

## BENEATH THE SWAMP

I've heard a lot of conspiracy theories about the Everglades City earthquake.

*Florida is tectonically stable.* That's true.

*The government was testing a superweapon.* That's not true.

Still, I admit that most of the theories play off legitimately peculiar facts and murky circumstances. The government was doing something there before the quake. There was an oddly quick response and developed evacuation plan from the National Guard. And there was very little mainstream media coverage of the disaster. Conspiracy theorists descended upon these facts like wolves fighting over scraps.

But you know what I don't see mentioned in the internet forums? You know what never gets brought up in those late night 4chan threads? The injury count. I see the list of fatalities all the time. 53 men, women, and children, all wiped from the Earth. 53 deaths.

0 injuries.

Ask yourself how that happens. How could dozens of people could be killed by falling debris and car accidents, and not a single one be treated for a serious medical issue? They either got out unscathed or they died.

I know how. I was in Everglades city two days before the incident. I'm going to sound insane, crazier than the conspiracy theorists, but this is the truth.

I was 18 years old. My parents wanted a romantic cruise to kick off their post-childrearing years, and even though I wasn't *quite* out of their hands, they figured it wasn't

worth waiting until I went to college. So I got dumped at my grandma's cabin in the Middle of Nowhere, Florida, for all of June and most of July. I wasn't too bummed, because the swamps around the house were perfect for catching fish and observing alligators, and I had my own little raft.

It got a bit lonely sometimes, because Everglades City was 25 minutes away, with a population of about 300 people. All quiet, churchgoing busybodies too, and no woman under the age of thirty. Shame. But I had my notebook, tackle box, and adventurous spirit, a combination that kept me going.

It was June 15th when the trees first shifted. My grandma actually noticed it first.

"Lloyd, does something about the backyard seem off to you?"

I didn't even glance up from my cereal. "No, Grandma." But when I walked out the backdoor, fishing rod in hand, something was definitely wrong. It took me a second, but then I registered what had happened. The thin, twisted pines that grew in the woods behind my grandma's place were about five feet closer to the house. All of them.

From what I could see, the treeline had shifted for all of our neighbors too, thousands of feet down the road. The dirt in between the house and the trees was raised, like the entire ground near the trees pushed towards the house. It was hardly noticeable without inspection- just enough to really unnerve me, like the forest was advancing upon us.

I continued on my way, noting that the "shift" in the trees seemed to be about 50 feet wide, and there was a small ditch where the earth had moved apart. After I had left the dry ground behind and began happily fishing, I forgot about the trees. But when I grounded my raft

and walked back to my grandma's house for the night, I felt the ground shake. Briefly, barely. But it shook.

The days passed like that for about two weeks. I'd wake up, look at the stretch of land as I walked into the woods, and ignore the occasional tremors. That wide stretch of ground continued to move closer to the house, and the gap between the "shifting" land and the rest of the woods continued to grow. The chasm became so wide that I had to put several planks across it as a bridge.

One day - July 2nd if I remember correctly - I was out on my raft fishing in a large, open area of the swamp. The water in this area was surprisingly clear, and I tried tempting several large bass to grab my lure. I nearly dropped my rod when I heard it. A resonating groan, so deep I felt it vibrating the water around me. It boiled up from the land and hung in the air, a hollow rumble that made my hair stand on end.

It stopped after a minute, and after five, the birds and insects started to sing again. I sat stunned in my raft, before leaning over the edge to glare down at the smooth, flat bottom of the pond.

"What the fuck is going on down there?" I whispered to myself.

That question wasn't truly answered for a while, but I got a few hints. Oddly enough, they came from a local drunk. I was walking out of church on Sunday, July 7th, when I heard a few grumbles by devout old ladies about "that man over there."

I turned to look at a hunched figure against the church wall. He was mumbling about the apocalypse, saying stereotypical catchphrases like "the end is near." I felt a little bad for him, but

prepared to continue with my day. That's when I heard him say, "The ground won't stop moving."

Curious, I walked over to him. "What did you just say?"

"Uhh, nothing, man," he stammered. "I was gonna leave, I ain't doing nothing."

"Relax. What did you say about the ground moving?"

He slurred his words. "Listen, boy. There's things out in the swamps, all sorts of things. They talk about alligator men, there ain't no alligator men. But there's gar people, men with the faces of gar and scales on their body."

I remember thinking that the man was clearly batshit crazy. I turned and walked back to my concerned grandma. From behind me, I heard him say it.

"There's giants buried here."

The rumbling continued throughout the next week, after which the forest always became silent for several minutes. I lost sleep, staring at my ceiling wondering what was out there.

My memory around one incident is hazy- it might have been a dream- but I recall going into the kitchen around 2 AM one night and seeing the ground in the backyard swell. As in, the entire portion that had been inching towards the house- it slowly expanded upwards and then fell back.

After several nights of being unable to sleep, I decided to go out and fish at midnight. It wasn't my brightest idea, but I had to get out of that creaking house, where the forest crept up on me and the ground shook my bed, even if that meant going into the swamp. I'd always felt more comfortable on the water.

So I grabbed a flashlight and my gear and headed out into the woods. I felt a definite slant when I walked over the planks. The shifting ground had moved upwards over time, that was for sure. It took me more than the usual ten minutes to reach my raft, moored at the edge of the clear, still expanse of water.

As I paddled to the middle of the lake, I noticed two things. First, that the moon was very bright - a huge, luminous orb that made the bottom of the lake as visible as my hands. And second, that the swamp was absolutely silent. No frogs croaked. No cicadas buzzed. Nothing.

I felt uneasy. It was never this quiet. The water was never this still. The pond was never this clear. I began to turn back, and in doing so, looked at the bottom of the pond.

In the smooth silt, to my left, there was a crease. A deep wrinkle that stretched under my raft. The realization hit me.

The greyish bottom of the pond was not silt, or mud, or stone. It was mottled, and too unbroken by natural features like rocks. It was skin.

And then the crease opened into an enormous eye.

It was easily 25 feet across, gold except for a monstrous, horizontal pupil. That black pit seized me with terror, and I couldn't move as it slid back and forth. It must have seen my raft floating above it, and for a second, I thought I was about to die. But then the mottled skin gradually pulled back together. The moon illuminated the golden bands of the iris and sunk into the black hole of the terrifying pupil until that vast eyelid drifted shut.

I didn't move for an hour. It was only when my raft bumped against the shore that I found the courage to leap out of it and run home. I waited until 6 AM to beg my grandmother to drive far away, and we drove up to my parent's house in Kentucky for the rest of the summer.

Mere days after our departure, the Everglades City earthquake occurred, killing 53 and injuring 0.

I don't know about the people in the government. But I'm the only regular civilian who ever saw that thing and lived. I don't know what its body looked like. Maybe it had tentacles, maybe it was a monstrous worm, fuck it, it might have even been humanoid. I don't know. But it was *miles* long. There's a lot I don't know. But there's one thing I never *want* to know, even though the question rings in my head every night.

How many more of these things exist?