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Chomp

Written by

Carl Hiaasen

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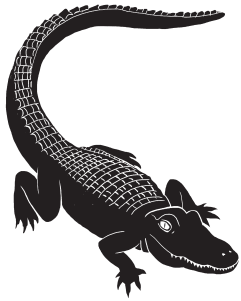
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This book is for Quinn, Webb, Jack, and, of course, Claire, who suggested the toothy title.



ONE

Mickey Cray had been out of work ever since a dead iguana fell from a palm tree and hit him on the head.

The iguana, which had died during a hard freeze, was stiff as a board and weighed three-and-a-half kilos. Mickey's son had measured the lifeless lizard on a fishing scale, then packed it on ice with the turtle veggies in the cooler behind the garage.

This was after the ambulance had hauled Mickey off to the hospital, where the doctors said he had a serious concussion, and ordered him to take it easy.

And, to everyone's surprise, Mickey did take it easy. That's because the injury left him with double vision and terrible headaches. He lost his appetite and dropped nine kilos and lay around on the couch all day, watching nature programmes on television.

"I'll never be the same," he told his son.

"Knock it off, Pop," said Wahoo, Mickey's boy.

Mickey had named him after Wahoo McDaniel, a professional wrestler who'd once played linebacker for the Dolphins. Mickey's son often wished he'd been called

Mickey Jr. or Joe or even Rupert – anything but Wahoo, which was also a species of saltwater fish.

It was a name that was hard to live up to. People naturally expected somebody called Wahoo to act loud and crazy, but that wasn't Wahoo's style. Apparently nothing could be done about the name until he was all grown up, at which point he intended to go to the Cutler Ridge courthouse and tell a judge he wanted to be called something normal.

"Pop, you're gonna be okay," Wahoo would tell his father every morning. "Just hang in there."

Looking up with hound-dog eyes from the couch, Mickey Cray would say, "Whatever happens, I'm glad we ate that bleeping lizard."

On the day his dad had come home from the hospital, Wahoo had defrosted the dead iguana and made a peppercorn stew, which his mom had wisely refused to touch. Mickey had insisted that eating the critter that had dented his skull would be a spiritual remedy. "Big medicine," he'd predicted.

But the iguana had tasted awful, and Mickey Cray's headaches only got worse. Wahoo's mother was so concerned that she wanted Mickey to see a brain specialist in Miami, but Mickey refused to go.

Meanwhile, people kept calling up with new jobs, and Wahoo was forced to send them to other wranglers. His father was in no condition to work.

After school, Wahoo would feed the animals and clean out the pens and cages. The backyard was literally a zoo – gators, snakes, parrots, mynah birds, rats, mice, monkeys, raccoons, tortoises and even a bald eagle, which Mickey had raised from a fledgling after its mother was killed.

"Treat 'em like royalty," Mickey would instruct Wahoo,

because the animals were quite valuable. Without them, Mickey would be unemployed.

It disturbed Wahoo to see his father so ill because Mickey was the toughest guy he'd ever known.

One morning, with summer approaching, Wahoo's mother took him aside and told him that the family's savings account was almost drained. "I'm going to China," she said.

Wahoo nodded, like it was no big deal.

"For two months," she said.

"That's a long time," said Wahoo.

"Sorry, big guy, but we really need the money."

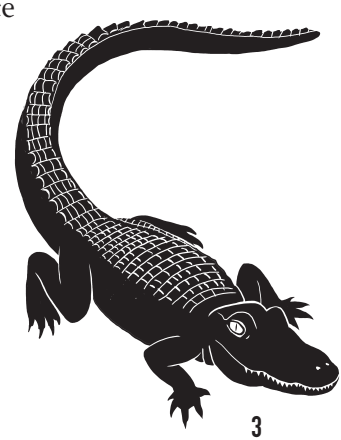
Wahoo's mother taught Mandarin Chinese, an extremely difficult language. Big American companies that had offices in China would hire Mrs Cray to tutor their top executives, but usually these companies flew their employees to South Florida for Mrs Cray's lessons.

"This time they want me to go to Shanghai," she explained to her son. "They have, like, fifty people over there who learned Mandarin from some cheap audio tape. The other day, one of the bigshots was trying to say 'Nice shoes!' and he accidentally told a government minister that his face looked like a butt wart. Not good."

"Did you tell Pop you're going?"

"That's next."

Wahoo slipped outside to clean Alice's pond. Alice the alligator was one of Mickey Cray's stars. She was three metres long and as tame as a guppy, but she looked truly ferocious. Over the years Alice had



appeared often in front of a camera. Her credits included nine feature films, two National Geographic documentaries, a three-part Disney special about the Everglades and a TV commercial for a fancy French skin lotion.

She lay sunning on the mud bank while Wahoo skimmed the dead leaves and sticks from the water. Her eyes were closed but Wahoo knew she was listening.

"Hungry, girl?" he asked.

The gator's mouth opened wide, the inside as white as spun cotton. Some of her teeth were snaggled and chipped. The tips were green from pond algae.

"You forgot to floss," Wahoo said.

Alice hissed. He went to get her some food. When she heard the squeaking of the wheelbarrow, she cracked her eyelids and turned her huge armoured head.

Wahoo tossed a whole plucked chicken into the alligator's gaping jaws. The sound of her crunching on the thawed bird obscured the voices coming from the house – Wahoo's mother and father "discussing" the China trip.

Wahoo fed Alice two more dead chickens, locked the gate to the pond and took a walk. When he returned, his father was upright on the sofa and his mother was in the kitchen fixing bologna sandwiches for lunch.

"You believe this?" Mickey said to Wahoo. "She's bugging out on us!"

"Pop, we're broke."

Mickey's shoulders slumped. "Not *that* broke."

"You want the animals to starve?" Wahoo asked.

They ate their sandwiches barely speaking a word. When they were done, Mrs Cray stood up and said: "I'm going to miss you guys. I wish I didn't have to go."

Then she went into the bedroom and shut the door.

Mickey seemed dazed. "I used to like iguanas."

"We'll be okay."

"My head hurts."

"Take your medicine," said Wahoo.

"I threw it away."

"What?"

"Those yellow pills, they made me constipated."

Wahoo shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"Seriously. I haven't had a satisfactory bowel movement since Easter."

"Thanks for sharing," said Wahoo. He started loading the dishwasher, trying to keep his mind off the fact that his mom was about to fly away to the far side of the world.

Mickey got up and apologised to his son.

"I'm just being selfish. I don't want her to go."

"Me neither."

The following Sunday, they all rose before dawn. Wahoo lugged his mother's suitcases to the waiting taxi. She had tears in her eyes when she kissed him goodbye.

"Take care of your dad," she whispered.

Then, to Mickey, she said: "I want you to get better. That's an order, mister."

Watching the cab speed off, Wahoo's father looked forlorn. "It's like she's leaving us twice," he remarked.

"What are you talking about, Pop?"

"I'm seein' double, remember? There she goes – and there she goes again."

Wahoo was in no mood for that. "You want eggs for breakfast?"

Afterwards he went out in the backyard to deal with a

troublesome howler monkey named Jocko, who'd picked the lock on his cage and was now leaping around, pestering the parrots and macaws. Wahoo had to be careful because Jocko was mean. He used a tangerine to lure the surly primate back to his cage, but Jocko still managed to sink a dirty fang into one of Wahoo's hands.

"I told you to wear the canvas gloves," scolded Mickey, when Wahoo was standing at the sink, cleaning the wound.

"You don't wear gloves," Wahoo pointed out.

"Yeah, but I don't get chomped like you do."

That was hogwash. Mickey got chomped all the time; it was an occupational hazard. His hands were so scarred that they looked fake, like rubber Halloween props.

The phone rang and Wahoo picked it up. His father weaved back to the couch and flipped through the TV stations until he found the Rain Forest Channel.

"Who was it that called?" he asked when Wahoo came out of the kitchen.

"Another job, Pop."

"You send 'em to Stiggy?"

Jimmy Stigmore was an animal wrangler who had a ranch up in west Davie. Mickey Cray wasn't crazy about Stiggy.

"No, I didn't," Wahoo said.

His father frowned. "Then who'd you send 'em to? Not Dander!"

Donny Dander had lost his wildlife importing license after he got caught smuggling thirty-eight rare tree frogs from South America. The frogs had been cleverly hidden in his underwear, but the adventure ended in embarrassment at Miami airport when a Customs officer noticed that Donny's trousers were cheeping.

Wahoo said, "I didn't send 'em to Dander, either. I didn't send 'em anywhere."

"Okay. Now you lost me," said Mickey Cray.

"I said we'd take the job. I said we could start next week."

"Are you crazy, boy? Look at me, I can't see straight, I can't hardly walk, my skull's 'bout to split open like a rotten pumpkin—"

"Pop!"

"What?"

"I said *we*," Wahoo reminded him. "You and I together."

"But what about school?"

"Friday's the last day. Then I'm done for the summer."

"Already?" Wahoo's dad didn't keep up with Wahoo's academic schedule as closely as his mother did. "So who called about the job?"

Wahoo told him the name of the TV show.

"Not him!" Mickey Cray snorted. "I've heard stories about that jerk."

"Well, how does a thousand bucks sound?" Wahoo asked.

"Pretty darned sweet."

"That's one thousand a *day*." Wahoo let that sink in. "If you want, I'll call 'em back and give him Stiggy's number."

"Don't be a knucklehead." Wahoo's father rose off the sofa and gave him a hug. "You did good, son. We'll make this work."

"Absolutely," said Wahoo, trying hard to sound confident.