Catching George.

(or: The strange ways of youth.)

(or: a fragment of autobiography.)

Young people do some funny things.

I expect you do, sometimes.

Maybe not exactly like this, though!

See what you think.

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Student: What’s the story called?

*Tutor: “Catching George”.*

Did it really happen?

*Well yes, it did.*

To you?

*Yes.*

How long ago?

*Maybe 60 years!*

Tell me about it.

*OK. I will.*

Go on then!

*Well, it all starts in Trinidad, round about 1954.*

1954!

*You make it sound like a different world.*

Well, it was.

*I suppose it was.*

Anyway, what happened all those years ago?

*We tried to lasso George.*

Lasso George?

*Yes.*

Who is “we”?

*Me and my friend Tim.*

Who was George?

*George wasn’t a person.*

Oh?

*He was an alligator.*

An alligator?

*Yes.*

George was an alligator?

*Yes.*

You decided to lasso an alligator?

*Well yes.*

Why?

*It seemed like a good idea at the time.*

You must have been crazy.

*No, just young.*

How young?

*About 9 or 10.*

Right.

*Quite young.*

You lived in Trinidad, right?

*I did.*

It’s hot all year round?

*Yes.*

And there were alligators?

*Oh yes. We lived beside a lake.*

Nice!

*And there were alligators in the lake.*

In a lake by your house?

*Well, we called them alligators.*

But they weren’t alligators?

*They were caiman.*

Caiman?

*Spectacled Caiman.*

Like alligators, though?

*Not quite so big.*

But like alligators?

*Yes.*

How big are these caiman?

*A really big one is about 3 metres.*

3 metres!

*Yes.*

And George was a big one?

*The biggest on the lake.*

How could a boy lasso a 3 metre caiman?

*Easy!*

Easy?

*That’s what we thought.*

Right.

*You just have to know how caiman are.*

And how are caiman?

*Mmmm…?*

I mean, one day I might want to lasso one.

*Well…*

So it would be good to know.

*Well, in the afternoons, they come out onto the mud banks.*

To bask in the sun?

*Exactly.*

When it’s really hot?

*And they seem to fall asleep.*

Really?

*They stay dead still for hours.*

But how did you get close enough?

*Well, George used to bask in the same spot.*

Always the same spot?

*By some long grass not far from our house.*

So you decided to creep through the long grass.

*Yes. Simple, really.*

Wouldn’t George hear you coming?

*Not if you were quiet.*

Really?

*A caiman doesn’t hear very well out of water.*

OK. But he would see you.

*He would if he had his eyes open.*

But he doesn’t?

*No.*

Maybe he’s asleep.

*And they often hold their head quite high off the ground.*

O.K.

*And George did.*

So you thought you could creep up on him.

*Yes.*

And swing a noose over his nose.

*Yes. Simple.*

Mmmm...

*No problem.*

What was the rest of your plan?

*Well, Tim would sit in the tree with one end of the rope.*

What tree?

*There was a tree close by*

And Tim would climb into this tree with one end of a rope?

*Exactly.*

And you would lasso George with the other end.

*Exactly!*

And then?

*Then I would run away.*

Just run away?

*George would be lassoed, so he couldn’t catch me.*

And you thought this was a good plan, did you?

*We thought it was foolproof.*

Hmmmm.

*I would creep through the tall grass.*

Right.

*Until I was alongside George.*

And he wouldn’t notice.

*No.*

Because his eyes were shut.

*They were.*

And he doesn’t hear well out of water.

*I told you it was simple!*

Well….

*And it almost worked.*

Almost?

*Very nearly.*

But not quite?

*No.*

What happened?

*Well, we got a nice, strong, long rope.*

Yes…

*And I tied a noose in the end of it.*

And then you walked up to George and put it round his neck.

*Pretty much.*

Oh come on! It can’t have been quite like that!

*Of course it wasn’t.*

What happened, then?

*Well, I crept through the long grass until I was alongside George.*

And then?

*Then I swung the noose over his neck.*

Which happened, did it?

*Oh yes.*

But then?

*Then I clambered over George and ran away.*

Clambered over George?

*Yes.*

A 3 metre caiman?

Yes.

Didn’t he wake up?

*Oh yes, he woke up.*

While you were clambering over him?

*Well, when the noose went over his neck.*

So he woke up then?

*Yes.*

And then?

*I clambered over him and ran towards the water, away from the tree.*

Which was fine, because George was lassoed to the tree.

*Well….*

He was lassoed to the tree, right?

*Almost.*

How do you mean “almost”.

*Well…*

You had the noose round his neck.

*Yes.*

And the other end was tied to a tree.

*Well, no. Not quite.*

Not quite?

*No, not quite.*

Tim didn’t tie the rope to the tree, did he?

*No. He just held it.*

He just held the rope?

*He braced himself, but he just held the rope in his hands.*

And a boy can’t hold a big caiman like that.

*No. Of course not.*

So George got loose I suppose?

*He did.*

Mmmm…

*Tim flew out of the tree like a cork out of a bottle.*

And what did George do?

*He ran for the water.*

And a caiman runs very fast, does he?

*When he has to, yes.*

Right.

*His head is down and his tail swings from side to side.*

And he runs very fast, does he?

*Yes.*

So now you had a huge caiman right behind you.

*It felt as if he was chasing me.*

Because he was.

*Well, he wasn’t really, but it felt like that.*

Mmmm…

*I ran as fast as I could.*

Away from the tree.

*Down the bank and into the water.*

With George right behind you.

*We hit the water almost at the same time.*

What happened next?

*When I got my head above water, there was no sign of George at all.*

What did you do then?

*I got out as fast as I could and tried to run up the bank.*

Still scared, I guess?

*My legs were shaking so much I had to sit down on the mud.*

And there was no sign of George?

*He was long gone.*

And Tim?

*Tim came to sit beside me on the mud.*

Right.

*We didn’t say much.*

There wasn’t much to say, I suppose.

*The afternoon was suddenly so normal.*

Normal?

*Peaceful. Weird.*

Where was the rope?

*That was still round George’s neck.*

Really?

*We saw him a few days later.*

What did it feel like to be so close to George?

*Scary.*

He must have seemed enormous.

*Dusty and grey and enormous.*

There can’t be many people who have been on a caiman’s back.

*I wasn’t there long.*

Scary, though!

*It felt as if I was riding him.*

What do you most remember now?

*Well, his eyes.*

His eyes?

*I was right by his head, and his eyes snapped open.*

Wow!

*I was looking right into them.*

Scary!

*They were a beautiful brown colour with flecks of gold.*

What would you have done if you had caught George?

*I have no idea!*

What were you planning to do?

*We never thought that far ahead.*

You never thought that far ahead?

*We just wanted to catch him.*

You would have had to tell your Dad.

*Yes.*

“Hey, Dad, there’s a 3 metre caiman tied to the tree at the bottom of our garden.”

*Yes.*

He might not have been very pleased about that.

*No.*

He might not have been very happy at all.

*No.*

It’s not the sort of thing Dads like to hear, really.

*No.*

What do you think he would have done?

*He’d have gone potty!*

You would have been safer with George, maybe!

*I probably would!*