

DON'T FEED THE ALLIGATORS

By Steve Geller

A simple enough instruction: A negative imperative command, plus a direct object.

The equivalent of RUN, SALLY, RUN.

Pre-school reading.

We live in an apartment complex that could have been designed by Elon Musk as a prototype of a Martian community. Put a bubble over the whole thing, lift it up, and drop it into a Martian crater. The community would be set.

It would have 2 bedroom-1 bedroom-studio apartments with 5x7 terraces, set around a kidney bean shaped pool; a clubhouse; a small exercise-gym; two public bathrooms, a mail-room, and the main office.

The bubble, made of special material, would be perfect for a crater. Swimming in the pool, you'd swear you were in Palm Springs.

Our complex, however, is not in the Hellas or Gale craters, protecting its interior from the mile-long, thousand foot high dust storms that remind Earthlings they "are not in Kansas, anymore..."

Our particular complex is in Savannah, Georgia, five minutes from the city center. It is surrounded on the north by the Savannah Sewage Treatment Plant, on the south side by a 5G complex designed by a Belgian surrealist, and in the East, a marshland that stretches a quarter of a mile to the BASF chemical plant, and always smoking, by the Savannah River.

The view of the open marshland, of swamp, marsh-grass, and of a series of waterways running through the grasses with several open bogs, reminds us that the city itself is the interloper.

If we hadn't been here for two hundred and eighty-nine years, this would still be marshland, all of it, feeding into what was not yet the Intracoastal Waterway, but which, then and now, runs from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico coasts. (Or from Massachusetts down the Atlantic Seaboard, around the southern tip of Florida, then along Gulf Coast to Texas).

We ourselves don't see much of that.

Instead, we see a marsh, a distant factory designed by Wim Wenders and, hovering above it, an ultra-large Chinese container ship, fashioned by Ludwig Visconti for a single shot of the beauty of capitalist alienation

creeping along an invisible Savannah River.

The single-lanes going to and from the BASF plant also splay southward to Fort Jackson, a tourist attraction where a canon is fired, daily, by a young man in Confederate drag.

Between our apartment complex and the Fort is that small home for wildlife: crane, heron, otters, deer, coyote, osprey, and alligators. All are protected species in Georgia. At least, that's what the law says.

One day, on a walk down the road, alongside the marsh, we saw nostrils following our progress. The nostrils were scaly, noisy, and behind them were two large eyes staring at us with definite interest. Its head would turn, ears following our speech, as we exclaimed, "Is that a gator?"

We moved cautiously to the edge of the road, and the nostrils turned and humphed at us. I humphed back. The nostrils humphed once again, and slowly, the body of the creature emerged from the bog. It was an alligator. About five feet long. Its eyelids opened wide. The outer edges were soft, and feminine.

My wife said, "Hello, Alice..."

The alligator continued to stare.

Alice wasn't frightened, or frightening. She was curious. And as we spoke to it, she turned her head from me to Kae, and back to me again. There was no doubt in our minds, Alice was attentive, responsive, interested. Why we thought she was a female reptile neither of us could say. But it just felt obvious.

Alice did not move forward. She was in no way threatened by us, or threatening. We stood a few feet back from the bog, and talked to her.

Then we said goodbye.

She watched us leave, then harrumphed a goodbye as well.

We were thrilled.

It was the strangest sensation to speak to an alligator, with nothing between ourselves and the reptile. We both had the sensation that we could feel her thoughts in our hearts.

We're not anthropomorphizing a reptile. We are both writers, and were describing to each other how we felt and what we were feeling. And it was the same thing: excitement on our part, curiosity and interest on Alice's part, as well as a quiet sort of amiability.

Our relationship with Alice continued over the year. We visited her every day; sometimes she was in the bog; sometimes she was elsewhere. But after two weeks,

we could call her name, and wherever she was, she swam to us, humphed, stayed in one place while we asked how she was, and told her of our day.

And she always listened, from the middle of the bog, moving her head from Kae to me and back again. Then we would leave, turn the car around, and she would still be in the center of the bog, looking after us,

And then she disappeared.

One of our neighbors, Sophie the Singer, said that she was either in hibernation, or had been removed from the bog by a trapper. The rule was that if an alligator was aggressive and came out of the bog and was over seven feet long, it would be killed. Otherwise, the trapper would remove it to another location, tagged.

About a week before Alice disappeared, we had stopped four people from feeding it. Alice was out of the bog, on the road, eating chicken. Her feeders were standing a few feet away.

We informed them that what they were doing was both illegal and stupid. The bog was not a petting zoo. Alligators are very smart, and when they are fed, they assume that they will be fed again, and so they show themselves to people whom they assume will feed them.

Every year there are stories about idiots living along golf-courses or marshes who feed the alligators as if they were pets. Eventually, the alligators expect to be fed and eat anything handed to them, including the hand that feeds them. They're not dainty, where food is concerned. But then, who is?

No matter how fascinating and violent are the news stories about alligators eating old ladies who feed the creatures, or pets who defend their ranch-houses along the fourteenth hole and end up inside an alligator's belly, it should be obvious that wild creatures are wild creatures, and are a very different kind of consumer of food. They should be admired, loved, but seen from a great and safe distance.

Alligators are smarter than humans. They are not aggressive unless they are challenged, and then their aggressivity is defensive. They do not invade other countries. They have their own territory, but defend it only when it contains babies.

Alligators evolved nearly 250 million years ago, and appeared in the form in which we now see them, about 80 million years ago.

They haven't changed a great deal in 200 million years.

They learned they didn't have to.

As the Smithsonian reported, alligators evolved slowly and steadily. The faster species, evolving according to every environmental change, died out swiftly.

Mankind has been on the planet 300,000 years, and our brain shape evolved to its contemporary state 100,000 years ago. We're moving too fast.

Reptiles don't know about social media.

My money is on the reptile.

Even if Putin sets off a nuclear bomb, and we respond accordingly, the reptile still has my vote.

Alice, I am happy to tell you, reappeared in the bog, several months later, and with three babies swimming around and about her.

We called her, she was happy to see us, and her babies came up, one by one, beside her, and that was a fine time for all of us.

We visited her daily, and watched her watching her babies. She lay on the edge of the bog, away from the road, like a proud lady, attentive with her kids at the public swimming facility. She took the sun, but took even greater notice of each alligator child carefully.

Then one day we saw junk food littered around the bog.

One day we called her, and she climbed out of the bog and onto the land, and came over to our car.

That was dangerous.

I went home, made a sign, which was the Dick and Jane title of this essay.

I wrote the sign on a large book-shelf which I placed across the front of the bog:

DON'T FEED THE ALLIGATORS!

The next day, when we went to visit Alice, she came up and out of the bog once again and immediately moved around the book-shelf.

We sped away. This was dangerous. Not that Alice would attack us, but she had become used to being fed, and was leaving the safety of the bog for the road.

We told our friend, Sophie, who was also one of Alice's devotees. Sophie walked her dog every day along the road to the fort, and had even seen an otter sliding along the grass to get to the marsh.

But she had seen no Alice.

And no babies.

She told us she was worried. She was sure someone must have called our complex and said that there was an aggressive alligator on the road, and the Trapper must have come to take her away.

We made several trips to the bog, and saw one of the babies, but no Alice. We called the complex, and they couldn't remember if they'd called anyone, but said I

should try to call 911, which was absurd.

So I phoned Animal Control, and they gave me Alligator Tracking, and I learned that they only trap alligators who are twelve feet long, and they didn't know if Trapper Jack had taken Alice, but if he had, he'd either relocate him.

"Her," I said. "Alice is a she."

Okay, they would relocate her with a tag and the operator was certain that's what would have happened, she didn't know about the babies because the Trapper wasn't paid but he had the ability to do whatever he wanted with the babies — sell them to an alligator pond at a gas station, or sell them as pets, or kill them and stuff them — she knew that I had bonded with the alligator, and that was a great experience because they're very intelligent, so she would have the Trapper call me, even though this is summer and his busy season, because of the golf courses and housing developments, but she was pretty certain that if I said the reptile was no longer than five feet, she was sure the Trapper would have tagged her and taken her elsewhere, and she'd have him call me...

It's been two weeks since that conversation. I've left messages, heard nothing.

Late afternoon, yesterday, Kae and I went to the bog to see if we were wrong, and to hope against hope that Alice had returned.

She hadn't

But within the bog, paddling and staring at us, were two of Alice's babies. And waiting, the bog's edge. Waiting for mommy to come back home. Remaining probably where they had last seen her, fighting against the Trapper.

I wish more people knew how to read.

If they did, they would understand that "DON'T FEED THE ALLIGATORS" means exactly that.

It's not a riddle meant for a mind as limpid as Marjorie Taylor Greene's to decipher, until it can state, with all the authority of its peers:

Alligators are simply another form of illegal alien.