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Alligator's Hopes in a Tadpole Town

BY LOUIS DELL LOGAN

THE DAY he left Texas, Alligator said, "I'm twisting free of the oil-drilling rigs and I'm going to learn something new."

Confidently pursuing that objective, he parked his car on the eastern edge of Ranger, Wyoming, at a roadside cafe. He went inside and ordered coffee. A man entered and talked to the waitress. He came over to Alligator and asked, "Are you a truck driver?"

"Yes."

"Where'd you drive?"

"Down home. Water truck, servicing the rigs."

"Gas?"

"Huh?" said Alligator trying desperately to manage the vapory situation.

"Was the truck gas or diesel?"

"It ran on gas."

"Did you ever drive a diesel?"

"No," admitted Alligator.

"Well, I'm sorry. I'd give you a try at it, but I'm pushing a fleet of new ones and I'm responsible for them. Diesels are a lot different than gas rigs. You can't lug them. You got to watch the tack, so it don't run into the pump. No, I can't chance it and I'm sorry. You understand I'm responsible for the new trucks."

"That's okay," said Alligator and he returned to drinking coffee. Just after lunch Bearfoot approached him. "You want a job?"

"Sure."

"You can have mine. I worked for that poorboy outfit long enough."

"Is it a truck driving job?" asked Alligator.

"Yeah, if you call that dog a truck. You can make a student run right now if you want to. The boss is standing over there by the green Mack. See him? That's the other driver with him."

Alligator walked to the truck and asked the boss for a job. It was a double bottom with insulated tanks.

"Fellow in the cafe said you might need a driver."

"You mean Bearfoot. Yeah, he just quit. He gets impatient when the truck isn't running right. More than once I've said, 'Man, you got to have patience. These trucks break down once in a while.'"

Alligator was impatient to get hired. "What's she hold?" he asked, nodding toward the empty truck.

"Hundred barrels on the truck and eighty barrels on the pup-trailer. As I was saying, 'You got to have patience, Bearfoot,' I'd tell him. 'Patience, hell,' he'd yell, 'you got to blow and go to make any money. Otherwise you're going to get sucked under.'" The boss laughed at his story. "Are you a truck driver?" he asked when he stopped laughing.

"Yes."

"Ever drove smoker before?"

"Sure."

"Know how to split gears?"

"Yeah."

"What did you drive?"

"Hauled water down home to the rigs. It was a diesel semi."

"Never run a dog and pup?"

"No."

"It takes a while to get the hang of it. Make a couple student runs and you'll be an old hand at it. Pups are a little tricky, if you've never pulled one. They get obstinate sometimes and try to pass you and then you jackknife all over hell."

Alligator rode with the other driver and made his student runs. The driver soon found out that Alligator didn't know the first thing about driving a diesel; but that was all right, he said he would teach him; and so for three days Alligator drove and the other man supervised. And when the boss asked the driver how Alligator was doing, the man said, "Fine, fine. He's a good driver. But give him a few more days to get used to the pup. You know how tricky they are."

A few days after Alligator started working at his new job, he met Bearfoot in the cafe. "Hey, man," called Bearfoot, "I saw you got the job. Has that dog eat your lunch yet?"

"No. She goes right on down the road, pulling and making that pup the most mindful thing you ever saw."

"How do you like working for Jim?"

"He's okay so far," said Alligator, still playing his new role cautiously. He did not feel his position was secure; and so he remained reserved when he was around the other drivers. It was best, he had thought, if he didn't push his luck and advertise his worminess. So he played his role cautiously and said, "He's okay."

"Well, he wasn't okay with me," said Bearfoot. "I tried to be his friend. But he wouldn't listen to me. I'd say, 'Jim, this poorboying won't do. You got to highroll. You got to blow and go to make money. Them other truckers ain't poorboying it and they're going to suck you under.' Then he'd say, 'Patience, Bearfoot. Have patience.' 'Patience, hell,' I'd say."

"I'LL LET YOU DO THE DRIVING," the man told him, "except for Williston Grade. You wake me up for that, if I'm sleeping."

"Okay," said Alligator.

The trucks are big and it is a long way from the ground to the driver's seat. A diesel has a way of quivering like a big horse. When the driver puts one foot on the running board and gives that little bounce up to catch the handle on the side of the cab, he can feel the shiver like the nervous shiver a horse gets when he wants to go. The driver catches the feeling. He feels the restraint like reins and he pops the clutch to release the energy. Hop, hop, the truck stands and bucks up and down.

"I told you before, not to clutch so fast. The pup's got eighty barrels on her and she's got to be nursed out of her standstill."

So the clutch was gently slipped and the pup responded. "There, that's better, Alligator." There were two gearshift levers on the floor in the cab. One was the over-and-under shift and the other was the main box. It was necessary for the driver to use both hands on every other shift.

"When she's loaded start her in low-under. Each gear has an over and under. When you got rpm, then shift to low-over. Now you're splitting gears. That's right, now hook your arm through the steering wheel, so you can steer with your elbow and shift her to second-under. Now the rpm again. One hand, that's it, second-over. Good. Now walk her that way. Half a gear at a time, to fifth-over. Dollar gets you a doughnut, you don't get past fourth-under and the little hill up there will take you down again. That's right, you got to walk her

down the same way you just came up. A half gear at a time. A truck driver never stops shifting in this rolling country."

After the fifth day Alligator was making the hauls by himself. It was ninety miles to Pipecity and he liked to drive it at night. It had been daylight when he had made his first student run; and when the other driver had said, "Guess you can take it now," he had crawled across the two gearshift levers and taken his place behind the wheel. The steering wheel was at least twice the diameter of the one in his own car. And it was during that fateful second that he first doubted his wisdom in changing occupations. Through the mirrors on each side of the truck, he could see back along the truck, and then after that, back along the side of the trailer. The double-bottom was sixty feet long and the distance seemed longer since the total length of his own car, which he was used to driving, was barely more than twice the width of the cab he rode in. "Well, let's go," the other driver had said. Alligator with no more idea of how to move a truck than a trail said, "Wait a minute now. Maybe you better draw me a shift pattern on the dash. I think maybe the shift is different on this one than the one I drove."

The other man had bluntly guessed Alligator's predicament. "Never drove a truck before huh?" So the other man had taught him how to drive. He even said Alligator caught on fast and after a few trips, he began to sleep while Alligator drove. "I'll let you do all the driving, except for Williston grade. You wake me up for that, if I'm sleeping."

So Alligator learned to drive in the daylight, but he preferred to make the trips at night. After loading from the tank batteries north of town, he would stop at the all-night cafe before going south of Pipecity. Climbing down from the seat of his truck and jumping finally the last little way to the ground, he always felt something go out of him. It was as if he had relinquished something of himself and left it shuddering with the truck when he went inside the cafe.

After he had visited the cafe where it was warm and varnished, and he had eaten and filled his thermos bottle, he would return to the parking lot to sort through the trucks for his own. It was like the other trucks except maybe older, and the clearance lights of red and amber, which marked well in the night, were perhaps dimmer than those on the others, but there was something about it. And he would find it and it would be gently rocking from the uneven throw of the motor. And that unevenness was like a pride pulse which he inherited

as he climbed into the cab. For an instant he would wish it was daylight all the way to Texas, so his friends could see him. And he could say, "You got to admit old Alligator's not roughnecking this year. Unless you can't see to tell a diesel truck from a hole in the ground."

Then he would release the air brakes and it would sound like the grease rack in a service station coming down. And when the eighteen wheels were free to roll, he would put the transmission in low-under and move away from the parking lot. Above the right-hand mirror was a smaller one, and it was called a stack mirror. And through the mirror he could see the top of the exhaust pipe extending above the cab. In the daytime, smoke, like ribbon, unfurled out of the top of the pipe and hung above the road for miles in the rear. But at night-time there was only fire coming out of the top; and if it was a foot high and had a nice point, that meant the truck was running right.

So we would move away from the all-night cafe and shift to low-over. When the rpm was back up again, he would glance up at the stack mirror. And the flame would be just right. Then he would hook his arm through the steering wheel and move both shift levers to second-under. A half gear at a time, he would work his way through the dark night, the red and amber clearance lights bouncing in the side mirrors and the pointed flame standing in the stack mirror. He was conscious of it all, the light, the stack, the night, and the complex of gears which kept him busy.

ONE DAY Alligator's boss came to wake him and tell him the truck had had a fire. "What kind of fire?" asked Alligator, still too sleepy to comprehend.

"Under the hood. All the wiring burned."

"Guess that means I won't make a trip tonight, huh?"

"That's about right. But we'll get it back on the road faster if you will come over today and help me and the other driver rewire it."

He had returned from Pipecity that morning and had been in bed only a few hours, but he agreed to help rewire the truck. It was his first taste of being driver by night and mechanic by day. Poorboying it, Bearfoot had called it. They started with a roll of electrical tape, but by the afternoon they were using Band-Aids from the boss's medicine cabinet; and all day they used old wire for the job. So Alligator was disgusted with poorboying and went up to town when they stopped for the evening.

He went to Slim's Cafe for dinner and after that he planned to go to the Center Bar. Slim's food was always half-cooled and greasy so that it turned white and thick before it reached the customer's stomach. The roughnecks ate there because Slim's prices were reasonable and he stayed open late and also he was near the Center Bar. Everything on the menu was a dollar and a quarter except the T-bone steaks and they were two dollars and a half. After the roughnecks got drunk at the Center Bar they ate mostly T-bone steaks.

Slim and his wife wore greasy aprons. Mrs. Slim wore her hair long, stringy and stiff, and some of it always managed to get in the food. The place was a thriving enterprise, a regular bubbling pot of oil-field workers, called roughnecks, coming and going all the time. Mrs. Slim liked to serve a carrot and mayonnaise salad; and most of the roughnecks growled and said, "Do I look like a goddam rabbit?" So she took it back and served it again to another customer. Sometimes it was served three or four times before it was touched. She served vanilla pudding several times a week and the rest of the time she served tapioca pudding. Pie and cake did not come with the meal and were extra. The regular dessert reminded the men of cat snot and fish eyes. So they paid extra for pie.

Through the front window of the cafe, Alligator could see the people passing on their way to the movie theatre. The moviegoers parked their cars up by the auction barn and walked by the cafe. Soon a line began to form of people going to the movie. They stared in the window and Alligator's gaze retreated. Slim's Cafe was a sharp contrast to the trucker's all-night cafe where Alligator had been eating since he arrived. The green walls were discolored and yellow. The highly varnished walls of the trucker's cafe were clean and he had enjoyed his meals there. But he couldn't think of the varnished walls without thinking of trucking and that made his anger come up with the recollection of the day. Bearfoot hadn't stood for the poorboying and he wondered if he could. Suddenly Slim's greasy cafe took on new meaning in Alligator's mind. It was old fashioned, solid comfort, a roughneck cafe, and he was a little bit proud to be there.

"What you gonna have?" asked Mrs. Slim, her hair falling straight like rain.

"Pork steak," said Alligator in a very happy mood. It was as if he had been walking on eggs. All the lies about truck driving in Texas had gotten to him, and always knowing in the back of his mind that

the lie-story would have fallen apart if it had been questioned closely. But Slim's Cafe was oil-field ground. And he understood it. He could talk rig talk all night and be able to tell the worms from the weevils, and be able to tell the roughnecks from both. It was real solid comfort to be able to feel loose like that, and he decided to eat in accordance.

"Hey, ma'am. Change that pork order to T-bone, will you?"

Slim's wife turned and wiped the hair from her eyes. "It's kind of early to be eating so good, ain't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mostly you roughnecks get drunk before you eat T-bone steaks."

"Well, I plan on doing that too, ma'am. Just as soon as I finish eating."

All the stools at the bar were taken and the television was going. There was a bowling machine in the corner and the large crowd around it blocked the passageway to the dance floor.

"Are they going to dance tonight?" Alligator asked the man next to him.

"No. They only have dances on Friday and Saturday night."

The bar was brightly lighted with bar bulbs and it was warm in the room. "I'll have another beer," Alligator instructed the bartender. And when he got it he said to the man sitting beside him, "Why don't they have dances on Wednesday night?"

The man thought about it for a little while and then said, "I don't know. Guess they just don't, that's all."

Occasionally there would be great shouts and laughter from the men surrounding the bowling machine. "He did it again. You keep that up, Bearfoot, and you'll never have to work. How much did you win that time?"

Alligator thought about getting up and going over to Bearfoot and telling him that he was right. That poorboying wasn't worth it. Any man who hooked up with a poorboy outfit was crazy. But when he glanced over to where he heard Bearfoot's name called, he only saw the backs of the crowd drawn close once again. And he could hear the balls slamming down the runway and the click, click of the score registering. But he couldn't see Bearfoot. So he said to the man next to him, "Well, tell me. Is there anyplace where a man can dance on Wednesday night?"

"Not that I know of."

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There was no reason to continue talking along those lines so Alligator got to wondering what Bearfoot was doing there. He ordered another beer and watched television. The bartender came over during the sports broadcast. "I think Sanchez will take the Canadian Friday night."

"I don't know," said Alligator.

"It'll be on the TV Friday night. I don't let the dance start till after the fight, come on by and watch it."

"I'll do that," said Alligator, and he watched the television. Someone had won ten thousand dollars playing golf that day. Much later Bearfoot emerged from the crowd surrounding the bowling machine.

"Hey there, friend," he said to Alligator, "how you getting along with that dog and pup?"

"Okay," said Alligator, "you want a beer?"

"Sure," said Bearfoot. "I hear you had a fire on the truck this morning. Sure glad I quit. Has Jim got you out there rewiring it?"

"Yeah."

"He's pretty smart that way. He's a poorboy's poorboy. Why don't you quit and get a better driving job? There's better outfits than him around to drive for."

"Maybe I will later on. I'll stay with him for a while."

"I don't think I'll ever go back to work. I found me a gold mine right here in this roughneck bar. Found out I'm a natural bowler on the machine. And these old boys are suckers for a bet. Look at that." Bearfoot reached into his pocket and produced a hand full of currency. "There's over seventy bucks there. Do you know how much that is in wages? That's three and a half trips to Pipecity with a load of crude."

"Sounds like you're doing okay."

"Doing great. You bet I am. And when I get through with these guys I think I'll buy myself a bowling machine and take it wherever they strike oil. And break each town. You ought to learn to bowl. Maybe I'll let you be my partner and we'll buy two machines."

WHEN THE TRUCK was fixed and back on the road, Alligator felt better. But his pleasure with truck driving never reached the point it had before the fire. That something special had gone. He got rough with the truck and became a faster driver. "You got to blow and go," Bearfoot had said; Alligator chose to interpret literally. When

he caught whole gears and took his share of the road from the center, he found he cut the driving time to eight and a half over his previous trips. Still he banged away like a maniac trying to break his own records.

The hills to Pipecity came even and frequent like ribs on a washboard. His method of conquering them was simple and timeworn. It was to barrel the truck off the top of the hill and let the momentum, and all the acceleration he could get from the pedal, carry him most of the way up the next one, so that after the wild, roller-coaster ride was over, the truck was far enough up to make the lug-power speed tolerable on his nerves. So well did the strategy work that hill after hill fell like objections on a Friday night.

The day of the dance he was in a particular hurry. He was making a record run by catching more whole gears than usual and for a while it seemed he would be back in Ranger long before the dance started. But he got behind a little old lady with a statue of the Virgin on her dashboard. And she didn't seem to have any particular destination. Spring had arrived and the little flowers were peeping through the generous growth. And there was a tremendous lot of daring on their part among the sage. Colors clashed as if it was a church holiday. And the little old lady nosily took it all in.

When he first saw her she was driving very slowly across the dead spot between the two hills. He tried to pass her, but was instantly aware of his mistake. The misjudged situation came in the form of a car on the horizon and in an effort to correct it, he pulled the air-brake lever. The pup hunched and squealed and left black marks on the highway trying to stop. But the little gray car disappeared under the radiator anyway. He thought he had killed her, but when he looked up again, she darted away like a jackrabbit.

She quickly outdistanced him and he forgot the near accident. Happily he followed her new speed over the hills. As he would top a hill he could see her top the one beyond. So they went crest after crest like a chase, until the little gray car got winded, or slowed down from habit, and his truck caught it again. Then his old problem was back. He couldn't get the down-hill speed because she was in the valley. And without it he couldn't make the hills.

The truck in low-under pulled and strained against the gravity of the last valley. The power of the engine decreased with each turn, and it began to whine and moan like a galley slave, until a balance of

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pull was found at the top of the hill. Then the sound of the motor changed and it grew stronger as the truck went over the top and down. And with each forward, plunging foot it got more aggressive and the engine screamed in deadly anger. But the little old lady was in the valley. And that little sheep of a woman in a rabbit-colored car would quell the fury and the power and the drive of the truck but not of the man. He was at wit's end and his anger grew like something huge and awesome which controls the destiny of things.

It was spring and the sage smell was fresh in the air; and he rolled down his window and listened to the motor lug its way up another hill. His anger mounted like a storm cloud, as he watched the nervous lady who refused to let him pass. She watched his truck in her rear-view mirror, and he knew her feeling because he too had glanced up at different times in his life and had seen a huge truck's radiator blocking out everything else in the mirror; and he knew too that to a driver of a little car there was nothing to do but speed up or move over. Yes, he knew the feeling. And he knew he was squeezing the orange now. He hated the woman with the skinny little neck who drove with both hands, and hunched over the wheel like a dog making dung. So great was his wrath that he couldn't appreciate the courage or faith she had in her conviction; he only understood force and power and size. She watched him closely in her mirror. And he thought to himself, you better watch me close, ma'am, 'cause I'm going to suck you up on the next hill. Then he saw her replace the statue on the dash. He hadn't noticed it was gone; but he took strength from her act of replacing it, because he knew she had been holding it since the near accident. It meant she was scared and that was what he wanted. Finally her car went over the top of the hill and slowly disappeared. His patience for revenge carried him to the top and he went over like a storm. And down, down he went catching whole gear after whole gear. The black smoke poured out of the stack and there was no faltering or let up in the assault. Just before her car was consumed by his radiator, and with no concern for life or property on the highway, he swung to the left lane and grabbed the air-horn chain. So great was the momentum that he nearly crested the next hill. When he looked in the mirror he saw the car in the ditch and the little old lady shaking her statue at him.

She could wave her artifact until she thought it was a baton. He didn't care. And he wasn't going to stop. After that each mile was

sweeter because it had been good revenge. It had poured out of him like smoke out of the stack. And she had felt his anger. She had gone for the ditch like a rabbit for a hole.

He was feeling very good when he arrived at the truck turnaround in Pipecity. He parked and stretched in the wind. It made him feel cool and he went up and over the cab to his work. The hatches on top had to be opened to prevent the tanks from collapsing when the belly hoses were attached and the suction pumps started. Usually the lids were stuck like bottle caps and had to be pried open. And when the seals were opened, strong vapors escaped from the tanks. Intoxicating fumes rose on the wind like honky-tonk music on a Saturday night.

"Don't want to smoke around them fumes," Alligator had been told on the first trip. "You can dump the oil but you can't get the fumes out. Only way to get the fumes out is to steam the tank. So don't get careless."

Twenty minutes later Alligator shined his flashlight in the tank. Its light ricocheted from the empty bottom. Impatient to get to Ranger, he slammed the hatches and drove away.

When Alligator got back from Pipecity, he cleaned up, and hurriedly ate at Slim's Cafe before he went to the dance. The dance had started and the bar was crowded. He could hear the Western music coming from the dancing floor in the next room. "Give me a bourbon and water." When the bartender brought it Alligator asked, "Is it always this crowded?"

"It's not crowded yet. Wait till later, its gets better. Hey, I thought you were going to come by and watch the fight tonight."

"I was," said Alligator, "but I met some slow traffic on my trip and got put behind time. Who won?"

"The Canadian. I lost on Sanchez. Well, I got to go, the place is hopping tonight."

The usual large crowd was around the bowling machine and the traffic from the bar to the dance floor was having difficulty squeezing past it.

"Why in the hell don't they move the machine out of here?"

"Cause it pays the rent, that's why."

It was getting more crowded all the time and everyone was carrying his drink high with his elbows in. But even that didn't do much good and the drinks were spilled frequently. Alligator bought a spare

drink and went over to talk to Bearfoot. He hadn't heard Bearfoot's name called but he was sure he was there somewhere in the middle of those people. "Hey, Bearfoot," he called when he found he couldn't penetrate the crowd. "Are you there?"

"Who's that?" came the answer from the center.

"It's me, Alligator. If you get a break after a while, I'll buy you a drink."

"That's just fine, Alligator. I'll talk to you later, I'm working right now."

Finally he worked his way around the end of the bar, through the edge of the bowling crowd, and into the darkened dance area. There were dark wooden booths on each side of the rectangular room. And for a few moments he could see nothing except the band. They wore brilliant rodeo clothing that sparkled in the stage light. "Move over, I can't see." Alligator felt someone touch his arm and he turned to see a group of men standing along the wall. He had been standing in front of them and so he stepped back and joined them against the wall.

"I'm sorry."

As his eyes became adjusted he began to look into the dark booths. The confines of each were a shade darker than the room and even after his eyes had become accustomed to the dark, he could barely distinguish between men and women. After his survey of the crowd, he put the number of women at about one fifth of the total. But that wasn't bad odds for a Texas country boy who liked hoedown music. He peered intently through the darkness, trying to fix his gaze on some particular girl, but he couldn't see well enough.

"What's supposed to happen?" he asked, turning to the man leaning on the wall nearest him. "Do them gals get up and come asking us to dance?"

"I never seen them ask anybody to dance."

"What do you do then? Go over there?"

"I don't know, I don't dance."

Alligator figured the odds on the Texas country boy finding a gal were going up by the minute. He wished the room was lighter because it was hard to see into the booths. Even up close, he couldn't see that well. The evil of darkness cancelled all expression in the booths and it was like talking on the telephone. He liked to see reaction when he spoke, but it was impossible standing outside the booth.

Besides he hated to ask just any old gal to dance, because he might get an ugly one. But on second thought, he guessed that wouldn't be too bad. At least he would get into a booth that way and maybe he could work on a better looking one.

So he stood before a booth which had five figures and three of them women and he said, "You want to dance?" And a voice said "Which one of us?" And he couldn't tell which one said it. So he pointed at one and said, "You." She arose and he saw he could have done worse. As they started, she said, "I don't normally dance with strangers."

"Who do you dance with, then?"

"My brother-in-law. My husband don't dance."

"Well, I feel mighty privileged you danced with me, ma'am."

"I like to dance."

"Which one of the other two is single?"

"The one on the end," said his partner pointing toward the dark figures at the booth. "But she's not single. She just came with us tonight. Her husband's working and they live next door in the same trailer court as us."

"Do you reckon it would be all right if I joined you at the table? I'm getting mighty tired standing against that wall."

She said she thought it would be okay and when the dance was over the group at the table said, "Sure, come on and join us." They all moved over and he sat next to the one on the end.

"Is everybody comfortable?" Alligator asked, but he directed his question at the woman sitting next to him. She looked like a pioneer's wife, or someone who had worked all her life in a jerky factory. She put out a leathery hand and said, "Don't think I ever saw you in here before. Call me Billy."

"Folks call me Alligator."

He bought a round of drinks and everyone wanted to know what he did. After that, it was his turn to find out what everyone else did. And then they were quiet until the brother-in-law bought a round of drinks. Alligator said to Billy, "You want to dance, honey?" She nodded in a sort of big-eyed watery way so he got to thinking that maybe her eyes were kind of pretty at that. She danced well and he said, "Have you lived in Ranger long?" And she shook her head, no, in a dreamy way like the movies. So he said, "Talk." She said, "What can I say?"

"Where do you come from?"

She said, "Louisiana."

He said, "You know what people call Louisianians?"

"Yes, I know, but I don't like to hear it."

So he said, "I come from Texas." And he was feeling romantic and wished the music wasn't so ragged.

She said, "That's where my husband is from."

"Where is he now? Working?"

And she nodded. They continued to dance around and around and with each turn Billy got softer and finally didn't look leathery at all. She was a little more on the skinny side than Alligator liked but that was all right. He wouldn't mind taking her with him. She could probably wear clothes pretty good. Some of them could and some of them couldn't. A man couldn't be cheap though, when it came to dressing his woman. It took a payday at least to dress them right. Then he had something he could be proud of. You got to dress them up, if you want them to look good while you travel. A woman would be a good thing to have along if a man was going to hop around a lot.

"Do you like the music?" he asked.

She nodded in that delicious way of hers and so he bent and kissed her fresh on the mouth. She responded with pressure.

"I like smoother music," he said, "this is rougher than a stucco bathtub."

"I like smooth music too," she said.

They rejoined the group at the table and fresh drinks. They were the only ones in the group still friendly to all. The brother-in-law had asked his sister-in-law to dance once too often, according to the husband.

The harsh words distracted from their fun, so they went back to dancing. With each turn she got softer and softer until she was so soft, he thought he could separate her into little pieces with his fingers as he could with jello. And on they danced and he said, "How do you spend your days?"

"I read a lot of romance," she said.

They danced on and he spun her madly as if trying to spin her out of her familiar axis. Sometimes when they took a turn she would glance up almost shyly and her big eyes would be watering and his heart would kind of thump out to her. And he felt as if he could pick her up, because she wouldn't weigh anymore than a sack of groceries,

and fold her into him so he could hold on to her good like a football and then after that he wanted to run through some kind of line of objection. He wanted to smash hell out of someone who objected to his taking her. It was mad and it was jungle. And still she got softer and softer and was as soft as he thought anything could get, as soft as a thigh all over.

When they went back to the table, the group was ready to leave. The brother-in-law's wife wanted to go home; and they were all mad about something.

"I'll drive you home," said Alligator to Billy. She nodded. She hadn't said anything for a long time.

"She's coming with us," said the brother-in-law.

"I'll take her home," said Alligator firmly.

"You better come with us, honey," said the sister. "You know who will be home from work pretty soon."

"I'll take her home," said Alligator.

"Let's all go over to Slim's and get something to eat," said the sister's husband. Alligator conceded and he walked with Billy. She wasn't saying a word. And, he noticed for the first time, she was wobbling very badly.

Slim's cafe was busy and all the booths were filled. So they sat at the counter. Slim's wife was grinning and she said very jerky-happy, "Well, what are you going to have. T-bones?"

Alligator turned to Billy and said, "What are you going to have, honey?"

She mumbled something and he said, "Huh? What did you say, honey?"

The sister said, "She said she's going to get sick."

"Are you going to get sick, honey?" he asked.

Another mumble.

"Are you sure she said she was going to get sick?" he asked the sister.

"That's what she said."

"Why don't you go in the toilet if you're going to get sick?" he asked her. She didn't even mumble anymore. And she was very, very white.

"Don't get sick in here, little lady," said Mrs. Slim. Then she continued, "What are the rest of you going to have?"

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Alligator wasn't hungry and he watched Billy's head jerkily go down to the counter. Then she vomited and he got up and went back to the bar.

He found a stool at the bar and ordered a drink. "That was quite a fight," said the bartender, "you should have seen it. I thought Sanchez had it. I thought he did, right up to the end. Oh well, you can't win them all."

"I guess not," said Alligator.

"Did you dance yet?" asked the bartender.

"Yeah. I danced a lot. I did everything in here except bowl."

"I'd advise you to stay away from the bowling machine. Bearfoot will get your money if you do."

After a while Alligator heard Bearfoot call him. "Hey there, did Jim see you?"

"No," said Alligator.

"He was in here looking for you earlier."

"Why?"

"He wanted to tell you he lost his trucking contract."

"What?"

"Something to do with the license. He was using a borrowed license on the pup, and when they found out they canceled him."

"How did they find out about it?"

"Somebody turned the license number in this evening. Claimed the truck tried to run them off the road today. Anyway Jim says you can get your check at the dispatch office."

Bearfoot bought Alligator a drink. "I'm buying this for you because I know how much you liked that job. I tried to get you to quit but no, you wouldn't quit. So the job quit you and you are to be congratulated and not to be felt sorry for."

"I don't feel bad about it, Bearfoot. It's just that it comes so sudden and all. Tomorrow is soon enough to worry about what to do."

"You know what I been thinking, Alligator? Now that you aren't working, the two of us ought to get in that car of yours and go on down and see what's doing in Utah. Or the Four Corners Area. This bowling machine isn't paying like it used to and it's not because I forgot how to bowl. It's that people are getting wise to betting with me."

"That might not be a bad idea," said Alligator and he laughed to himself when he thought about the little old lady in the gray car. "She sure had the spunk, that one."

✿ A recipient of a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford, LOUIS DELL LOGAN is completing his novel, which bears the same title as his story. He received the Joseph Henry Jackson Award for "Alligator's Hopes" when it was in manuscript, and he remarks, regarding influences upon his writing, that he is fond of any writer with "a leafy delivery," going on to mention the specific influences of D. H. Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry, and James Agee.