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Opening Extract from...

Carrying Albert Home

Written by Homer Hickam

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CARRYING ALBERT HOME

The somewhat True Story of a
MAN, HIS WIFE, and HER ALLIGATOR

AS TOLD BY

Homer Hickam

(THE YOUNGER)

STARRING

Elsie Lavender Hickam

(Who thought what she said caused the journey)

AND

Homer Hickam

(THE ELDER)

(Who thought what he did caused the journey)

AND FEATURING

Albert Hickam

(Who actually caused the journey)

AND

The Rooster

(Whose presence on the journey is not entirely understood)

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PART I

How the Journey Began

1

WHEN ELSIE CAME OUTSIDE INTO THE BACKYARD TO SEE why her husband was shouting her name, she saw Albert lying on his back in the grass, his little legs splayed apart and his head thrust backward. She was sure something awful had happened to him but when her alligator raised his head and smiled at her, she knew he was all right. The relief she felt was palpable and nearly overwhelming. After all, she loved Albert more than just about anything in the whole world. She knelt and scratched his belly while he waved his paws in delight and grinned his most toothsome grin.

At just a little over two years old, Albert was over four feet long, which was big for his age according to a book Elsie had read about alligators. He was covered with a thick skin of exquisite olive-colored scales with yellow bands on his sides that the book said would disappear over time. Raised ridges rippled down his length, even to the tip of his tail, and his belly was soft and creamy. His expressive eyes were the color of gold but glowed a compelling red at night. His face was quite striking, his nostrils perfectly placed atop the tip of his snout to allow him to breathe while resting in the water, and an endearing overbite that presented

rows of brilliantly white teeth. He was, Elsie believed, about the handsomest alligator there ever was.

Of course, Albert was also smart, so smart he followed Elsie around the house like a dog and when she sat down, he crawled into her lap and let her pet him like a house cat. This was good because she was no longer able to have either a dog or a cat, due to Albert's tendency to ambush them from under the bed or out of the little concrete pond her father had built for him. Albert had never actually eaten either a dog or a cat but he'd come close, enough so that both species had declared the Hickam house and yard off-limits for at least the next century.

After smiling back at her "little boy," as she liked to call him, Elsie took note of her husband, who had ceased yelling and was just looking at her with an expression that she interpreted as somewhat peevish. She could not help but also note that he was dressed in a rather peculiar fashion, which led her to ask, "Homer, where are your pants?"

Homer did not answer her directly. Instead he said, "Me or that alligator." Then he said it again, this time low and slow. "Me . . . or . . . that . . . alligator."

Elsie sighed. "What happened?"

"I was sitting on the toilet doing my business when *your* alligator climbed out of the bathtub and grabbed my pants. If I hadn't climbed out of them and run out here, he'd have surely killed me."

"I guess if Albert wanted to kill you, he'd have done it a long time ago. So what do you want me to do?"

"Choose. Either me or him. That's it."

There it was. How long, she wondered, had this been coming at her, at them both, at them all? Yet, she had no answer other than the one she gave. "I'll think it over."

Homer was incredulous. "You're going to think it over when it's me or that alligator?"

"Yes, Homer, that is exactly what I'm going to do," Elsie said, then flipped Albert over and beckoned him to follow. "Come on, little boy. Mama's got some nice chicken for you in the kitchen."



Homer watched in disbelief as Elsie led Albert inside the house. At the fence, Jack Rose, neighbor and fellow coal miner, approached and coughed politely. "You gonna catch cold, son," he said. "Maybe you ought to go put on some pants."

Homer's face turned crimson. "Did you hear?"

"Everybody on this row likely heard."

Homer knew he was in for some terrible ribbing. Coal miners always liked to take a man down a notch and Homer being chased into the yard without his pants by Elsie's alligator was going to make it easy for them. "Help me out, Jack," he pleaded. "Don't tell anybody about this."

"Okay," Rose said, amiably, "but I can't guarantee the missus." He nodded over his shoulder to the window where Mrs. Rose stood with a big grin. Knowing he was doomed, Homer hung his head.

That night, over supper, Homer paused over his brown beans and cornbread. "Have you thought it over yet? About me and Albert?"

Elsie didn't look at him. "Not yet."

Homer was clearly miserable. "I'm going to catch heck from the other miners about being chased outside without my pants."

Elsie still did not look at him. She was staring at her beans as if they were sending her a message. "I have a solution," she said. "Quit the mine. Get out of that dirty old hole and let's go live somewhere clean."

"I'm a coal miner, Elsie. It's what I do."

She finally looked at him. "It's not what I do."

All night long, Elsie slept with her back turned to Homer and the next morning, after fixing him breakfast and handing him his lunch bucket, she provided no kiss, or a wish that he might return home safely. Homer was certain he was the only Coalwood miner who went to work that day without some sort of well-wishing from his wife and that knowledge was a heavy weight to carry. On top of that, a miner named Collier Johns gave him the business about his excursion in the yard without his pants. Johns thought himself sly by asking, "Did Elsie's alligator really scare you out of your pants, Homer?" This was followed by general laughing and slapping of the knees by the other miners on the shift. The correct and expected response from Homer should have been something funny or ribald but he said nothing, which took all the fun out of the ribbing and it subsided. The suspicion was that Homer had fallen ill, perhaps gravely so. Later, there was much discussion of this on the company store steps. The conclusion was that his illness was his wife, a peculiar girl who, though lovely, was the kind who could destroy a man by wanting more than he could provide.

Two more days went by until Elsie walked outside into the yard, where Homer was sitting on a rusty chair he'd scrounged from the company junkyard. She stood before him and, after taking a deep breath, announced, "I will let Albert go."

Relieved, Homer said, "Wonderful. Thank you. We'll put him in the creek. He'll be fine there. Lots of minnows to eat and the occasional dog or cat trying to get a drink."

Elsie pressed her lips together, an expression Homer knew all too well meant she was not pleased. "He would freeze in the creek during the winter," she said. "He has to go home to Orlando."

This was an astonishing proposal. "Orlando? Good Lord, woman! It must be eight hundred miles to Orlando!"

Elsie defiantly raised her chin. "I don't care if it's eight thousand."

"And if I refuse?"

Elsie took another deep breath. "I'll take him myself."

Homer could almost feel the earth shifting beneath his boots. "How would you do that?"

"I don't know but I'll figure out a way."

Instantly defeated, Homer asked, "Does he have to go all the way to Orlando? Could we not drop him off in one of the Carolinas? It's warm down there, so I hear."

"All the way," Elsie replied. "And when we get there, we have to find the perfect place."

"How will we know the perfect place?"

"Albert will know."

"Albert is a reptile. He doesn't know anything."

"Well, at least he has an excuse for that, doesn't he?"

"You're saying I don't know anything?"

"I'm saying none of us do. I'm saying everything we think is true is probably not true at all. If I said a million things and you said a million and one things back, none of our words might even come close to what the truth really is."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It's the most honest answer I can give you."

After his wife had gone back inside the house, Homer sat brooding in his junkyard chair. For one of the first times in the entire history of his life, he felt scared. A week ago, the mine roof had cracked like a rifle shot and a giant slab of rock had missed him by inches but that hadn't scared him at all. He'd never told Elsie about that but he knew she knew. She

seemed to know everything he tried to keep from her. In contrast, Homer confessed to himself he knew very little about the woman he'd married and had now put the fear of God in him with her threat to head off for Florida whether he went along or not.

There was, he realized, only one thing to do. He would seek the advice of the greatest man he knew, the incomparable William "Captain" Laird, World War I hero, graduate of the Stanford University engineering school, and lord and master of Coalwood.

And so, although he did not know it, the journey began.

2

AFTER A FULL SHIFT UNDERGROUND, HOMER SHOWERED at the company bathhouse, dressed in a fresh pair of coveralls and town boots, and asked the office clerk to see the Captain. The clerk waved him to the door and the Captain roared "*Enter!*" to Homer's knock. His hat held in his hands, Homer stepped up to the Captain's desk. The Captain, a huge man with ears like an African elephant, looked up and frowned. "What the devil is it, son?"

"It's my wife, Captain."

"Elsie? What's wrong with Elsie?"

"She wants me to take her and her alligator to Orlando."

The Captain sat back and considered Homer. "Does this have anything to do with you running around your yard without your pants?"

"Yes, sir, it does."

The Captain cocked his head. "Okay, son, I'm always up for a good story and I sense this might be a good one."

After taking an offered chair, Homer told the Captain about Albert chasing him outside and then what he said and what Elsie said. The Captain listened intently, his expression gradually changing from bemusement

to squinty-eyed interest. When Homer was finished, the Captain said, "You know what I think this is, Homer? It's kismet or damn close."

Homer had heard of kismet but he wasn't sure what it was and said so. The Captain leaned forward, his bulk looming as if to smother Homer's doubts. "There are times that come to us to accomplish things that don't make sense but make all the sense there is in the universe. Does that make sense?"

"No, sir."

"Of course it doesn't. But that's what kismet is. It makes us careen off in odd directions from which we learn not only what life is about but what it is *for*. This journey may be nothing less than your chance to discover these things."

"You're saying I should go?"

"I am, indeed. You are hereby granted your annual two weeks' vacation and you have my permission to draw one hundred dollars from the company to finance the trip."

"But that's so much money! I'll never be able to pay it back."

"Yes, you will. You're the kind of man who figures out how to pay a debt and then does it. Now, let us speak of Elsie. Have you made it clear to her that she is the most important person in your life?"

"I guess not, Captain," Homer answered, truthfully, "but she surely is." He scratched his head. "Trouble is I don't know if I'm the most important person in *her* life."

"Well, maybe that's another reason you've been given this journey, so that the two of you can figure out what kind of couple you are meant to be. When are you leaving?"

"I don't know. Until just now, I wasn't sure I was going."

"Go in the morning. A thing put off is a thing not done." The Captain's countenance turned gloomy. "Make no mistake. I'll miss you. You

have those goons on Three West running good coal and likely they'll fall back into bad habits with you gone." He shrugged. "But I'll make do. A young man on his way to adventure in tropical climes! I wish I were you."

"I will tell you truly, Captain," Homer answered. "I sense this journey will be one of the most painful experiences of my life."

"It may very well be," the Captain agreed, "and perhaps that is all the more reason you should do it. That said, in two weeks, I want to see your bright and shiny face back on Three West."

Homer rose from the chair, thanked the Captain, received a farewell salute, and walked outside into the dusty air, oblivious to the line of evening shift men tromping past to the manlift. In the sequential manner he'd been taught by the Captain, he made some rapid decisions. Getting to Florida from West Virginia with a wife and an alligator was a daunting task. His first decision was to eliminate going by train or bus. Neither of those conveyances would likely accept an alligator as a passenger. No, to get there, they'd have to go by car. Luckily, he had a good one, a 1925 Buick four-door convertible touring car he'd recently purchased from the Captain.

Homer's next decision led him to walk to the company store, where he procured a large washtub on credit and then went to the pay window and got one hundred dollars in the form of two fifty-dollar bills. As he walked to his house, the tub hitched up on his shoulder, he caught the attention of several ladies sitting in chairs on their porches. Their husbands were evening shift miners and so they had a little time on their hands to sit and watch anyone and everyone who might walk by. Most of them spoke to him as he passed, and one, a new wife in town, even asked him if he might stop for some iced tea. Though he politely touched his forelock to all of the ladies in a gesture of respect, he kept walking. He

was a handsome young man, Homer Hadley Hickam, nearly six feet tall, his straight black hair kept slicked back with Wildroot Creme Oil. He had the broad shoulders and muscles of a coal miner, and a lopsided smile and very blue eyes that many women found interesting. But he wasn't interested in them, not since he'd met and married Elsie Lavender.

Homer stowed the washtub in the back seat of the Buick, which was parked in front of the house, then went inside to apprise his wife of the decisions he had made. After peeking into the bedroom and not finding her, he discovered Elsie—her full married name was Elsie Gardner Lavender Hickam—sitting in the bathroom on its cracked linoleum floor. Her back was against the bathtub and she was holding her alligator, who was looking at her in rapt adoration. She was also crying.

Not counting sad movies and onions, Elsie had only seriously cried twice before, to Homer's recollection: once when she'd agreed to marry him, and again when she'd opened the box holding Albert and read the accompanying card from a fellow she'd known in Florida named Buddy Ebsen. In both cases, he still wasn't sure why. Uncertain what to say to this third bout of serious tears, Homer naturally said the wrong thing. "If you're not careful, that thing will yet bite off your arm."

Elsie raised her face and the sight of it hurt Homer's heart. Her usually bright hazel eyes were puffy and rimmed in pink and her high, prominent cheekbones—which she said came from the Cherokee in her blood—were wet with tears. "He will do no such thing," she said, "because Albert loves me. Sometimes, I think he is the only one in this old world who does."

Recalling the Captain's recommendation, Homer said, "You are the most important person in my life."

"No, I'm not," she shot back. "Not even close. First is the Captain. Second is the coal mine."

"The coal mine is not a person."

"In your case, it might as well be."

Homer did not want to argue, mainly because he knew he couldn't win. Instead, he said the thing he knew would either make her very happy or call the whole thing off. "We leave for Florida in the morning," he announced.

Elsie pushed a tear-soaked strand of hair from her cheek. "Are you joking?"

"The Captain gave me permission to go as long as I make it back in two weeks. I bought a galvanized washtub at the company store for Albert to ride in. It's in the back seat of the Buick. I also withdrew one hundred dollars from the company." He dug into his pocket and displayed the two fifties.

Her astonished face told Homer all that he needed to know. She believed him now. After all, a man didn't get two fifty-dollar bills from the company if he wasn't serious about using them. "If you still want to go, I think you should pack your things," he said.

Elsie pondered her husband, then stood up and put Albert in the bathtub. "All right," she said, "I will." She brushed past him heading for the bedroom.

When he heard her open the closet door followed by the rattle of coat hangers, Homer felt a little panic crawl up his back and perch on his shoulder. When he looked at Albert, the alligator seemed to be sizing him up. "This is all your fault," Homer said. "And, damn his hide, Buddy Ebsen's."