

# THE CENTREFOLD STORY

## ALLIGATORS

*a story written and told by Pete Castle*

*I came across the bare bones of this story many years ago whilst browsing through a copy of Readers Digest in my chiropractor's waiting room. Nearly as many years ago I submitted it to a storytelling event organised by Birmingham Library. It was one of the entries chosen for a book they produced. I couldn't be at the actual live event because I was working elsewhere so someone else read it for me (Amy Douglas I think.)*

There was a king who had a daughter who was just coming to marriageable age. In those days and in that place girls *had* to be married, even princesses—or especially princesses—and they did not usually have much of a say as to who their marriage partner would be. Their parents just arranged it and announced it, and that was the end of it. Now this king loved his daughter and wanted the best for her. He wanted to find a husband who she would be happy with, someone about her own age who would be kind to her and treat her well. It didn't matter whether the young man was rich or not because eventually he and the princess would inherit all the king's wealth. It was more important that he was healthy and strong and, if possible, good looking, that he was someone the princess could be happy with. How was he to find this young man? The king and his advisors put their heads together and came up with a plan: they would hold a competition—an athletic competition. If he was good at sport he was probably healthy and that often goes with good looks... But what kind of sport?

In their kingdom was a place called the Long Lake which was just that, a long lake, so what better than a swimming competition? Now anyone (almost) could swim across the lake but all the way down the whole length of it would be a suitable task. So they decided that there would be a swimming competition at the Long Lake and the winner would get the princess's hand in marriage. But then someone raised the point that there might be a really good swimmer who didn't want to marry the princess. He wouldn't enter the competition and they really did need all the best swimmers in the race. They didn't want to devalue it. So they decided there should be a choice of prizes: they were certain that the winner would want to marry the princess but just so that no-one was put off, if they didn't want to marry the princess then they could have half the kingdom; and if, by any chance they didn't want half the kingdom then they could have as much gold as they could carry away in two carrier bags. That would solve the problem, they were sure.

So the king sent out his messengers and heralds all round the kingdom and into all the neighbouring kingdoms to announce that at mid-day on 1st August there would be a swimming competition at the Long Lake, the prize for the winner being the princess's hand in marriage (and in the unlikely case that he didn't want that: half the kingdom or as much gold as he could carry away in two carrier bags.)

When the 1st August came the shores of the Long Lake were thronged with people. They'd never seen such crowds before. There were all the young men who were going to swim and all their friends and families coming to cheer them on. There were local people just coming to watch and see what happened. There were people out to make a bit of money: jugglers and fire-eaters; poets and storytellers; women reading fortunes; bookmakers taking bets; men selling hot dogs and hamburgers; it was a whole big festival which you could hear and smell a mile off.

At noon a hush fell over the crowd and the royal party made their way onto the dais. Trumpets blared and the prime minister gave a little speech and announced what was going to happen.

The sign for the race to start, he said, was when the king said “On your marks, get set, GO!” and dropped his handkerchief.

All the while he was speaking young men were getting ready—taking off their shoes, unbuttoning their jackets, stretching and breathing hard...

Just then the king himself interrupted. “Just to make this all a bit more interesting” he said “I have recently stocked the lake with alligators!”

Silence.

Not a sound as everyone turned to look. And then they saw what they hadn’t seen before: that log floating in the water had little legs paddling away beneath it; the old tree stump laying on the shore had little eyes... the more they looked the more alligators they could see and they were the biggest, meanest looking alligators any of them had ever seen. Then the king shouted “On your marks, get set, GO!” and dropped his handkerchief...

And nothing happened. No-one dived into the water. No young men started swimming. In fact various young men were buttoning their coats which had ‘accidentally’ come undone or tying their shoelaces. They’d never had any intention of swimming themselves, they’d just come to watch.

All the old men were in a huddle complaining away as old men are want to do: “Young people today” they grumbled “it’s not like when we were young. We wouldn’t have worried about a few alligators... we’d have swum up there so quickly we’d have been out at the other end before the alligators had even thought about it... if they had caught us we would have wrestled with them Tarzan... they wouldn’t have stood a chance against us... I blame these here computers... they rot your brain... all that fiddling with your joystick it’s not natural... blah blah, blah...”

And while everyone was looking the other way there was a sudden splash! There in the water was a young man. Off up the lake he went with his legs kicking and his arms going like windmills. A huge cheer went up.

He was a quarter of the way up the lake and the alligators had seen him.

Half way up the lake and they were all in the water.

Three quarters of the way up the lake and they were getting closer and closer.

Nine tenths of the way up the lake and the leading alligator’s mouth was open ready to bite.

And the young man leapt out onto the shore just as the alligators jaws clamped shut and missed him by a hair’s breadth. A huge cheer went up and everyone gathered round and patted him on the back. They put a blanked round his shoulders and led him back to the king who shook his hand and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Congratulations” he said. “You were the only one who was brave enough to swim against the alligators. Would you like to marry my daughter?”

“No, I don’t want that” said the young man and a great sigh went round the crowd.

“Then you must want half the kingdom.”

“No I don’t want that either.”

So was he just a greedy young man who wanted as much gold as he could carry away in two carrier bags?

“No, I don’t want that” he said.

That puzzled everyone, including the king.

“But you jumped into the lake and you risked your life swimming up there with the alligators after you, you must want something” said the king.

The young man turned and faced the crowd. He looked round it staring deep into everyone’s eye.

“Yes” he said. “I want to know which of you was the rotten so and so who pushed me in!”

