags. People clubbed them, shot them, set fire to them and ran them over with four-wheel drive vehicles. We all joked about getting new sets of luggage, shoes and belts and wallets.

But the constant pepper of gunfire around town made sleeping difficult and became a hazard in its own right. Black community leaders protested to the Mayor that the specially formed police kill squads were careless in their neighborhoods. They held up photographs of bullet-riddled front porches, shattered picture windows and perforated automobiles to prove their point. The Mayor defended the police saying that the only accidental casualty thus far had been a cop -- shot in the foot by a fellow officer.

Added to the racket and ricochets was the problem of carcass disposal. The carnage was creating heaps of dead alligators. Yellow-painted garbage trucks, each with its city seal proclaiming this to be the place "Where Town and Country Meet" were loaded with corpses. They drove to the dump on the west side. There were too many alligators to bury, so they were burned. If the wind shifted the stench was over-

powering -- if it didn't, the stench carried into the next town, Poonville. The Mayor of Poonville complained to our Mayor about this. Our Mayor shrugged his shoulders. The Mayor of Poonville dispatched a fleet of dump trucks -- each one painted the color of avocado meat, "City of Destiny" decaled on the side -- to the edge of our town. There they dumped a pile of dead alligators across the highway that was tall as a man and too wide to reach over.

Our Mayor said he thought this action smelled like a temper tantrum.

The Mayor of Poonville said he didn't care as long as his people had to smell our dead alligator smoke.

Our Mayor ordered the city's dumpsters to drive ten miles south to a mutually agreeable site for carcass disposal.

As if the disposal of dead alligators wasn't bad enough, the the proliferation of live ones kept increasing. Alligators were in the roads, on the sidewalks, in backyards, frontyards, under porches, in front of doorways. They basked in the town square, they floated on the lake, they crawled across the baseball diamonds and shaded themselves beneath the bleachers. Business at the Mall fell like an egg rolled off a tabletop. People avoided going out; again and again I heard them saying about the alligators: "I just can't stand the sight of them."

The kill squads kept at it but there weren't enough bullets. There were too many alligators.

On Sunday the Rev. Hargrove stood before his congregation with one hand on the Bible and a look on his face that was hard as a beam of steel. He wasn't surprised that the alligators had come -- arrived

like a plague of locusts, spawn of black rain because he knew that Satan permeated this society. Until this time he had only guessed how much but now he was certain. Rev. Hargrove was not afraid to fight Satan, to let his righteous anger at Satan's ways have a good roll. He had parked his station wagon in the doorway at Planned Parenthood and preached from the hood about subsidizing wantoness, the massacre of innocents. He had orchestrated over 100 telephone calls to the head librarian's house protesting the inclusion of books on homosexuality in the library's collection. He wore black cowboy boots and, on Sundays, a black frock coat like Johnny Cash. He looked over his congregation from the pulpit and everyone there thought that the Rev.'s eyes drilled their own as he swept the room from side to side. "I feel like Travis at the Alamo," he said, "I've drawn a line with my sword right here. If Satan dares, let him try to cross it."

No one imagined that Satan would. But no one knew that an alligator had slipped down a window well, slid through the broken casement and flopped heavily to the linoleum floor below -- right in the middle of Mrs. Qweazy's Sunday School Bible Study Class. Boys and girls collided with each other getting out of its way. Mrs. Qweazy began hiccoughing uncontrollably.

It was a big one.

WHAT BEN SAID

My friend Ben lives in a basement apartment off the town square. I think his apartment is one of the most extraordinary places I have ever seen. It has an aura -- like Ben, I think -- of romance, of chiaroscuro; it places me in Paris at the turn of the century, Berlin in the thirties, Greenwich Village in the fifties. It is an amber-colored room, very large. There's a small bath off to one side and a recess with some kitchen things; the rest is open, a space in which Ben keeps what he needs: books and records, TV, stereo, a lowslung table that serves for dining and desk, some pillows and a king-size mattress on the floor. There are pictures on the walls — some by Ben himself, photographs and sketches — a few green plants. But the feature of the place, what snares the imagination, is the skylight.

The skylight is built into the sidewalk.

When Ben pulls back a curtain he has fashioned from parachute silk you can lay back on his pillows, look up and watch people passing up above. In daylight it is almost impossible to see in so most pedestrians pass over Ben's apartment without knowing whether they are being watched or not. On sunny days I have reclined on Ben's pillows, a martini in my hand, and looked up ladies' dresses as though I was stargazing, flat on my back in a meadow on a summer night.

Ben likes martinis. He makes them very dry in a silver shaker. He also smokes cigars. You don't meet many men as young as he who smoke cigars. Ben actually has Cuban cigars. He says he likes them -- gets them from a man he knows in Chicago.

Ben doesn't have a job. He lives on a trust his parents left him. His parents were blown up in a pub in London on their second honeymoon by Irish terrorists. Since then Ben lives in his basement apartment, smokes cigars and drinks martinis, goes on occasional trips to places like Nepal and Patagonia, looks through his skylight, writes some poetry and studies the world's religions. I like him.

I had not seen Ben since the alligators had come. Tuesday afternoon I decided to close the store early -- no one had been in, not even to browse -- and went to pay him a visit.

The TV was turned on in Ben's apartment, the sound was turned down to zero. Soap opera: two Sears catalog types in bed -- the sheet up to her collarbone, just below his nipples. They were drinking what looked like champagne. Ben sat crosslegged on an azure pillow, cigar in one hand, martini in the other. That smell of smoke always staggered me at first.

"You know," he said, "it really pisses me off. Alligators everywhere you look and all that's on the tube is this teenage sex."

Ben is not a handsome guy but he has the kind of looks women sleep with to understand. He poured me a martini. It was clear and cold.

"How's Rea?"

"She wants to get married."

"To you?"

"I think so," I felt embarassed. I knew Rea wanted to marry me -- or wanted me to marry her. I was reluctant to admit it.

"You're lucky."

"C'mon," I looked at him, wondering if he was sincere, "It's funny, I can imagine it all right but I don't know if the rest of me is ready -- if I want it."

Ben ashed in a heart-shaped dish, "Afraid your dreams will come true?"

We both laughed. Then we were quiet. I watched shadows cross the skylight; Ben watched the colored images on his screen. He frowned, he started smiling. He was shaking his head. I noticed the Eiffel Tower on the TV, a caption read: PARIS. Ben spoke.

"You'd think even someone who did nothing but watch the tube would know le Tour Eiffel was in Paris. You'd think a video vocabulary would be in use by now, that the sight of the Eiffel Tower would automatically signal Paris, art, l'amour, gaeity, museums, fashion, beheadings, the guillotine. They wouldn't have to say PARIS, right there on the screen. But they do. They say it anyway and deny all the things that image might suggest. They turn Paris into another change of scene on a linear track.

Ben studied the ash on his cigar.

"Do these scientists -- the ones we see on television -- really sense anything about the origins of these alligators or do they need names and labels before they can deal with them? Are they telling us the truth? Do they know how to tell us the truth?"

Ben was rocking on his pillow. The ash had fallen between his crossed legs.

"I've gone among the alligators, you know. And I don't think there's anything to fear."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me tell you."

He had gone out after midnight, on foot. Wind was up and clouds crossed the moon one after another like racers. Ben pulled the collar of his topcoat up; a purple cashmere scarf was knotted at his throat. He carried no weapons; nothing for either attack or defense. Other than a cigar and an eighteen carat gold lighter that had belonged to his grandfather, there was nothing in his pockets. He set a brisk pace away from the center of town.

Police had concentrated on the east side that night. Ben headed westward, breathing a sigh of relief as the noise of guns grew farther from him. He saw no other people but counted fourteen alligators in what he calculated to be the first mile. The first one he saw startled him; it was across the street on the lawn in front of an old rowhouse. Aware of the alligator's presence, Ben stopped in his tracks like a hunting dog. But the alligator seemed to take no notice of him. Its movements were sluggish -- or perhaps just unconcerned. Ben noted it and walked on.

Ben took pleasure in walking at night. He was familiar with the nocturnal ways of these neighborhoods and observant of changes. One feature of these outings he habitually looked forward to was the sense of walking through strangers' dreams. The windows of houses and apartments he passed were invariably dark. They seemed captivated by deep sleep. Ben was fascinated.

This night was different. Lights were on in one building after another. Though out of sight, people were awake. Ben felt frazzled consciousness crackling the air like static electricity. He wanted

to find a dark place where he could sit and reflect on what was happening.

Another mile and he was outside the cemetary, Memorial Gardens. Transient moonlight played on marble curves, uneven rows of headstones. The dark outlines of fir trees looked inviting. A cast-iron gate was left unlocked; it was easy to get in and Ben didn't hesitate. He entered the graveyard as though it had been his destination from the start.

Ben rarely walks in graveyards: "I must admit they frighten me a little -- or else they make me depressed." This night he found tranquility there. He strolled among the markers; felt the cool of weightless souls just above his shoulders. Finally he sat down to rest and meditate.

His mind was almost at the point of feeling like an empty funnel when Ben realized he was not alone. Surrounding him in the blue-green night was a movement of black forms. They were close to the ground, breathing. He heard them pushing over blades of grass. Ben breathed in, "I concentrated on making myself the most harmless creature in the world." Through the expensive wool that covered his spine something hard -- like the sharp point of a broken rock -- pressed against him. He breathed out. A head, long and massive, came to rest beside his knee. He heard the laborious sounds of more alligators coming. Their thick bodies were soon clustered around him, draped in attitudes he could only guess at. They didn't fight or bitch or moan. Ben shut his eyes and, at one point, thought he felt the slow beat of cold blood through a four-chambered heart. He tried to make that time

his own.

"But I wonder if they weren't trying to do the same with me."

At dawn the alligators peeled apart. They crawled off in all directions. Ben didn't bother to count them.

He offered me another martini but I declined. He poured one for himself then clipped the tip off a fresh cigar.

"I don't go out in the daytime anymore," he told me, " the alligators may be a nuisance but the people are really dangerous." He crowded the light with a swirling puff of smoke, "You know these alligators -- I think they're the mirrors in our blood."

I didn't doubt any of what Ben had told me. Like Rea, he never lied. I climbed his stairs to the rose-colored dusk feeling an assurance that was neat as one of his tailored jackets. Right turn at the corner. I was due at Rea's for dinner.

What could have been a five-minute drive was a half-hour walk. I had put my car in drydock; the risk of running over alligators was too great. They caused a lot of damage to the undersides of cars and word was people were having trouble getting insurance to pay for repairs. I didn't mind walking. I needed the exercise. Also, I was finding the presence of alligators stimulating.

My disposition is generally to detest reptiles. If, one morning, news arrived that in the night every snake on earth had spontaneously caught fire and been reduced to a flick of ash I'd get out of bed and go to work without thinking twice. Let someone else eat the rodents and pests -- I'm sure some creature would -- as far as I'm concerned snakes and the better part of lizards are the lowest kind of predatory mechanism; heartless crawlers.

However, in those first days, alligators turned me on. Ancient and strange, they affected me like a fantastic vacation. Annoying people stayed indoors; I felt free to close the store. On my way to Rea's I took anarchic delight in the freaked-out expression on an old lady's face when she opened her door and found an alligator on her front walk. I skipped over the tip of its tail remembering what they said about Bonnie and Clyde: "They're young, they're in love, they kill people."

Walking was too slow — I almost ran to Rea's. I could feel a wedge of sweat down the back of my shirt. It was like I was twenty again; too intense to be cool. Alligators were everywhere. Scaly, hard, thick; mottled gold on black; white bellies with those horizontal lines that looked soft enough to slit with a Swiss Army knife. On Wanatah it looked as if a load of wet logs had been dumped helter skelter in the street. Then one log raised its head, another lumbered over the curb.

Rea, as always, was waiting. Sitting in her sawed-off living-room, the narrow walls covered with Guatamalan weavings she had collected on a trip. The colors of the weavings were bright and wild, they made the little room hum. Rea sat among them on her couch, an aromatic mug of mint tea propped on the upholstery between her legs.

I was conscious for the first time that the figures in all the weavings were animals. Cats, horses, birds. Lizards. They were magenta, indigo, turquoise, bright orange, black and white. They followed each other in flat profile, one beast after another across their woven planes. Some looked over their shoulders. Others were on hindlegs, mouths open and cocks erect.

Rea's hair was parted on the side, it fell over one eye.

"Do you want some tea?"

"Thanks."

She set her mug on a low lacquer table. Stood and meant to pass me. We brushed — her breasts, my hip. We held, turned together, lost balance, regained it. My mouth over her's. Her's inside of mine: mint and steam. I forced her blouse across the

bone to the edge of her shoulder. My teeth on her skin. Both of us breathing deep; she wrapped her legs around me, long arms around my neck her hands so large they completely covered my shoulderblades. We fell across the couch. It was such a little room.

I pulled the pants off her and knocked over a vase. I ripped my shirt cuff.

I went into her so blind I wondered if I'd ever leave. She cried out as though she would never let me. She held on to my shoulders and we went down off the couch, across the floor.

We both came and we both slept. Then we awoke and started in again. Eventually we found our way to Rea's bed. Morning light and we uncoupled. I listened through the wall as she ran herself a bath, to the underwater rubbing of her buttocks on the porcelain, water splashing off her as she rinsed her limbs. I watched her dress, get ready for the bank. We hardly spoke but before she left I told her that I'd meet her after work, that I'd be waiting for her. Rea touched a finger to her lips. She looked back at me as though she was looking at something that was easily recognized but not quite clear. "How do you feel?" she asked, accenting the last syllable.

"As though I've just eaten a platter of raw tuna, full of clean protein."

Rea shook her head.

I told her, "Don't be late." She blew me a kiss and closed the door. It was the beginning of a sex time the like of which I may never know again.

THE FIRST FATALITY

Every day of alligators is another day that makes history.

In our town a corner was turned when Anne Marie Shidler, three years old, of Salem Ct., got the notion of pushing open her screendoor and toddling out into the morning to pull up a new tulip. She was wearing miniature blue and yellow Ms. Pac Man sneakers, socks with strawberries on them, denim pants, a Robot Lover tee-shirt. Her wavy blonde hair fell over one ear that was curled over on itself like a piece of fried squid, a birth defect her parents were saving to correct through cosmetic surgery.

She pushed open the screendoor and walked into an alligator. This alligator had just gotten a rude hiss from another that it had tried to rub against. Then Anne Marie's wee legs passed before its snout, stirring the air like a Japanese fan. It swung with the girl's motion and clamped her with its jaws.

Anne Marie screamed.

The alligator pulled her down.

In her livingroom across the street Mrs. Wiegand thought she heard a human voice. She went to her picture window and saw an alligator dragging the Shidler girl over the Shidler's tulip bed, stringing a telltale spatter of bright red on some thick green leaves. The alligator and Anne Marie went behind the house. Mrs. Wiegand called the police.

Too late.

An alligator had claimed a human life.

AN EXCURSION

Since adolesence I had heard songs about sexual performers who did "it" all night. On the radio, in the car, on records, in bars, restaurants, waiting rooms: celebration of jissum and come, sweat, hair and saliva. Power and escape. These songs were so socially ubiquitous yet foreign to my actual experience that long after adolesence I still felt adolescent curiosities, doubts and fantasies -- expectations about women and myself -- clouding the base of my brain like a purple fume.

I had never done it all night. This in spite of over a decade's worth of what I liked to believe was genuine sexual enthusiasm, practiced with a variety of partners that I hoped were as honest -- more or less -- as I was. I heard those songs on the radio and wondered to myself, do they mean this literally? Actually doing it all night, again and again? Or is doing it all night a figurative expression, code words for eternity, that timeless feeling had in good lovemaking? Never having done it all night I didn't know.

In the first days of alligators I found out. I threaded my way through virtual alligator mazes to get to Rea's or she would come to me. Her place, my place; the bookstore -- I realized a long latent fantasy in the stockroom one night after locking up, there on the worktable where we wrapped the Christmas presents. Rea and I fucked ourselves down to butter, until neither of us could make a fist.

We both slept deep, dreamless, drug-like sleeps. Neither of us suffered the nightmares that afflicted so many of our fellow citizens during this time.

I began singing along with songs on the radio I had once pretended to ignore.

One of these songs -- about a guy picking "sweet hot cherries off the vine" -- was playing that afternoon Rea and I took a drive south of town. It was Saturday, warm with a humid breeze, a sultry day for Spring. We had come-to feeling hungry and restless. Without any warning, in a way that was playful but loaded with self-defense, Rea asked again if I would marry her. In fact, what she said was, "When are we going to get married?"

She sounded so casual, leaning on her elbow on the Marimeko rainbow sheet. I chose to see no insecurity.

"When the alligators go."

"But what if they don't go. What if nothing changes?"

"If nothing changed, what would be the need of getting married?" I said, enjoying the perverse logic of this reply.

Rea clouded, looked away, "Let's go for a drive today. I need to get out of here for awhile."

So we risked running over alligators, wrecking the suspension, muffler and exhaust system. We got the car out and went. I switched the radio on — AM -- we heard that song about hot cherries; I kept my mouth shut.

Within city limits I drove carefully. We both kept our eyes peeled for alligators; Rea pointed them out, making certain I saw

every one. Once I had to bump over the curb and drive on someone's front lawn to avoid a mess of them. Getting too close could be dangerous; a few were known to have bitten hefty chunks out of passing tires, disabling cars and stranding motorists.

As we got on the highway at the outskirts of town I stepped on the gas. My Datsun bucked into high gear, Rea clapped her hands. We clipped the tail of a lazy alligator in the lefthand lane. It was smallsize -- less than eight feet -- the blow kicked it in the air, spinning it on its back so that its clammy belly caught light. Its front feet were held in a dainty pose and for a nanosecond I saw a storybook alligator doing a tour en l'air. It hit the pavement on its back, hard. I drove even faster. We rolled our windows down, breeze blew our hair every whichway.

Speed seemed to do Rea good. She put her hands behind her head and reclined her bucket seat. Within minutes we were driving across farm country, vast stretches of ploughed-up ground still looking grey and naked at this time of year. It was a landscape that yielded easily to human beings, Rea observed. Clumps of trees stood off at the far edges of muddy fields like refugees — the last of forests that had stretched for miles.

We saw only four or five alligators.

We had gone about twenty miles, taken a back road off the highway. Here the fields came up close to the edge of the blacktop. Cattails stood in the ditches high enough to catch the wind. Rea turned away from her window to speak to me; fresh air made her eyes look like two stoned smiles.

"I feel like a milkshake," she moistened a finger with her

lips , reached across and touched my earlobe.

"Sounds like a good idea," I said.

We travelled another five miles and saw what looked like a white wooden box by the side of the road. It was a two-storey frame place that wasn't really white so much as it lacked color. It showed a lot of peeling paint and bruise-like water stains. There were two gas pumps in front -- the old cylindrical kind -- and handwritten signs in windows that were on either side of a screendoor: GOOD FOOD and BEER/BAIT. There was a Wildroot hair creme poster faded to the color of piss. I stopped the car by the pumps and we got out and stretched. Rea inclined her head toward the sign about food and raised an eyebrow at me.

"Homecooking," I was rubbing my palms, "probably great." I took her arm.

The place was a kind of general store. On one wall were some shelves stocked with rolls of toilet paper, toothpaste and headache pills, a display of plastic combs and other assorted grooming and bathroom items. There were also some groceries: cereals and canned goods, white bread and kitty litter. There were automotive supplies like fan belts, windshield wipers and a few bottles of antifreeze. You could buy baseball caps, strawhats, flannel shirts in three different patterns.

A discouraging number of shelves were bare. Some held nothing but a dusty knickknack or two: a crystal reindeer, a couple of souvenier spoons from the Black Hills. The glass in the counter with the cash register on it was cracked in two places; one of the cracks had adhesive tape stuck over part of it.

Three tables were off to one side with paper napkin dispensers — empty — and sugar shakers on them. The tables had flaking chrome-plated legs and there were chrome-plated chairs with yellow vinyl seats and backs drawn up to them. The room smelled like a catbox but I didn't see any cats.

The screendoor slapped behind us. There was no one in sight. That penetrating smell and the cheerlessness of the merchandise had me turning around at once but Rea pressed the inside of my arm, held me there.

"Don't. You'll insult them."

She said it under her breath. I saw she was looking to the back of the store and followed her eyes. A little mongoloid — a boy, I think -- was standing there, staring at us. His jaw was slack, his moony face had dirt ground into it. He was wearing an unwashed tee-shirt and dungarees that were too big; they were cinched with rope around his waist. He was no more than four feet tall. I couldn't guess his age. There was an open door behind him and a woman stood within its frame. When she realized there were customers she hurried out, pushing herself in front of the child.

"Can I help you?" Her face contorted with effort when she spoke, her speech was palsied. She was slope-shouldered and one arm was clearly longer than the other. She could not have washed her hair in less than a week. She wore a pink blouse that was cut like a bowling shirt, brown rayon pants stuck on hips that looked broken and poorly set. She was anxious to please us, you could tell by the way she wrung her hands.

Rea spoke, "May we sit and have some coffee?"

"What is it." A man's voice. In back of the woman and the mongoloid a man -- and then another man behind him -- crowded the doorway. Their faces were large, unlined and unshaved, eyes wide apart, hairlines receding. One followed the other into the store like an echo. The leader jerked a nod at us, his twin rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand.

"They want coffee." said the woman.

"Well make it for em," yelled the leader. He looked at us full and made a horselaugh.

Rea led me to a table and we sat, both of us with our backs to a wall of empty shelves. The woman hustled to the backroom and the child followed her. The twins eyed us and sidled over to the counter with the cash register on it. The one behind faded back slightly, propped himself against the wall and looked out the window.

"She'll have that coffee in a minute." said his brother. He stared at us. Then, "Seen many alligators?"

"Enough," I said.

"Yeah. Me too. All the time. I'm sick of em!" He barked at me.

The woman was in the doorway again. There was an urgent look in her eyes, she was calling out. I must have looked like a goose -- I couldn't understand a word, even though I was staring at her. Rea answered, "No thanks, just black."

The woman came out of the kitchen, a cup and saucer in either hand. We sat and watched her attempt her role. She came to us haltingly, her feet sometimes turning sideways. Coffee slopped over the cups and filled the saucers. When she finally could set them down she turned her back on us and hurried to the counter where she

stood still beside the men, not saying anything.

Rea and I tasted our coffee. It was very hot and strong. No one spoke. The twin with the horselaugh kept staring at us.

The mongoloid child re-entered. He was clutching a steaming cup in both hands and perambulating toward the screendoor. The twin with the horselaugh stopped watching us and scrutinized him; scowled and said to the woman,

"What's he got?"

"Instant cocoa."

"What's he doing?"

We all watched the child get to the screendoor. He stood before it, holding his cup in his hands like an offering. The screendoor was a problem. He took a step forward, he took a step back. He grunted. The twin looked disgusted and turned away. His brother was still gazing out the window.

The child stepped forward again. With both hands still clasping his cup he reached for the handle on the screendoor. The cup tipped back. Scalding cocoa poured over his bare arms and splattered the floor. He let go the cup, it broke at his feet. The child spun around, his mouth gaping with a dumb scream. He reeled toward the woman and fell around her ankles, shaking.

The first twin watched all this and slapped his forehead.

"Did you see that," he cried at the ceiling, "did you see that! Look at him! Look at him! Clumsy! Clumsy! Clumsy! You little shit. Little piss!" He hit the counter with his fist, shoved his face close to the woman's, "All I give to you, everything. What comes out of you? What do I get? A monster! This little, this little," he wiped

his mouth, "fucking animal. Yecchhh."

"Calm down Tom."

For the first time his brother was speaking. He stood away from the wall. He put a hand on his twin's arm. Then he let go and rubbed his face. As he rubbed he spoke.

"You give everyone here a complex when you talk like that. It is good you express your anger and get in touch with those feelings but you do not think of how this impacts on the rest of us. I mean, we all must take responsibility for our feelings in our own way and putting people down won't help. You can't always have control. Let's go outside and walk and you tell me what's bothering you. We need to give each other space — it's such a hot day."

He stopped rubbing his head. He came out from behind the counter and walked outside. The screendoor slammed behind him and the noise chased a crow that had been perching on my Datsun into the air.

I got up and put a dollar on the table. Rea walked beside me to the door. We stepped over the spilt cocoa -- smeared like brown stigmata on the floor -- and pushed our way back into the open air. The brother was standing across the road with his back to us. He was above a ditch, a ploughed-up field stretched out before him.

Rea and I got in the car. I turned us around sharply, spraying dust and stones. The brother didn't turn around. Maybe he was watching an alligator.

DRASTIC MEASURES

The Comprehensive Mental Health Center had a broken videotape recorder. Dave Weber was sent to fix it. He was halfway between the fourth and fifth floors when fire in the elevator shaft burnt through the last emergency circuit and dropped him to the basement like a screaming rock. The fall killed Weber, which I'd say was comparatively fortunate. Otherwise, he would have broiled.

Hungry alligators had gotten into the basement and begun to eat up the electrical system. Several charred reptilian corpses were found. Luckily, the blaze was contained. On the ground floor its only trace was a lingering smell in the Driver's License Bureau.

By now everybody knew it: alligators were coming indoors. And not just in basements. They were turning up in livingrooms and kitchens and most disconcerting of all, in bedrooms. Bedrooms. The alligator builds its nest in riverbanks. It burrows its way into the muddy slope below the surface of the water, creating a cave in which it heaps old leaves and sticks, grass and sand. The alligator uses this place as a retreat; it carries its food for feasting there. There are no riverbanks in our town; other than the lake which skirts our northern boundary the place is dry. Alligators searched for places to serve as shelters -- under people's beds seemed best. In the darkness, amid the dustballs, they could rest.

Alligators' presence in peoples' homes and places of business created a geometric increase in the general anxiety level. Everywhere you looked people were gnawing their lips and biting at finger-

nails. There was a lot of drinking at all hours of the day and night; men and women who had never smoked took up cigarettes.

Meanwhile, the alligators plodded through our lives, disrupting commerce and households. The more people tried to eradicate them the more there seemed to be. The initial exhuberance of the kill squads degenerated into a joyless orgy of bloodletting that finally bottomed out as a municipal shrug of the shoulders, a sunken-eyed admission of ineffectuality. Police and firemen, punchy from overwork, their ears ringing from all their trigger pulling, resigned themselves to keeping just the main streets free of monsters.

Business at the bookstore was absurd. When alligators started roaming the mall's climate-controlled thoroughfares, customers stayed away. A huge display of books on reptiles I had put together after the first day was never touched. I began opening at 10:30 and closing at 6:00. I had to lay Ted the Teenage Clerk off; he had taken to smoking prodigious amounts of dope and could not be relied upon to speak into the right end of a telephone. However, had he been straight as an arrow, I would have had to let him go. The business couldn't justify his paycheck. I sat by myself beneath the artificial lights, surrounded by gleaming book jackets, listening to the muzak and the faint swishing of alligator tails on the glazed cement floors. Sometimes a beast would bellow, rattling the plate glass window of the women's shoe store across the way.

Although I was often bored in this routine and knew that eventually word would come from corporate headquarters informing

me that my franchise was being terminated, I enjoyed the relative quiet of those days. That strange preternatural peace one sometimes finds in a large, enclosed and unexpectedly empty space. I steered clear of the alligators and they did me no harm. Those of us who continued showing up for work on a regular basis developed a state-of-siege camaraderie, an esprit I had not experienced since the war.

My sentiments regarding the alligator situation were not shared by the majority of my fellow citizens. For most the reptilian presence was a calamity that outdid the worst of flood, earthquake, hurricane or volcano. They were more than a natural disaster, they were an insult to our species, a blight transforming our world. Nowhere was this felt more strongly than at the bank.

Rea's bosses had insisted on maintaining regular hours. They saw themselves presenting an image of stability to the community and took an aggressive kind of pride in holding up their end of an otherwise enervated status quo. Rea told me how the Vice Presidents would gather in the lobby at midmorning of each day. Together they looked like so many officers on the bridge of the Pinafore. Evidently little was actually discussed in these meetings. The eight men involved postured quite a bit; flexed their jaws, raised an eyebrow now and then and clenched their fists behind their backs. They milled around and then retired to their respective offices. "The financial profile of this community will not be assailed," said one of them to Rea.

As with every other establishment in town, people were coming

in with less and less frequency. Nevertheless the bank continued burning electricity and heating oil. The tellers sat behind their marble counter, doggedly shuffling and reshuffling currency of all denominations. Rea learned that one of the Vice Presidents had taken to finishing bottles of Glenfiddich in his office. She stood in the parkinglot by the Drive-In Window, watching the alligators sun among the decorative yew trees that were planted on its borders. It was Friday afternoon and there was just a trickle of cars where once there had been a smoking stream.

Then there was an alligator in the vault. How it got there defied rational explanation.; a janitor was fired on the spot. Confronted by a brace of Vice Presidents, the creature hissed and showed its teeth, swung its tail and slapped the stainless steel walls.

A security guard emptied his Smith & Wesson into the beast; he had to reload and shoot some more before getting the job done. That same afternoon an emergency meeting was held and the bank's hours were cut in half.

There was no longer any doubt: this was a crisis.

Representatives of the Power Company submitted a plan to the Mayor. They proposed cutting certain power lines and leaving live wires in the streets to electrocute alligators as they crawled along their way. The representatives stated that while they recognized the presence of these wires might be a hazard to pedestrians they felt the situation justified the risk.

ALLIGATOR UNDER THE BED

I keep thinking I should have seen its tail; I could have seen it...

Rea was remembering her girlhood.

She was raised Catholic in a hundred year-old town in the middle of the state. Shy and retiring to the age of ten, at eleven she seemed suddenly precocious, possessor of a rangy vocabulary that made concrete images and wrapped itself around abstractions in ways that provoked amazed and nervous laughter from her parents and their friends.

She began trying to put her feelings into words. She filled one brightly colored spiral notebook after another and she hid what she wrote so that no one could find it but she destroyed nothing. For the first time she felt what she called desire: a visceral yen for a sensed connection that was also sensed to be missing.

She was smitten by the Virgin and St. Francis. Rea had visions that formed around birdsong and marsh grass. She let herself fall down on the mossy ground. Rolling on her back she let the summer vacation sunlight fill her insides up and she prayed to the Virgin, praised her.

Rea blew softly between her lips.

"Of course I grew away from that," she said, "not that I abandoned faith. It was just that I kept thinking about Her and the more I thought about Her the more I worshiped Her, But as I worshiped Her I lost touch with Her. Missed that connection. I

ceased believing that She could be enough.

"I've been trying to find that touch ever since."

Rea told me that our lovemaking had gotten her closer to that connection than she had felt in a long time. She took my hand, the right, and ran her teeth along my fingertips — the soft parts thieves sand off.

"How long can this go on?" she asked.

We drank some wine; we went to her bedroom. Rea was wearing an orange boatneck jersey. She was pulling it over her head as she walked, her arms stretched upward like antennae. Blind, she twisted in midair, mounted her bed pulling the jersey free of her face. Her breasts bounced, the bedsprings sounded like toy musical instruments. She watched me closely as I followed. I was looking at her eyes, her pupils seemed very large, then I saw her hand dangling the jersey. The flesh of her inner arm tightened. I smelled prey.

I took several small quick steps; I leaped on to the bed beside her. It was still light outside and the venetian blinds were open making bars of forsythia yellow and green across us both. I unbuckled Rea's pants and bit her nipple. She inhaled through her voice. I was over her. We were getting each other's clothes off, she reached up and grabbed my hair in her fists, pulled my mouth to hers. We kissed a long time. Then I took my mouth away, I held her wrists. I lifted myself off of her, looked into her open mouth, along her throat, saw the crumpled pillow, shoulderbone, sheets soft from fucking and sleeping. I looked over the edge of the bed, I looked down.

I saw the alligator tail.

It lay on the floor like heavy black electrical cable. It was quiet as sweat, stretching out from under the bed like a chain of islands in a private sea. I heard a claw scratching floorboard -- a reflex -- then nothing.

I stared at the alligator tail.

I lifted myself higher over Rea. I needed a better view. I lifted myself in slow motion; my heart wasn't beating, it felt like stone in deep water.

There was an alligator under Rea's bed.

My rampant cock went limp.

"My God," I whispered.

"What's the matter?" asked Rea.

BEN POURS A DRINK

The gin had been in the deepfreeze and the silver shaker was so cold it burned the skin. Ben filled my glass.

"So you can't get it up?"

I drank. By turns the martini appeared transparent and silver, then transparent again. Ben offered me a cigar and I took it. His ribs were resting on a Persian cushion, his clay colored eyes watched the skylight.

"You know dinosaurs once ruled this Earth. That's a sentimental way of saying they were the top predators. In a megahistorical flash they die away. A number of causes for extinction are put forth but no one can come up with an ultimate explanation as to why this incredible breed so suddenly vanished. An entire class of creature virtually disappears from the planet.

"Now if the dinosaurs could just die away," Ben blew a kiss, "like that -- then what's to keep them from reappearing," he blew again, "like this?"

He finished his drink. "You had a natural scare, don't lose heart."

In the space where Ben had blown late afternoon light made a slant of dust and smoke.

By the time I left the sun was down. It was too late, I told myself, to go to Rea's. I didn't phone her; I went straight home. It was what I wanted. I wanted my own bed -- a bed without alligators under it. My mattress lies flat on the floor.

That night I closed my eyes but couldn't sleep. I kept seeing Rea. It was as though she was with me, very close. My heart raced

and I turned over and over until my blankets wrapped me like a shroud.

REA'S DREAM

When I saw Rea the next day she came to me, taking my hand and smiling as though I had just said something kind. I hadn't said anything. They were locking the bank up and I stood there in the empty lobby feeling guilty and amazed. Slain at how great Rea looked in clothes: how her bra held her breasts up, how her heels elevated her butt and stretched her calves. Her hand squeezed mine.

"You're a shit for not calling me last night but we were together anyway. You were in my dream."

"Tell me," I said, realizing as I did that I was pleading with her.

There was a tavern not far from the bank. It had dark wooden booths, they kept the TV turned down and never played the jukebox. Rea took me there. I ordered whisky and she had bottled water. Her eyes were bright as Christmas ornaments; they glinted and I blinked as she related this story:

The two of us were together in her parents' house -- a brown brick building put up around the time of the First World War. We were on vacation, dressed in casual clothes as if we might go sailing or on a picnic. We were alone.

Rea and I sat together on the livingroom couch. In high school Rea had necked with boyfriends on that couch, made out on the sly while her parents slept upstairs. Now we were there, side by side. I put my palm between her legs. Seized with the sudden fear that her parents might come barging through the door, Rea asked me, "What do

you believe in?"

My eyes were fixed on hers, I didn't take my hand away. I said, "Keeping secrets and staying young, locked doors and doing the wildest things that come into my mind."

Rea twisted a wedge of lime into her Perrier.

"That's a line from The Big Knife. The funny thing is, in the movie a woman says that. She's trying to seduce Jack Palance, a self-destructive movie star. He keeps mentioning drunken blackbirds. All the characters in that film treat each other like animals.

"The next thing I remember is that we both start chasing each other through my parents' house. Up and down the stairs, circling the diningroom table, doors slamming, furniture tipped over. We go round and round like a couple of ferrets. Both of us are laughing. The sound of our laughter in that empty house had a hysterical edge."

At last I corner Rea in the bathroom.

"It was like you had no neck. You were all head and shoulders -- and hands. Your hands seemed very large. You backed me into the showerstall. It's metal and it made a booming sound when I was pressed against it. I was naked. I searched your face but I saw you weren't looking at me. You were looking over my shoulder, at something beyond me. I tried turning around to see what it was but all I saw was that white aluminum wall. It boomed like thunder."

She touched the back of my hand, bent the fine hairs over on themselves. "You know, when we make love I often watch your face. Your eyes are always closed."

We finished our drinks and got to our feet. Rea came over, slid her arm around my waist and leaned against me. She let her head rest on my shoulder. I could see us together refelected in the horizontal mirror behind the bar -- my posture tilting to let her take hold -- she looked happy. I was looking at myself.

I SEE A MAN

I was at Ben's. If I couldn't get it up I wasn't going to sit in an empty store listening to the sussurus of alligator bellies. I was tense. The night before I had gotten upset with Rea -- that flaccid dick of mine -- and wandered home feeling stupid and desparate. I spent the hours before dawn screwed up like an embryo beneath my quilt. I craved an orgasm like a cancer patient craves morphine. I felt lucky to believe I knew Ben well enough to knock on his door and say, "I need a drink."

The first thing I saw in his apartment was the broken TV. Not broken, smashed. The picture tube was kicked-in, crashed into angry looking smithereens of grey glass. The plastic chassis had a S-shaped crack down its side you could see through. I stood in the middle of Ben's livingroom looking at this wreckage. I had secretly planned on asking Ben if we could see the daily rerun of Leave it to Beaver, a show we both knew from childhood. I was looking forward to softening my brain with some light nostalgia and sarcasm. Instead the set's empty frame tilted up at me like a wounded maw.

Ben's back was to me. He was fetching a clean glass. He spoke before I could ask the question.

"I fixed it."

"What happened to your TV?"

"I fixed it."

He poured me a martini.

"TV images lie down in your memory; they settle in the space where we dream, where I think our real power is. TV's distracting. Especially for animals like us who know so little about who and what we are."

Ben put a glass in my hand. He dropped an olive in it, splashing icy liquor on my skin.

"I had to get serious," he told me, "you know I had an alligator down here. Last night. I must admit it startled me -- and pissed me off. I appreciate having control over my solitude. Anyway, that's why the bathtub."

The bathtub. Distress at the TV's demolition had kept me from noticing this new addition. It was a Victorian tub of generous length and depth, elevated at its four corners by clawed castiron feet. It was filled with heavy cushions and positioned to afford an upward view through the skylight.

Ben lit a half-burned cigar. "A beauty isn't it? A temporary inconvenience I may learn to enjoy. It beats going to bed with some clammy crocodilian. Until I get this alligator thing out of my system it's the tub for me. Try it, it's gator-proof. I'll get you another drink."

I kicked my shoes off and climbed in. The tub made a commodious kind of couch. I stretched my legs comfortably and chuckled at the hip incongruity of Ben's invention. Leaning back I saw horse-tail clouds through the heavy panes of glass embedded in the sidewalk overhead. Ben was already passing me another drink, perching himself on the tub's far edge.

"How do you get alligators out of your system?" I asked.

He smiled, "I sure don't shoot them. You ever heard the story of the shepherd who went to the spiritual master to learn the ways of wisdom? The master said, 'you have to get out of yourself,

dissolve your ego.' The master told this shepherd to go and meditate until he became one with the object of his meditation. So the shepherd goes up to a cave near where he kept his herd. This shepherd herded yaks — that's an ox with big horns. The shepherd proceeds to meditate on a yak. He does this for months. Finally the master goes up to the cave to see how the shepherd is doing. He stands at the mouth of the cave and calls in to the shepherd to come out. But the shepherd calls back, 'I can't come out Master, my horns have grown too wide and won't fit through the door.'

"What I'm saying is, you think alligators enough and alligators is what you get."

We both chuckled over this. Drank our martinis and watched the shadow of an alligator darken the room as one crossed over the skylight, silent as a shark in a giant fishtank. We laughed.

"How did you get the alligator out of here?"

Ben shook his head, giggling helplessly now, "I opened the door."

This cracked me up. I downed my round and began lifting myself out of the tub to get another. Ben motioned me to stay put and went for the shaker.

I eased back, gazing through the skylight at blue sky, streaking clouds and the foreshortened perspectives of pedestrians passing by.

"You have our alligators figured out."

Ben was shaving ice, "Yeah. For what it's worth. I understand them but it doesn't keep them out of my apartment."

I was beginning to forget the tension between my shoulderblades. I was looking at the sky, Rea came to mind. In the background Ben was shaking up reinforcements.

"You know," he was saying, "there's a guy who lives on the other side of the Square who has some interesting things to say about these alligators. He was first in town to see them. Quit his job after that to try and figure them out -- calls it a psychic conspiracy. I've had him down here to tell his story; he's developing a taste for martinis. Older guy, his name is Spychalski. Maybe you know him..."

"No," I called over my shoulder.

"Why don't I call him and invite him for a drink?"

"That sounds fine."

Ben set the shaker on the floor and went to telephone. I was sipping my drink when another shadow dimmed the room. A man this time.

I could see him plainly. A man about my age -- maybe a little older. He had squatted down close to the glass of the skylight and was peering in. He hadn't shaved for a couple of days and the lines on his face looked exagerated with worry and anger. He looked beaten to me, done in. I don't know whether it was the effort of squinting through the window that made him scowl or the sight of me stretched out in a bathtub with a martini in my hand. Either way his eyes seemed hot with bile; they locked on mine and held them until a hard shudder shook my head and broke his bead.

This guy is pissed off at me, I thought. There he is, freaked out and shattered, dazed because nobody's telling him what to do or think, because his fucking world is upside-down and he's pissed at me because he sees me being comfortable, enjoying a drink, having a good time with a friend of mine.

"Well fuck you, shitface," I yelled up at him, "Yeah: You.

Shitface. You pisshead, you asshole. Fuck you," He wasn't moving and I rose up from the bathtub, waving the finger at him. I shouted, "Fuck you you fucking fuckhead. Get fucked!"

The guy straightened. His head became a black point at the end of a dissheveled body. His hands were dirty and his knees were smudged orange from being down on all fours on the sidewalk. He looked stiff. Then he spat and his muck hit the glass above me. I heard it. He turned on his heel and disappeared.

I was out of breath.

"What's the commotion?" Ben looked at the skylight, at me.

"Chasing alligators," I tried laughing.

"You almost scared Ernie away. He's coming. He'll be here any minute."

Ernie Spychalski rented in a tenement across the town square from Ben's place. It was a five minute walk. Ben and I sat nursing martinis, waiting for him to come down the narrow steps and knock on the door. As we waited I imagined myself going to Rea's, opening her door, possibly forcing my way in, but telling her things that I had never told anyone.

Ben watched the ash on his cigar grow long and heavy until gravity broke it off.

No Ernie.

"I wonder where he is."

Ben got to his feet. "I think we should see if something has happened to him," he said.

I nodded and pulled myself up, out of the bathtub. I got behind Ben climbing to the sidewalk.

Mauve dusk. A bunch of breasty pigeons bobbing in the grass off the paving, searching out food before dark. On the far side of the green we saw a cluster of people and simultaneously heard the stretch of a siren. Heads turned to the sound; we heard no voices.

I felt like someone suddenly threw a black coat over my heart.

I started hustling across the square. I went as fast as I could without running. I was afraid to run, afraid to attract attention to myself that way. But I went so fast that Ben had to trot to keep up. The people in the crowd had their backs to us. They all were facing the entrance of a brownstone building, an apartment house. As I neared I thought I heard a woman crying but then a man turned to face me and I saw that it was he that was sobbing, tears smearing his glasses.

"O God," he moaned, he looked me in the face.

It was murder. Ben and I pushed to the front and saw: an older man lying there, bent like a comma, his face the color of dirty snow. His shirt was thick with gushed blood and a rich pool of blood, big as a bathroom rug, was on the sidewalk. He had been stabbed many times.

"That's Ernie," whispered Ben.

I knew it. There was a kid, a boy, sitting in the entry to Ernie's building. He was shaking his head and blinking his eyes as if bugs were in them. I had to ask him a question. I stepped over Ernie's ankles. I tried stepping carefully around the blood but the crowd was pressing and I got some on my shoe. I knew what the kid would tell me but I asked him anyway:

"What happened?"

The boy never looked up, never looked me in the face; he kept trying to shake off whatever it was that darted around his head.

"Somebody killed him. This dirty guy just stabbed him -- he was so angry -- he just came up and kept stabbing him. He hit him with the knife so many times."

Cops were coming. Four of them, doubletime. I heard their heels on the pavement and saw their pressed uniforms. Ben caught my eye, "Let's get out of here," he said.

I followed him.

The two of us walked for a long time after that. At first we were anxious, looking out for Ernie's killer -- I told Ben what he looked like. But there was no sign of him and so we fell to simply walking, hands deep in our pockets, neither of us saying anything. Darkness settled and we walked on, looking out for alligators. After awhile I started laughing. I laughed until I cried and then I couldn't stop crying. I leaned against a brick wall and sobbed. Ben stood close-by, looking at the ground. At last I was exhausted; I said good-night to Ben. I made my way to Rea's and knocked on her door.

THE END