It was in that time that words came alive for me—they were no longer just letters strung together in some hieroglyphic pattern. Lazy winter evenings would be spent sitting Indian-style on the gold carpet sounding out the words of book titles. Though I rarely saw my parents read anything beyond a newspaper or magazine, our bookshelves were lined with all kinds of gloriously large, tall, thin, leather, and plastic-bound books, their vibrant colors and mysterious language creating a world of adventure for a bookworm-in-training. I remember running my fingers over the spines of the books, feeling their power without understanding their worth.

One title always caught my attention and made me pause, gently slide the book from its resting place, and allow my eyes to linger on the words: “*Lawyers and Other Reptiles*” it proclaimed in neat, block lettering. Underneath the title, a green alligator carrying a brown attaché sported a finely tailored suit jacket and red-striped tie. Automatically, I began utilizing my newfound skill of reading and connecting meaning to words. A lawyer, then, I reasoned, must be a giant swamp-dweller who dresses in nice suits. I gloated to myself about this epiphany for several months, often removing the book and reading the title, gazing curiously at the reptile-man.

In those days, my grandparents were embroiled in a heated legal battle over a land dispute, and they frequently visited their attorney to answer questions and file paperwork. On one such occasion, my parents had to take my grandparents to the lawyer’s office, and I had to tag along.

For the entire car ride, squished between my grandparents in the backseat of Mom’s navy blue Oldsmobile, I kept imagining the image from the cover of *Lawyers and Other Reptiles.* Alligators looked mean, I thought, remembering the sharp, protruding teeth from the picture, and I certainly had never been one for creepy-crawly things.

As we sat in the foyer of the lawyer’s office, I squirmed in the hard chari and wrung my hands in anticipation. Finally, the receptionist, who looked to be in good shape after spending all day with a big alligator, called us to the back conference room.

I grabbed my Mom’s waist and hid my face in her ribs as we trod into the office, afraid of what may be lurking beyond the threshold. Aggravated (in retrospect, probably more at the situation than at me) Mom pulled me away from her and forced me to face my fears head-on.

I stared at the dark hardwood floors until the adults lost themselves in their own worries and my curiosity began to get the best of me. I remember very slowly raising my eyes, being ever-so-cautious to hold my head stationary. Adult murmurs and the occasional sharp word floated around me. First, my eyes rolled up and grazed the broad oak desk, before sliding back onto the floor for fear of what was sitting just beyond the scope of my vision. But, before long, my child’s curiosity won out and my eyes began their journey once again: the broad, well-wrought oak desk, the gold and green mosaic lamp…then, the object of my musings. A tall, thin, grey-haired man sat in a green wingback rolling chair, his suit jacket unbuttoned, tie loosened, and white shirt crisp and clean. “Where are his teeth? And where is he hiding his snout?” As I pondered these mysteries, I examined the lines in his face, the curvature of his nose, the soft cleft of his chin. They had to be there somewhere. How could a man manage to hide all those reptilian features?