**A Suitable Replacement**

Brits took advantage of the Sun whenever is arose. It didn’t rise often. Well, it rose, but you’d be mistaken to think that it didn’t. Grey, cloudy skies were as expected as much Werther’s Originals in the dashboard of an OAP’s hatchback.

But rarely, once in a blue moon, on the odd occasion, whenever the clocks struck thirteen… there was the Sun! And even rarer, Sun without a cloud to be seen. Rarer *still,* the temperature reaching over a mild twenty-five Celsius.

On this most rare occurrence, an alligator would be a fool not to take advantage for a jolly good bask. Darla, a recent arrival to the glorious British Isles, had been waiting for this day for some time. She’d been so excited that she’d made enough plans to infiltrate the Guggenheim! Exact timings, precise positioning… she had even decided what angle to sit at, and at what time she would roll over to sun the scutes along her back.

She was actually in a good mood for once! After two years in her new neighborhood, she’d solidly established a reputation as a grumpy, bloated nuisance. A gator of her age and looks was expected to express some level of sass, sure, but Darla took the biscuit. She took a lot of biscuits, literally, too.

But anyway, I’m going off on a tangent… I just… can’t help but describe such a bizarre specimen. I think it’s appropriate, however, because she was about to encounter a particularly bizarre conclusion to her much-awaited adventure in the Sun.

Do I spoil the ending? Hmm… Well, you probably already know what happens. I’d be naïve to believe that you came to this story without certain expectations in mind.

So here’s your spoiler, I suppose: This gator is going to get inflated today. Like a balloon. A blimp. God, I love those words… Just typing them brings about such pleasing images to mind!

I’d better get to the story. I didn’t expect to be writing with this style, but I guess it just… happened. Seemed right at the time!

Without further ado, let’s discover how Darla’s wonderful plan for a simple basking ends up with her cartoonishly swollen. It involves everybody’s most horrific nightmare: Kids.

Darla wasn’t the only one waiting for the Sun’s re-emergence. Hordes of children materialized like tsunami reaching the shore of some unassuming coastal village, flooding every part of the town that was in some way fun or inviting, turning everything once good into a loud, obnoxious wasp nest. *At least they don’t sting,* Darla thought.

Needless to say, she was wrong.

And right there, in the perfect basking spot that Darla had spent months thinking about, hours and hours examining for its suitability to the task, was a big, colourful, and downright disgusting, bouncy castle, complete with hyperactive, violent juveniles.

The thing was huge, bigger than any bouncy castle she’d ever seen. And it was there. On. Her. Spot.

Her annoyance was immeasurable. Who would dare force her to sit fifteen feet from a position that she’s so clearly reserved! I mean, come on! She marked it with a pebble! Shouldn’t it have been obvious?!

But Darla wasn’t a stupid gator. Well, she was, I guess, but she was at least smart enough to have a Plan B. A second spot, not quite as glamourous as the first but as least somewhat acceptable.

She unraveled her basking mat and laid it out on the recently-cut grass. Before going any further, she looked around at the proximate environment. Kids. Parents. It was a busy setting, like a beach at the height of Summer. That aggravated her greatly, and rumours of the British being afraid of the Sun had been greatly exaggerated, so it seemed.

But why throw the baby out with the bathwater? She could at least take advantage and warm up her cold-blooded form. Maybe then, she could finally garner to energy to get some exercise and shed some of the extra pounds. Stones, even.

She pulled off her golden skirt to reveal her bikini. It could barely restrain her plump breasts and plumper backside. Out in front, her scaly belly protruded and sloshed, a metaphorical beacon to the otherwise dignified denizens around her.

At least the Sun had stuck to the plan. Such a reliable friend! She sat down on her fat arse, and then rolled onto her back, her stomach and breasts wobbling like a jelly above her. She was comfortable, and could forget about all the annoyances around her.

Of course, that didn’t last long. With the skies completely clear, she never expected shade. But it came, a maddening coldness that came over her lower half. She grumbled and opened her eyes. Still no clouds.

The shade was coming from another source. She lifted her head to stare over her plentiful bosom and located the guilty child standing there, looking right back at her and swinging its arms aimlessly, one of those annoying moments that children do.

“You’re in the way of the Sun,” Darla growled. “What the hell do you want?”

The child decided to casually insult her, rather than answer her question. “Why are you so fat?”

Darla’s reptilian eyes widened in rage. She looked up and down the child. They were a mammal, of course. What kind? She didn’t care. It was annoying and covered in fur. No more detail was necessary.

“Get out of here, you hairy little beast!”

The child pulled a face of indecipherable emotion and then ran off, surely to irritate another sunbather.

Whatever. The shade had gone, so Darla could go back to relaxing. She sighed happily and rested her head back down, shuffling slightly to get comfortable again. She wouldn’t let some stupid kid ruin her day. She was above that, of course.

She could just relax… nice and happy… get nice and warm…

Something slammed and pressed into her huge gut! The heavy weight took her by complete surprise, and the intense pressure that hit her stomach dislodged a large bubble of gas!

*“BUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRP!!!”*

The kid bounced back off. He’d jumped on her belly! The devil! When she bolted up to yell, she noticed that everybody in the near vicinity was gawking at her. Her belch must have been heard by the old park. Some people were laughing.

Nobody more so than the evil little spawn who’d forced it out of her by pouncing on her sensitive belly.

“You’re so fat!” the kid announced, jabbing a finger in her direction. “They brought *two* bouncy castles!”

Darla was beyond rage! She just wanted to crush that little twerp!

But even she wasn’t evil enough to attack a child. She could do nothing. She just snapped her jaws threateningly and yelled, “Leave me alone, you stupid, stupid little freak!”

The kid ran off again, but now Darla couldn’t relax. How could she, when that kid could jump on her big belly again? It was so embarrassing! People all around were staring at her, and even though she had high opinions of her appearance, she was starting to feel very self-conscious.

*What a horrible little… How can I pay him back?*

She was done basking. Nothing would make her happier on that day than getting revenge. Nobody humiliated her and got away with it!

For a while, she watched, observing the environment for the ideal way of achieving vengeance. Eventually, the child went to the *actual* bouncy castle.

*Perfect.*

She packed up her basking mat and did her best to seem inconspicuous. Her task wouldn’t be easy with so many people still watching her. Harder still would be doing it without the bouncy castle attendant watching.

The fat gator waddled away like she was leaving north of the park, passing the castle for the quickest route. She caught the eyes of the attendant. He must have been the owner, rather than some dorky teenager hired to stand there pretending to care. He was a bull, and a large one at that. His shoulders were twice the width of his waist, and his muscles looked ready to burst from the navy blue polo shirt he wore. His eyes found hers, and he glared like he knew something was up. Maybe he just always looked like that. Either way, she needed to manage the risk.

She walked behind the bouncy castle, well out of the bull’s line of sight. She waited for a while, giving time so that he’d think she’d left long ago.

She left it too long. One of the kids bounced onto the side of the castle. She saw hairy arms wrap around the highest horizontal tube, and then a head appear between them.

The child recognized her immediately. “Hey! Hey! That fat gator’s here! The fat gator’s here!”

There came a chorus of scrabbling limbs and screeching high-pitched noises. More kids jumped onto the side of the castle, and soon five of them were all staring down at Darla.

They barraged her with insulting words and noises.

“Fatty fat! Fatty fat!”

“You need to lose weight! You look like a planet that’s *really* fat! You make planets look not-round!”

“Burp again!”

“I think she’s going to fart!”

The kid that made that last prediction started blowing raspberries. The rest, like sheep, followed. Five kids blowing raspberries, making fun of her weight!

Darla lost all control at that moment. She didn’t care about what would happen anymore. She would make those kids pay!

“Oh, yeah?” she growled back at them. “You want to ruin my day? How about I ruin yours?!”

She reached forward with her sharpest claw and stabbed it into the castle’s side. It *popped* loudly! She dragged her claw back with force, and soon the hole was more than enough to bring the whole thing down.

The kids started jeering and screaming. The air was awash with such horrendous noise. She gave them one victorious flick of her tail and swaggered away, pleased with the victory she’d garnered.

But her impulsiveness was her downfall. As the bouncy castle shrank and flattened against the grass, the kids decided that they should get the owner to take care of the nuisance gator. They cried – some genuinely, some not – bringing a tearful request to the bull who was suddenly wondering why his castle had collapsed.

“Whoa, now!” he said, trying to decipher the chorus of messages. “One at a time! What happened?”

The spokesman – the kid who’d jumped on her belly previously – told him, “It was the gator that did it! That fat, mean gator! She popped the castle with her claws and then she went away!”

“And you saw her do this?!”

The kids confirmed the statement unanimously. That was enough for the bull to conclude that she must have had something to do with it. He already didn’t like the look of her. Now, he didn’t like the sound of her, either.

“Where’s the hole?” he asked the kids.

They pulled him eagerly around to the back of the castle, still screaming their accusations as if he needed constant reminding of the perpetrator. They pointed to a gaping hole in the castle material, and he investigated it closely.

“That’s not an accidental burst,” he concluded. “Looks like a claw, after all! Thank you for telling me, children. Now, where did she go?”

They indicated for him. Fortunately, Darla was still visible, close to the edge of the park. She wasn’t a great runner, and looking at the size of her rear end, the bull wasn’t surprised.

“So, that’s her,” he said with a bullish snort. “Alright, kids, you stay here. I’ll get her to come and explain herself. I’ll be right back.”

The bull trotted after the gator, who was none the wiser. She was so wrapped up in her perceived victory to care about what was going on. She’d even forgotten to put her clothing back on, waddling happily away from the park in her tight, straining bikini, her thick tail waving merrily behind her. It was an easy target for the bull quickly catching up to her.

Just as she was about to step off the grass, she felt his firm grip around the tip of her tail. She span around, almost losing her balance. The bull held on comfortably, far stronger than her pull. “Hey! What the…?!”

“You…” the bull growled. “You popped my bouncy castle, didn’t you?!”

He towered over her by at least a foot, and his bulky figure left her coated in shadow. Suddenly, she didn’t feel so victorious.

“Uh… no?” she said unconvincingly.

“Come with me. Now.”

He pulled, and despite her best efforts, she couldn’t resist his power or force him to release her tail. She yelled at him, “Hey, get off of me! Let go of my tail! I’ll call the police!”

“You’re lucky that *I* don’t call the police!” he countered. “Do you have any idea how much that castle costs me? That’s my business! It’s the first day of the year I’ve been able to get it out, and you go and pop it! It’s bloody ridiculous! Goddamn Americans!”

“Get off me! I’ll bite you!”

“Oh, you will, will you?” he asked with a confident chuckle. “Believe me, you fat reptile, you don’t want to do that.”

“Are you threatening me?!” she squeaked.

“You threatened me first,” he accurately stated. “And I’m an eye-for-an-eye type of guy. You’re lucky I don’t pop *you*. You look about ready to burst, let’s be honest.”

He managed to drag the writhing, squirming gator back to the cheering group of kids. He swung her around by her tail and made her face them. They crowded around, taunting and jeering at the foul reptile.

The bull showed her off like a trophy, wearing a pleased grin. When the crowd quietened down, he said to Darla, “Well? I think you owe these kids an apology.”

She snarled angrily. “Apology for what?”

“For popping our bouncy castle!” one of the kids shouted.

“You popped it with your claw, fatso!” agreed another.

“Did not.”

“Did, too!” the mob countered.

“Did not!”

“Did, too!”

She wasn’t going to win, and she could tell from the bull’s face whose side he was on. So she had to resort to a second tactic. She pointed a finger at the kid who’d jumped on her before. “That one! He jumped on me! And he laughed at me!”

“I thought you were another bouncy castle,” the child replied with a mocking smile.

The bull shrugged. “Easy mistake to make.”

“He called me fat!” she continued.

“And that’s why you popped my castle?!” the bull retorted. “Somebody teases you and you decide to destroy *my* property?!”

Darla blinked. “Well, yeah… isn’t that normal over here?”

“Maybe in the States,” the bull replied. “But no. Not over here. Now are you going to apologise to these kids or not?!”

“No!” she huffed, crossing her arms over her breasts.

The children booed. The bull narrowed his gaze, tightening his grip on her tail.

“And will you pay for the damages for my castle?” he demanded.

“Why should I?”

The bull had had enough with her. There was no use in arguing with the rotten reptile. He looked at the kids again, intrigued by the suggestions that they made.

“I think we should throw eggs at her!”

“We should tie her to a tree!”

“We should find some ants and then… and then make her eat the ants, and then… then we make her eat soil!”

“We should throw her into the Sun, like in that book!”

Darla huffed. “That was a *crocodile,* you little brat! I am *not* a crocodile!”

“You’re all the same, you reptiles,” the bull commented.

He noticed that one child wasn’t saying anything. Instead, he raised his hand like he was in class. It was the kid who’d riled up the gator in the first place; a wolf. The bull permitted him to speak with a wave of his hand.

“I think,” the kid started, “that we should use *her* as a bouncy castle!”

The others all thought it a grand idea. The bull chuckled heartily and yanked the gator’s tail. “What do you think?”

“I have a very sensitive stomach!” she argued. As if that made any difference.

“Make her a bouncy castle! Make her a bouncy castle!” the kids cheered.

“We’ll bounce on her big fat belly!” one of them elucidated.

“Now, now, kids,” the bull laughed. “She’s only fat enough for only, oh, maybe four kids at a time.”

“Stop that!” Darla whined.

“Insults are the least of your issues,” the bull hissed in her ear.

“We should make her bigger!”

The bull laughed again, seeking the child who’d shouted that out.

“Yeah! Make her as big as the bouncy castle was!”

“Then we can *all* bounce on her!”

The idea was an amusing one for the bull, and he smirked at the thought of a literal bouncy castle made of gator. “Great idea, kids,” he spoke. “But I don’t think we can-”

“Yes, we can!” cried the wolf kid. He bounded over to the remains of the castle and pointed firmly at the huge block pump. It was a big grey industrial unit. Certainly powerful. It was blowing futilely into the tube of the popped castle. “Fill her up with this!”

The kids cheered again. “Fill her up! Fill her up!”

Who was the bull to deny the kids their dream? After all, their day would be ruined if they didn’t have a bouncy castle to play on! He got a firmly grip on her tail, and before she could react, his other hand grabbed the back of her neck. He hoisted her up, showing incredibly strength to lift such a weight clean into the air. Darla squirmed and wailed, but there was nothing she could do.

“You can’t be serious! No! Stop!” she yelped.

He carried her over to the pump, dropped her onto the ground and held her down. She writhed beneath him as he turned off the pump and removed the tubing for the original bouncy castle.

Darla gazed ahead at the black hole. That pipe didn’t look fun to her. Not at all. But the children were having an absolute blast, enthusiastically cheering on the bull as he retook his grip of the gator’s neck and tail. He swung her once, twice…

All the while, she begged for mercy. “Don’t! No, Stop! Nooo-MMPH!!”

He thrust her forward, and her snout entered the deep, intimidating pipe, lodging snugly inside. Her eyes stuck out just before the rim. She kicked with her legs and her tail, but to no avail.

“Mmmph! Mm-mmmf!”

Darla’s muffled, indecipherable moans did nothing to garner anybody’s sympathy. In fact, they laughed, and some prodded at her fat gut. Others started to film with their smartphones. Now others were arriving, too, kids and parents alike. Nobody cared for the plight of the horrible, rude gator. They wanted to see her punished for her cruelty.

“Ready, kids?!” the bull called excitedly.

A raucous cheer was a clear vote in the affirmative, and without further hesitation, he slammed down the pump’s switch.

The pump was slow to start, but that gave everybody an opportunity to witness the start of the bloat in slow motion. Darla’s muffled moans became muffled yowls. Her eyes bulged with a combination of shock and pressure, and her cheeks, already puffy and round, gradually doubled, tripled, quadrupled in size. It was like she’d stored a jawbreaker in each, and those jawbreakers were swelling up!

Then her throat bulged as her reluctance to swallow the air failed. The bulge travelled down her body, speeding up just as the pump did. The bulge found her backside, and once there…

*FFRRRRT!!!*

The kids groaned and laughed simultaneously. But Darla had no concern for embarrassment at that point. Rather, she was more focused on the increasing whir of the pump as it reached full speed. It roared like a lion, pumping gallon after gallon of cold air into the waiting vessel. The gator swelled, expanding outwards like a standard rubber balloon, only covered in scales and wriggling limbs. Her bulbous fat, once soft and squishy, became tight and rubbery. It rounded, and soon she had the same consistency as a football, her scales like the creases where the fabric was sewn together.

That’s *soccerball* to you Americans…

The bull saw a potential flaw in the design of his new bouncy castle as the gator continued swelling up. She appeared to be growing spherical – not an ideal design for a bouncy castle. He jogged away and toward his truck, an idea in mind.

Nobody else wanted to take their eyes away from Darla. It was like something out of the cartoons! She groaned now, too weak to do anything more , her face scrunched by her globular cheeks and the pressing of her body behind her. Everything distinguishing about her was quickly being swallowed by the great sphere of her bulk. She felt weightless, though of course she hadn’t lost any. She must have been over ninety-percent air by that point!

Her claws wiggled, merely stumps above a straining wall of green. Her tail tip wiggled, most of it having been swallowed up, assimilated by the rest of her. It was amazing that her bikini remained steadfast, though nobody could quite tell if the terrible creaking noises came from that or from the ballooning reptile instead.

Those in the crowd closest to the burgeoning blimp began to poke at her sides, testing for her tautness and pressure. Some took selfies or family photographs in front of the amazing spectacle. An ice cream van pulled up close-by to take full advantage of the park’s newest sensation.

And when the bull returned, the gator was almost full to capacity. The creaking was most definitely now coming from her stretching skin, threatening to snap open like an elastic band bearing a tonne weight. The bull tested her side and, satisfied, turned off the pump. It slowed back to silence, allowing the noise of the crowd to once again become the sound that filled the air.

A round of applause circulated. Taken aback, the bull performed a short bow, before he started to put into place some safety equipment. The children were desperate to be the first to play on the new bouncy castle, but he had to tell them to be patient. It would be worth the wait, he explained.

He asked for some help from the parents in the crowd, and together, they build a makeshift cage out of standing poles and nets they’d fetched from his van. They placed safety mats all around her, and locked her to the ground with big, thick ropes tied around what remained of her limbs and her snout. She squeaked in defiance as he tied the rope around her mouth, but there was absolutely nothing she could do to stop him.

He attached some sheets to the inside of the bouncy castle so that the kids wouldn’t fall down the sides and get stuck between her girth and the netting. From inside the castle, it looked like the shallow top of a green, scaly dome, but when you stood and looked from a distance, you could see her whole bloated form nestled within the contraption

Finally, he borrowed a ladder from a nearby scaffolder, who was more than happy to join in the fun as payment. With everything in place, the kids were free to jump on in! They were overjoyed!

But before that, of course, the bull sneakily added fifty pence to the price of entry… Why not, eh?

Though, there was yet one more issue with his new castle.

“Mr. Bull! Mr. Bull!” the wolf kid called, running around the circumference of the inflated reptile. “The castle’s leaking! The castle’s leaking!”

“It is?” he hummed, grabbing for his puncture repair kit. “Please show me.”

The child led him around to the back of the castle – though nobody could really tell what was front or back anymore – when he discovered the cause of the leak.

FFRRT!!! Frrrrt! FFRT!

He laughed. “Good spot, kid. You run along, and I’ll fix this leak.”

He dropped his kit to the grass and opened it up, shaking his head with a smirk. “Should have foreseen this. Oh well, I’m always prepared.”

From the kit, he lifted a large, bullet-like peg. It was meant for holding the castle to the ground, but it would be just as useful here, he imagined.

All the way on the other side, one child looked up at Darla’s bloated face at just the right moment to see her suddenly go cross-eyes and her cheeks bulge just that little bit more. He thought nothing of it.

Oh, what a rotten situation that gator was in. It was good news for her new owner, though. His profits doubled in no time. He promised to bring his new castle back every year, and maybe he’d even keep the business going all year round!

Though, there was one good outcome from this for poor Darla. At least she was in her preferred basking spot, after all.