

Second Place – Middle School/ Fiction

Charley & the Gator

By Jacob Dilley

As a fog settled over the small Louisiana swamp, Charlie cut the engines on the boat. Like Gramps said, never drive the boat in a fog. Though all that talk about gator hunting was nothing compared to real life. He'd been on the swamp for five hours and not a single gator was in sight. There were flies and there was heat, but there were no gators. What would Gramps say if he came back empty-handed? He would probably get those wrinkles between his eyes and sulk off with a broken heart. He had a tough punch and a vulgar mouth but something this personal would pierce Gramps' tough hide. He had to make him proud and be like Dad. Ignoring Gramps' advice, Charlie revved up the boat and headed off with a new determination.

The mist cooled his hot skin and wet his dry tongue. It wasn't long before he saw a ripple. Excited, he stopped the boat and headed towards the edge. He reached for his shotgun. It used to be his Dad's until the day... shaking sad memories out of his head he loaded the gun. Putting it to his shoulder he looked down the barrel and waited. A few minutes passed and Charlie's arm was beginning to get stiff. Could it have been an illusion or the sun playing tricks on his worn out mind? He just stood there anxiously waiting for... aha! A splash! Something emerged and Charlie, running on adrenaline, shot what seemed like a terrible shot. Luckily he had his Dad's good aim and the thing settled on top of the water turning the water red.

Confused that nothing else came up, Charlie started the boat and drove over to it, leaned closer, and examined the thing. His heart sank as he realized what it was; a catfish. How could he have been so arrogant? That shot probably scared off all the gators that he had a chance to get. He could tell by the position of the sun that it was almost 4:00. He had two hours left. He couldn't imagine how distraught Gramps would be. Had he remembered all the rules Gramps taught him? Did he give the boat breaks so it wouldn't overheat? Yes. Did he stay on the route? Eh, he sort of veered off. Did he remember what the gators were attracted to? Of course, they were attracted to... Wait! Gators were attracted to fresh meat! A spark of hope lit in his eyes as he stood up.

Suddenly, a huge bump from the hull knocked him down as the hope turned to panic. Charlie crawled to the stern of the boat and looked at the water. He saw exactly what he expected to see; a gator heading straight towards the catfish. He had to act quickly. This was his chance to live

up to Gramps' expectations and show that he *was* his father's son. He darted to the large supply box and got out his gator pole. Lucky for him the gator was slow and that gave him enough time to hook the fish and bring it closer. As the gator changed directions Charlie braced himself for a big tug. This is for you Dad, Charlie thought, as the gator bit down on the fish. Charlie didn't expect the gator to be this strong. He began to lose his grip on the pole and the boat started leaning to the side. Charlie looked around frantically for something to weigh down the pole just long enough for him to grab and load his gun. Then he got an idea. He stuck the bottom of the pole into the box, closed the lid and then sat on it. He started to load his gun, but just then, the pole shot out of the box. Charlie grabbed it out of mid air but lost his balance and slid towards the edge. He held on to the boat for dear life but it wasn't enough.

The boat tipped over and Charlie fell into the water. Charlie swam quickly to the surface. He cleared his eyes just enough to see the gator coming towards him. Charlie froze in fear hoping that it wouldn't end like this. Not like his father. Charlie let go of the pole and climbed on top of the boat. Grabbing his shotgun from the water he loaded a shell in from Gramps' ammo box and held up the gun. Hoping for the genetic aiming system to kick in, he fired. The gator stopped as water turned red. Charlie couldn't believe it. He did it. He proved Gramps right. He *was* his father's son. Just like you, Dad, Charlie thought. Now he just hoped he also had his Dad's strength to load up this gator.