

*Feral Treats*

The swamp guide kills the motor as a herd of wild hogs slosh a beeline for our airboat. We all echo glances and uncertain murmurs at each other, clutching our complimentary totes closer in our laps, but our ever-enthusiastic leader acknowledges only the sole kid aboard, who exclaims, “Piggies!”

“That’s right! Wild pigs are common in these parts, and they ain’t shy with tourists.” He grins down at the hogs gathering at the boat’s edge, then pulls a bulk bag of giant marshmallows from under his seat. “They love when we give ‘em marshmallows! C’mon and get a handful. Toss some towards their mouths or in the water, don’t try to feed ‘em close like your dog.”

The smell of plastic and sugar temporarily relieves the oppressive greenery’s rotten egg odor. We take a few marshmallows each—the kid takes two whole fistfuls—and start dropping them into the mouths of hogs. Rough squeals and oinks and grunts drown out the tour guide explaining their coat colors and foraging habits. We pull the kid back by the scruff of his oversized lifejacket when he reaches too far toward a hog’s mouth, the animal rocking against the side of the boat as its treat gets lifted away. It’s one of the bigger ones, coarse brown hair heavy with glade water and summer heat, so its movements send our boat a couple inches back. Suddenly we wonder if we should’ve insisted on getting lifejackets too. We quickly throw in the last of our marshmallows for them.

“Alright, folks, let’s let the pigs back to their business. Sometimes the gators’ll try to pick off the little or sick or old ones, so best not make them stay in one place to long.”

Adjusting his grip on the control handle by his raised seat, he tugs and pulls this way and that, but the boat refuses to turn back on. That signature cheerful attitude fades right out as the hogs’ grunts turn to growls at our continued presence but lack of treats. He tells us it’ll be just a moment, does this all the time, not to worry, just needs a kick, but then he gives us another bag of marshmallows. “Throw them out that way, so the pigs stop bothering.”

We tear the bag open and pitch the sticky confections as far as we can towards the thicker trees. As hoped, the herd splashes away from us towards their sugary treasure. Between their movement in the water and the tour guide’s feeble steering, we float off course towards a deeper part of the swamp. Time starts to tick, and we begin grumbling.

“Should we call for a rescue?”

“I knew this was a cheap ass tour.”

“We’re going to be late for our lunch reservation now.”

“Ugh, I told you suffering this humidity wasn’t worth the hassle.”

“What a waste of time, we’re demanding a refund when we get back.”

“You know, marshmallows probably aren’t even good for pigs.” “What if we get eaten by alligators?” The kid asks.

At this, our guide finally acknowledges us again. “Oh, gators don’t actually swim this area that often. Most of ‘em hate tourists. Just a minor motor issue, it’ll rev up any sec—hey, let’s all look to your left and I’ll tell you all about our state tree, the cypress!”

Naturally, we lean to our left to squint at what must be so interesting about trees, but the kid immediately leans right. He gasps, drawing our gazes to see what must be so bad over there. It takes a moment for us to pick it out from the rest of the nature. Our tour guide winces, fists his hand over his frown.

Several yards away, caught beneath a storm-struck cypress, algae festers in the open organs of a hog. An alligator chews on its hide. From the throaty cries we drift close enough to hear, the hog is still alive as its being eaten. None of us can look away. We can’t even move to cover the kid’s eyes.

The gator closes teeth over the mossy circumference of kidney, chomps off a gangrenous hoof. The pig wails. Intestines pool out into the water, wrap around scaled tail like a fungal growth. A rock-hard bezoar rolls out in brown blood. Taking the belly into jaw, the gator halves it like an oyster shell, reveals the mushy white inside. The pig screams as the alligator swallows its mid-digested marshmallows, all earth-rot and fluff.

We’re mere feet away but neither animal seems to care. After a mighty bite to weak-beating heart, the pig’s head is choked down the alligator’s marsh-sticky neck and dies. Our boat rears on. The guide speeds us away, choppy on the thick water, but the airflow cools our sweat-broken faces. We finally close our eyes and murmur complaints about not getting that on video. The kid sits quietly in his seat, staring at the floor the whole ride back. We depart onto dry land again, exchanging relieved small talk about our various bar-and-grill reservations and vacation itineraries and Groupon activities up next. No one says anything about the kid leaving with his life jacket still on.