

F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Contest Entry

The Crocodile Girl

A Short Story

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The Crocodile Girl

She began to sprout a tail one April evening as Mother and Father lectured on belonging. It still came as a surprise to the Crocodile Girl, even though she'd been picking scales from her skin for a week.

"You feel okay, my dear?" Father asked. "You look a little green." She sat between them, squirming, praying the spike growing from her rear wouldn't puncture their newly upholstered living room couch. She ran her handclaws crosswise on the satin seat, so smooth and cool, like river silt.

"Please sit up straight, my darling," Mother pleaded. "You are so smart, so funny, when you allow yourself to be. But you have no confidence. Put your shoulders back. You'll look so much taller."

"I'll try my best," the Crocodile girl said. "I know bad habits are difficult to break." She tried to sit with a flatter back, but there were bumps in her spine—a stiffness she couldn't shake. As she met her mother's eyes, her irises narrowed to diamond slits. She needed to excuse herself as soon as possible, or they'd notice. Or maybe not.

"When you cry all the time, my darling," Mother went on, "at every silly thing the other children say. Well, that's just...counterproductive. Everyone gets teased, right, my love?" she turned to Father. His smile widened, baring five extra teeth.

"Well, sure. Obviously. You're either the teaser or the teased, right?"

"Yes, Dad. That's good advice." The Crocodile Girl looked down, straining to bend her thickening neck and hide her eyes. Best to keep this discussion short.

"You just have to give it back to 'em." Father went on. But the crocodile girl's teeth were blunt—until now. She closed her lips and felt them whetted by the salt in her mouth.

“I’ll try to do better, I promise, and remember what you’ve told me. I’m grateful for your insight, Mom and Dad, really. But can I go upstairs now? Something I ate didn’t agree with me.”

“I feel fine,” her parents said, both at once.

“Oh, I’m sure it was lunch,” The Crocodile Girl assured them. “It’s never your cooking, Mom...school food, you know.”

“We’ve told you to pack your own salads,” her mother waved her on. “But you’re always running late...time management, dear.”

The Crocodile Girl nodded and scuttled off to bed. That night, the rain came—a drape of water sliding from their gray slate roof. In the dark, the creek outside their house licked the trunks of trees, and the crepe myrtles began to shed their skins in preparation for its invasion.

By morning, the water had receded. Light from a brightening April sun awoke the Crocodile girl, and she lifted her head—heavier somehow. Her mother still put the Snoopy sheets on her canopy bed, an embarrassment. She would have needed to change him for sleepovers—had she had other girls she felt comfortable inviting. She noticed, covering Snoopy’s giant eye was a tuft of hair—as if she’d yanked it out, weeded it like dandelions in her sleep. She would need to find a hat. Or a scarf. The bald spots were becoming wider, harder to comb over. She examined her face in the vanity mirror. Her nose looked wider somehow. She flared her nostrils and attempted a smile. Those frightened her the most. So wide, overtaking the attention she had been paying to the roughness of her face—the mottled spots—scabs—like she had scratched herself. She kept a jar of Vaseline on the glass top, next to an array of half-filled perfume bottles. She went to unscrew the top. Stiffness in her fingers. They were swollen, and her nails appeared darker, almost brown, with ragged edges. Longer than she remembered them the night before. She was too young for arthritis, but each clip with the manicure scissors before she went down to breakfast was excruciating.

“I never thought you liked lox, my dear,” her mother said when the Crocodile Girl asked her to smear a bagel with cream cheese and top it with the fish. “We have some Lucky Charms in the cupboard. Oh, never mind. Good for you. Better for the waistline than all that sugar. You have been looking a little...thicker...lately.”

The Crocodile Girl stared down at her plate—chewed her food quickly doing her best to hide her hands under the sleeves of her woolen sweater. That wasn’t difficult. It seemed the cuffs now extended past the tips of her arms all on their own.

The girls at the bus stop were up to their usual whispers. They barely glanced her way as the Crocodile Girl approached. And then...

“Eww...do you smell something?” one of them said, still not looking at the Crocodile Girl. She was the ringleader. Her smooth strawberry blonde hair was trimmed to a perfect pixie, and her pale blue eyes were lined perfectly with dark liner. Her lashes curled forever, even without mascara, and she had a way of half-drooping her lids as she spoke that garnered attention. The timbre of her voice was a velvet purr, but the words were drips of acid as she turned to another one of the bus stop girls—one with long curly dark hair that rested gracefully on her shoulders.

“Smells. Like. Fish.”

Laughter. And backs turned completely away from the Crocodile Girl. She shrugged her shoulders, as much as she could. They ached.

“I don’t smell anything, except the rain, maybe wet leaves, grass, honeysuckle...” The other girls ignored her, and she immediately wished she’d kept her stupid mouth shut. Or come up with some clever putdown. Those always came to mind later.

Takes a crab to smell a fish...

You're nothing but a bottom feeder...

I hope a river of piranhas gobbles you up from tips of your manicured toes to your plastic eyelashes.

Or the direct approach—her two favorite words living in the coral of her head that no one ever heard--

Fuck off.

In truth, her frustration came from the lie the grownups told—that bullies, if ignored, would simply stop. That was where her parents, all of them, really, were mistaken. They assumed the Crocodile's Girl's greatest wish was for friends. In truth, her greatest wish was to be left alone, and, presently, to be out physical pain. Her feet were cramping in her saddle oxfords, and the waistband of her skirt cut into her widening middle. Her mother was right about her thickness—just incorrect as to its cause.

That day, the Crocodile Girl begged off the kickball game at recess—again. No one seemed to mind. She had always been the slowest anyway. Her school was a one-story brick building about a mile from downtown with a flat slate roof and pale blue siding none the worse for wear. After lunch, the children were lined up and marched down the block to an empty lot, covered with cracked asphalt—a couple of rusted bowling basketball hoops in the corners. Recess was jump rope, baseball in a patch of grass behind the farthest hoop, and a rolling game of kickball in the middle with jackets set up for bases. Often, even when the Crocodile Girl chose not to play, the others commandeered her coat to drop on the ground and slide into, skinning their knees but not fussed at over rips in the sleeves of their winter clothing. The Crocodile Girl's mother rarely asked questions when she handed her the jacket or sweater to be mended. She shook her head, took the damage to the sewing room. After a while, the girl's overclothes resembled a patchwork quilt, or perhaps a coat of many colors. Something else for the children to laugh over.

In recent weeks, the Crocodile Girl had decided to find a new place to spend her free time during the day. She managed to slip outside the back door of the cafeteria during lunch. The lunch lady smiled, winked as she did—she had seen the others spit in her spaghetti and pour milk on her rolls. She'd save one or two right out of the industrial oven and hand them to the Crocodile Girl as she headed out.

Between the school and the empty lot where the children played was a stone chapel. Behind the chapel was a pond stocked with koi. The Crocodile Girl began to spend her lunch hour there, watching them grow. There was one that was a deep shade of amber who puckered his lips for her whenever she approached. The white and orange spotted twins were a little more standoffish, but the longer she sat, quiet, cross legged in the grass, invisible to the church's day staff, the more they came around. She didn't need to speak. She simply willed them to come. Of course, it didn't hurt that she started to peel the crust of her bread from the edges of her sandwich (She preferred them cut off, but her mother never listened) and feed them. They were close to a foot long each now, and the Crocodile Girl had read, if they ate properly, they could grow even larger.

They had become her very best friends. But on that day, after the storm, they appeared different somehow. The air had not completely emptied itself of moisture from the night before, and clouds had begun to assemble, a blanket of grey as she sat in the grass and watched them swim. She noticed a sweet smell—different from the honeysuckle she usually picked from the holes in the fence. She looked in her hand and realized, as it had cramped, she had squashed her bologna and mustard—the bread plastered to the meat in a lump of yellow gristle. She wiped her hands in the grass, then on her skirt, clumsily smearing the mixture everywhere. Oh dear. Teacher would fuss. The other children would laugh—again. She dipped her hands in the pond.

But she hadn't eaten. And the sweet smell grew stronger. She grabbed the red fish, the largest, by its tail, threw it into her mouth, and swallowed it in one gulp. Then the twins. The smell went away, as did the rumble in her stomach. That's when she realized how long she'd been sitting there on this particular day. Recess was long over.

She tried to sneak in the classroom door. Adults in the school rarely noticed her anyway. (They had not even counted her missing all those times they lined up the others.) But the snickers of the others brought her tardiness to the teacher's attention. She stopped writing on the board and turned towards the Crocodile Girl.

"Just where have you been? I'm afraid this will be a call home and detention for tardiness, and disruption of class. We will speak about this at the end of the day. For now, please find your seat."

"I'm sorry I was late, I just..." She could never come up with what to say in the moment. That's when the Crocodile Girl realized finding her seat would be a problem—that she had actually crawled through the door. Her hunching had become an inability to stand. She still wore her sweater, and skirt, which hid her scaly arms and growing extension from her backside, but the clothing wouldn't last for long. She turned around to skuttle back out the door, and, in the process, knocked over a chair. The teacher followed after her but stubbed her toe and tripped over its leg.

"Young lady, you come back here this INSTANT!"

"Oh my God!" she heard one girl shout above the screams, gasps that turned to titters. "She tripped the teacher! What a freak...oh man she'll be in soooo much trouble! She'll be in detention for a YEAR!"

There was no mention of concern for the teacher who, for all the Crocodile Girl knew, was still lying on the classroom floor shouting in the air after her.

The Crocodile girl kept skuttling, moving her stubby limbs as quickly as she could. They slipped on the linoleum of the empty hallway, and her nails made scratching sounds in rhythm with her breath as she rounded the corner to the front door of the building. Her breath heaved, her growing mouth hinged open. She realized then that her tongue had widened, literally fused itself to her bottom jaw. She kept running, as best she could, widening her mouth, breathing, breathing.

She managed to make it home undetected through the back yards of the neighborhood. She crept under the swing set next door and found a piece of the chain link fence uprooted from the earth. She wriggled through, catching the ridges on top of her back on some of the rusted pieces.

“Oh no, that’ll mean a tetanus shot,” she thought to herself. “Right in the rear...my leg will ache for days.”

Except, she realized, she no longer had a rear.

She was still a young crocodile, for now, possibly small enough to fit through the doggy door. The family pouch was asleep under the deck as she approached. He was a beagle mix—lazy, disinterested at first. Then he stood up straight in mid yawn, now on high alert. He growled.

The Crocodile girl was tempted for a minute, then thought better of it. With a swipe of the tail, as gentle as she could manage, she threw him to the side of the yard into a woodpile. He yelped, then scrambled back to his feet, cowering with the earthworms and stink bugs on that side of the lot. The Crocodile Girl squeezed through the door into the kitchen. Her parents were still at work—for now. But they’d be back. And she was sure there would be a message from school. She was in for it. It took her much longer than she imagined it would to climb the stairs to her bedroom. Her

front legs were practically useless, her tail now so heavy. She hoisted herself, one back leg after the other, one-at-a-time. In her room, she was able to push a chair to the door, using her snout to place its back under the knob. She scaled the side of her bed and rested on the mattress, waiting.

As the sun sank below the windowsill, the Crocodile Girl heard her parents' voices as they approached.

"I told you she needed therapy."

"Oh great, now this is MY fault!"

"I didn't say that. We just can't ignore the problem anymore."

"Well, obviously. Her door's closed. Guess she's in there. I hear some rustling."

The Crocodile Girl tried to cover herself with a blanket when the knock came, the jiggling of the knob. But she only managed to rip two pillows to shreds. Oh, what a mess. How they would fuss now.

"She's blocked the door...seriously? Okay, fine, miss. You can stay in there. No dinner. We'll revisit this in the morning."

The Crocodile heaved a sigh of relief that came out sounding part burp, part hiss, part growl. It terrified her.

"What the hell was that?" she heard her father ask.

"Who knows," her mother said. "Maybe she has a cold. I'll schedule a doctor's appointment in the morning. Let her stew in her juices for now."

That night, the water came again. But this time, it made it to her front door. Something called to the Crocodile Girl—a low rumble, gentle, a gurgling sound, beckoning. Then she understood.

*I remember you as a rush of blood and baby. Your lizard's skin was newly soft. You are beautiful. But—
Fair warning from the one who heard your cries from inside the egg—life will strand you at the feet
of some with spears. They will skewer you. Peel off your skin. Then piece it back together—a pair of boots, a bag, a
coat. But remember. Your teeth are blunt no more. Come.*

The crocodile girl slid down the stairs as quietly as possible, timing the clicks of her claws to her parents' snores. She entered the creek, which had come to her, gingerly. It felt so warm, comfortable, and she floated there for a moment letting every inch of her leather skin soak it in. She began to move her legs and ducked under the surface, amazed at how, unlike on land, her tail was a blessing. So strong, propelling her a mile in a matter of minutes to the mouth of the river. There, breath bubbles, then jewel eyes rose to meet hers. Her Crocodile mother's mouth widened to a cavern, and the Crocodile Girl crawled inside, resting her head on the pouch of the massive throat. The teeth slowly closed around her, but she felt protected, not afraid. Her mother carried her, swiftly, to the Bay.

She lived there, with her brothers and sisters, for months—growing. By August, there was no fitting through the doggy door, anymore. She had almost forgotten her four poster canopy bed and Lucky Charms for breakfast. Now fed properly—blue crabs, oysters, the occasional squirrel or unlucky rabbit—the Crocodile Girl grew large—powerful.

In August, she found herself swimming near the inlet she had waded in while in her previous form. She recognized it immediately. A wide net surrounded the circumference of the swimming hole to keep out the jellyfish. The Crocodile Girl smiled to herself remembering how her land

mother rubbed wet sand against the welts when she was stung—how much it used to hurt but didn't anymore. Her hide repelled the stings of the red nettles with little problem now. The Crocodile Girl approached the edge of the net in the deepest part and began to chew a hole through it. She knew the girls would be coming to swim sometime soon.

Sure enough, a group of bathers arrived late the next morning. The Crocodile Girl watched them from behind a sandbar offshore as they set up their umbrellas and blankets. Opened their coolers and ate their neatly trimmed cucumber sandwiches (no bologna for them). They slathered each other's backs with sunscreen. She heard their chatter, but, strangely, could no longer understand exactly what they were saying. It didn't matter. She knew. Most likely which parties they would attend that weekend, how cute their new bathing suits were, how they couldn't wait to go back-to-school clothes shopping. Had they done the summer assignment? Which smart student could they con into giving them the answers?

The Crocodile Girl blew some froth into the water as she remembered them copying her work without her permission. Or maybe she had given it to them willingly, just so they'd be her friend. Or, at the end of the day, just leave her alone. She watched as they entered the water, then she dove under.

From the muck underneath, she could see their legs treading—pink, swishing, like starfish. She knew it would take one move to grab just one. Pull her under. Devour her. Silent. Crocodiles never had to roar. One might be enough for her to get her fill. Or maybe she would gobble up the others for good measure. Their legs continued to pump; the water swirled. The Crocodile Girl waited.

And then, almost as quickly as her hunger had entered, it left. Her lizard belly churned, suddenly bereft of a wish for flesh. She wanted a snack of dragonflies instead. She knew where they

lived—in some tall grass on the other side of the Bay. It wouldn't take her long to swim. But she needed to go, before the sun went down and the air grew colder than the water.