

GATOR COUNTRY

By Jacob Shafer

CAROLINE and her father, AMOS, are sitting in a rowboat near the shore surrounded by rocks and clumps of reeds.

Insects chirp in the background. CAROLINE is studying a brochure. AMOS is staring into the middle distance.

CAROLINE

Dad. Are you sure this is where we were supposed to meet?

AMOS

Spoonbills!

CAROLINE

What?

AMOS

Your mother used to love them. Such beautiful birds...

CAROLINE

It says here we were supposed to rendezvous at the visitor center. I didn't see any visitor center.

AMOS

She always said they relaxed her. Made her feel at ease. Just watching them bob.

CAROLINE

And where is everyone else? This is a group tour. It says right here, as in *plural*.

AMOS

Hmm?

CAROLINE

Plural. Like, more than one.

AMOS

'Course, she always did like egrets best. And herons. Great blues.

CAROLINE

(Swats a mosquito on her neck) I think we're in the wrong place.

AMOS

She loved all God's creatures, of course. Once, an injured squirrel showed up on our doorstep, half-killed by the cat, probably rabid. She took that thing in, put it in a cardboard box, set it right by the fireplace. Fed it out of an eyedropper. (Pause) The cat ate it, while we were sleeping...

CAROLINE

Can we focus?

AMOS

Predators win. In the end.

CAROLINE

(Referring to brochure) It says right here—

AMOS

You worry too much. Always did.

CAROLINE

I worry for both of us. And maybe not enough. Did you remember to take your pills?

AMOS

Did you know I wanted to name you Stardust?

CAROLINE

Dad...

AMOS

After the song. (Sings horribly off-key) We are staaaaardust, we are goooolden we are something-something-something... and we've got to get ourselllllvvvsssss, back to the gaaaaaaaarrrrdeeeennnn...

CAROLINE

Dad.

AMOS

Always loved that song. You were conceived to it.

CAROLINE

(Groans) *Daaaaad.*

AMOS

It was a beautiful night. The crickets chirping, the moon all aglow. Like a big, pale tangerine. Our passions ignited. Something magic. Two bodies, joined as one. Our flesh, our breath, our sweat...

CAROLINE

So I've heard.

AMOS

But your mother. She was a Neil Diamond fan. So we named you Caroline. (Sings, now resentfully) Sweet Caroline, bum dah dum...

CAROLINE

Do you know how many times you've told me that story?

AMOS

How many?

CAROLINE

Too many. (Consults brochure) It says here our guide should greet us promptly on the shore. And here we are, already in the boat. This is the wrong place.

AMOS

Did I ever tell you about your first words?

CAROLINE

(Sighs) No.

AMOS

You weren't even two years old. Your big brother was playing with your favorite doll, cutting her hair with an old pair of scissors. You came in the room, all scowls. Ran up, ripped it out of his hands, face red as a Vietnam sunrise and you screamed, 'How could you do this to me!' Six words, all at once. Like you'd been talking all your life.

CAROLINE

I loved that doll.

AMOS

I guess so.

CAROLINE

And that's seven words.

AMOS

What?

CAROLINE

(Counts on her fingers) How...could...you...do...this...to...me. Seven words.

AMOS rummages through his bag, pulls out a small tin, begins rolling a joint.

CAROLINE

Dad!

AMOS

What?

CAROLINE

We aren't in California. This is Trump country. They still lynch people down here.

AMOS

For this? They've got bigger fish to fry. Or gators, eh? Say...you suppose there's any gators out there?

CAROLINE

Seriously. Do you have to?

AMOS

It's my medicine. You know that. Helps with my...well, with all of it.

CAROLINE

I thought maybe just for this week, you wouldn't have to be so...

AMOS

What? Wouldn't have to be so what?

CAROLINE

I don't know...*you*.

AMOS

You don't want me to be me?

CAROLINE

Just, maybe, not so *much* you.

AMOS

Well then who the fuck should I be?

CAROLINE

I don't know. How about normal for once. Less outhouses and conspiracy theories and secondhand copies of the goddamn *Communist Manifesto* for my ninth birthday and more...normal stuff.

AMOS

Normal is overrated, sweetpea. Normal is what they make you into at McDonald's or UC Irvine or the Naval Academy. Your mother and I always wanted you to be...special.

CAROLINE

Yeah? Well, I never felt especially special.

AMOS

No?

CAROLINE

No.

AMOS

Now, come on. We did our best.

CAROLINE

Your best. Your best. Sometimes I wish you would've done *my* best...

There is a rustling in the bushes.

CAROLINE

What was that?

AMOS

Could be a gator...

CAROLINE

Sounds more like a...

CLEM, dressed in a hodgepodge of vague swamp gear, an alligator-skin hat and a pair of reflective sunglasses, emerges from the bushes, carrying a beer and a bullhorn. He pauses a few feet from AMOS and CAROLINE and announces into the bullhorn.

CLEM

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Comprehensive Everglades Tour, Presented By Gatorade and the Koch Brothers with Support from Shell Oil and the Consortium for Climate Change Obfuscation. I'm your... (refers to paper, mispronounces as "dokent") *docent*, Clem. Hope everybody's comfortable today and remembered to bring their bug spray. I'd say these mosquitoes were our state bird, but that's actually the northern mockingbird, for what it's worth. And you can Google that shit...

CAROLINE

You're the guide?

CLEM

(Ignores her, still into the bullhorn) Please ensure all hands, arms and other appendages are inside the craft, as we will be embarking shortly. And be sure to stow all bags in the overhead compartment...

CAROLINE

(Looks up) The overhead...?

CLEM lurches awkwardly into the boat, grabs a paddle and steers the craft forward. AMOS smokes his joint. Lights dim.

CLEM

And now we commence our journey through Florida's infamous Everglades, where there's always something to find and you can never truly get lost.

AMOS

You hear that, nothing to worry about.

CAROLINE

And *why* can't we get lost?

CLEM

Cuz I got my... (pulls rubber alligator from his vest pocket) navi-gator! (Laughs maniacally)

CAROLINE

Where are we going?

CLEM

At the moment? Not sure exactly. Never been a big believer in 'maps' or 'plans,' as it were. (Tosses rubber alligator overboard)

AMOS

A man after my own heart.

CAROLINE

(Referring to the brochure) It says here we're supposed to get, 'A comprehensive tour of the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States and the first national park in the country established to protect an ecosystem and the abundance of life it nourishes.' This feels more like you showed up with a bullhorn and half a hangover.

CLEM

(To Amos) Talks a lot, doesn't she?

AMOS

I blame her mother.

CLEM

Blame the woman, eh? Doesn't work out so well in my experience.

AMOS

Well, I guess I didn't mean blame so much as—

CLEM

Up ahead, you'll notice...a clump of reeds.

CAROLINE

Are those native flora?

CLEM

Could be. Also where my third cousin Delbert lost his virginity. Or so he claims.

CAROLINE

I think you should let us off here.

AMOS

Are you crazy? I can't walk back to the Subaru. My glaucoma.

CLEM

No one gets off the boat. Period.

CAROLINE

Who says?

CLEM

I do.

Lights darken.

CAROLINE

Listen, I don't know who you think you are, but I have degrees in botany, sociology, 21st century Chicano studies and a pretty well-honed bullshit detector, and right now it's going off like Snoop Dogg's smoke alarm.

CLEM

You sure seem to know a lotta things. Lemme ask you something, though, and you answer me honest. You ever seen a full grown gator, missy? Ever stared down rows and rows and rows and rows and rows...etcetera of glistening teeth? Ever peer into the inky black eyes of God's oldest killing machine?

CAROLINE

Can't say I have.

CLEM

No. Can't say, can you? Well, this old swamp mariner can. And he can tell you it's a sight that'll turn your pretty little visage into a frozen mask of abject terror.

AMOS

Hey, come on. There's no need for that...

CLEM

No need? No need...

AMOS

Just, you know, mellow out.

CLEM

Mellow out? Did the Koreans mellow out at Normandy? Did Cesar Chavez mellow out when they breached the Berlin Wall?

CAROLINE

Really, you should let us off here.

CLEM

(Lost in his own world) It was a day a lot like this one. Overcast. Sticky as a super-glue-coated flytrap on Satan's taint. I was paddling down this very river with nothing but a pack of smokes and Delbert along for company. Sure enough, a few miles in, we met a gator. Big fucker. Ten feet long if he was an inch. And he was hungry. I could see it in those eyes. He sidles up to the boat, sizing us up. I knew then and there only one of us was getting out alive. I turn to Delbert, and tell him I don't have to outrun the gator...just have to outrun him. I can still hear his screams.

CAROLINE

You let him get eaten?

CLEM

Well just his leg as it turned out. He's got one of them prosthetics now, better than the original.

CAROLINE

But you could have helped him. What kind of docent are you?

CLEM

(Clears throat) That's *dokent*.

AMOS

So it ate his whole leg, huh?

CLEM

Clean off.

AMOS

Bone and all?

CLEM

You could hear the crunching two counties over.

CAROLINE

Can we change the subject?

CLEM

Fine timing, sweetie. You ever seen that movie *Deliverance*?

CAROLINE

No.

CLEM

Yeah, me neither. But they say that spot up there looks a lot like where they filmed that one scene, where the fella takes it in the—

CAROLINE

Look. This has been...informative. But I really think—

AMOS

Egrets!

CAROLINE

What?

AMOS

Right over there. Egrets. Whole flock of them.

CLEM

Sure enough. Funny thing 'bout them birds. They build their nests real near the gators, see. For the longest time, no one could figure out why. Then they realized,

the gators keep the raccoons and the possums—what they call the mammalian predators (mispronounces “pre-date-ers”)—away. Keeps the little chicks safe.

CAROLINE

So why don't the alligators just eat them?

CLEM

The chicks? They could. Birds build the nests a tad too high, though. Smarter than they look. Every once in a while, see, one of them chicks falls out of the nest and gets snatched up by a gator. Little reward for standing guard you might say.

Suddenly the boat is jolted and the passengers sway.

AMOS

What the hell was that?

CLEM

Nothing to be afraid of, just some kinda...obstacle...

Again the boat is jolted, this time harder, lights flicker.

CAROLINE

I really think you need to—

AMOS

Let us off!

Boat jolts harder, lights flicker again, blackout, lights back up. CLEM has disappeared.

CAROLINE

Dad!

AMOS

Caroline!

CAROLINE

Are you all right?

AMOS

I think so...

CAROLINE

I think there's something out there. And where's Clem?

AMOS

Darling. I always wanted to tell you. I'm sorry.

CAROLINE

For what?

AMOS

You know. All of it. Me. That I wasn't more...there? Doing the things you needed. I tried, goddamnit. I did. Just, shit gets complicated and the weight comes down on you and it's all so inverted and upside down and sideways.

CAROLINE

What are you talking about?

AMOS

Also, it was your tenth birthday.

CAROLINE

What?

AMOS

When I gave you the *Communist Manifesto*. It was for your tenth birthday. Really, I'm just grateful your mother...

Lights go to black.

AMOS (con't)

Oh God! Oh sweet Jesus! Something's got my leg!

CAROLINE

Dad!? Dad!

There is the sound of splashing water, snarls, screams from AMOS and CAROLINE, then silence.

Lights up, but still dim, on CAROLINE, alone in the boat.

CAROLINE

(Looking around in desperation) Clem? Dad?! Where are you? (Pause) How could you do this to me?

CLEM, now dressed in an alligator suit, approaches from offstage, walks up and taps CAROLINE on the shoulder. She turns with initial surprise followed by shocked acceptance, and takes the gator's offered hand.

The gator guides her gently from the rowboat and bows slightly, soliciting a dance.

Confused, CAROLINE backs away. The gator advances, and again offers its hand.

The first notes of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" begin to play. CAROLINE takes the gator's hand, as if in a dream, and they dance.

Song continues to play, with CAROLINE bewildered but becoming more enthusiastic.

Song fades and CAROLINE and the gator exit the stage. AMOS stumbles onstage, clothes tattered.

AMOS

Caroline! Caroline?! Where are you? Caroline?

A pause.

AMOS (con't)

I'm sorry darling. I...I didn't mean to make you feel so all alone, you know. I didn't mean to be less than you needed, or more than you wanted or...or. Fuck. I don't know. We were just in it for the love. You understand. The love... Caroline?

Another pause.

AMOS (con't)

Stardust?

Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's 'Woodstock' plays. Fade to black.