

Two animal handlers with distended bellies and cigarettes dangling from their lips hauled goats, chickens, two pigs, and a python from the driveway to the backyard. Jim watched from the kitchen window while his wife baked the cake. He held a glass of whiskey just below his chin, following the men with his eyes. His son watched cartoons in the next room over.

“Would you like to place a bet they find someone’s finger in the pig’s shit this evening?” he asked.

“Stop it.”

He slid behind her and placed his hands on her hips.

“Stop,” she struggled away. “I’m busy.”

He leaned against the counter. “Petting zoo was a good idea,” he said.

“Thank you.”

He could see she was smiling even from behind. “I didn’t know Johnny was into animals”

“Oh, he isn’t. He didn’t even want a party.”

“Why not?” Jim rummaged through a bag of chips.

“He has been complaining about some of the boys in his class. Apparently they’re being mean to him.”

Jim sipped his drink. His wife bent over the oven, sliding the pan of batter in and wiping her hands on her apron. Jim took a sip and rubbed his sleeve over his lips. Placing the glass on the table he went out to the two men in his backyard.

“Would you boys like anything to drink? Two beers?”

Jim walked over to the porch, after fishing around the cooler he produced two wet bottles. He lingered on the lawn as the men took their sips. A smile worked its way onto his face.

“Which of these animals would you say is the fiercest?”

The younger of the two twisted his face and leaned on one leg. “Well, that would have to be old Betty over here,” he waved a limp hand over to a python in a chicken wire cage. “Yep,” he sighed, “She’s one tough old bitch. Saw her eat a rabbit once.”

“Sure don’t look all that tough,” Jim said.

“Oh, but she is,” the older man replied matter of factly, placing his bottle on the cage. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if she could eat one of the children.”

“What’d you say to lettin’ me see her in action?” The men exchanged glances.

“Heck, it’s almost lunch time anyway,” the older one said. “Jeff, go on to the truck and bring the mice.”

He jogged off to the driveway while Jim and the other man with gray hair stood in the yard watching all the animals.

“Got any kids?”

“No sir.”

“Smart man.”

Jeff returned breathless, holding a cage of three mice. The older man then proceeded to drop a squealing mouse into the cage for Betty to enjoy. They all stood back to watch the snake lift its head from its sleeping position and look at her lunch. She sssssss'd in approval before striking the mouse, swallowing it whole.

Jim's eyes bulged. "Can you take her out?"

The older man watched the snake, scratching his chin. "Maybe it would be best to wait for the show."

"I just want to touch her," Jim persisted.

"It's really not a good idea but I can hold her head down while you pet her."

He relented, stroking the hard, slimy skin. Jim flashed a smile before trudging back to the house.



"The guests will be arriving any minute," she told him, running about the house making final adjustments. His son sat, eyes still glued to the television.

"Those are some animals out there," he said. "Why don't you go and check 'em out?" But his son didn't shift his gaze from the screen. "Hey, can you turn off the TV for a second?" The boy turned the volume down a few notches. "I want to give you your gift before everyone gets here."

Johnny shrugged and his father went to the closet where he had stashed the present. When he returned, the kid was already absorbed back into the screen. Jim turned it off himself and handed the wrapped box to his son. Johnny tore the blue paper away.

"It's a mitt. Ya know--for baseball." The boy picked up the glob of leather and turned it over in his small hands. "I figured we could get some tosses in this summer." The boy held the thing in his hands and stared into the pocket. Finally, he looked up at his dad and told him thank you. Jim went over to the bar and made another drink as he heard the television come back to life behind him.

Outside in the yard the two men were finishing their own preparations. The goats bleated, pigs oinked and all other conceivable animal noises drifted into the house. Jim had downed another drink and felt hopeful. It wasn't everyday that one had a zoo in one's yard.

The guests began pouring in and Jim was starting to get in the swing of things, conversing loudly with the other adults, even going back to the two men and handing them some more beers. He looked around the party and swelled his chest.

The yard was small, surrounded by a wooden fence. At the far end were the animals, protected from the sun by two willow trees each in a corner of the lawn. Streamers hung from the branches. On the small deck attached to the house where Jim was to grill burgers and hot dogs, his wife carried dips and snacks out to the yard. Guests entered through the side entry, just in front of Jim's grill.

The neighbors were the first to arrive, all with big smiles and children in tow, all bearing gifts. The kids ran to the animals squealing, leaving the adults to chat on the deck. The handlers sat by the animals drinking. It was bright colors and shimmering smiles all around.

Jim was watching his son feed a carrot to a baby goat when Brian Henderson, who lived across the street, clapped his hand into his palm and squeezed tightly.

“Great to see ya, Jim. How’re you holding up?”

“Fine, fine. You?”

“Great. Claudia is eight months pregnant so she couldn’t make it. Max is getting ready for little league and Lisa is playing basketball.”

“Very athletic bunch.” Brian grinned and Jim flipped the burgers.

“What’s your plan this summer?”

“Oh, just the same. Hanging around.”

“And Johnny?”

“Well, I was thinking baseball camp,” Jim sipped his beer.

“Is Johnny getting into baseball?”

Jim looked at the yard. There were only three boys there including Johnny. He wondered if there would be any more.

“Oh, sure.”

“Position?”

“Third base.”

“Well that’s great to hear.”

A couple guys came over and joined them. Jim stayed quiet listening to their jokes.

Jim looked around the yard for his son. He found the boy with his eyes standing with his back against the goat’s fence facing three other boys who must have shown up recently. Jim stepped down off the patio and edged closer across the lawn. Once he got in earshot he became aware of his heart beat and his skin began to prickle.

“Johnny got a Barbie for his birthday!” One of the boys shouted and was backed up by the other boys’ laughs. “Johnny doesn’t even know how to throw a ball!” another boy chimed in. Jim watched as his son stared down at the grass just in front of his feet and felt shame flush his cheeks. He turned away and turned back towards his wife who was laughing along with the Ericksons on the patio.

Jim stood alone, his grilling duties fulfilled, sipping a beer when he felt someone at his elbow.

“So I guess Johnny and Heather will be spending a lot of time together this summer.” It was Tina Schoenerger, Sarah’s friend. Her face was pulled taut by the tight bun in her hair. She was in her neon Lululemons, ready for a yoga class at any moment. She seemed to be always in motion, a peppy and infuriating ball of energy.

“Oh? How’s that?”

“Didn’t Sarah tell you? Johnny is taking a pottery class with Heather. Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Pottery?” He imagined his son at the pottery wheel, discussing the last episode of *The Bachelor* with Heather Schoenberger.

“Oh yes, Heather adores it. They will be making bowls and pots and even vases. Lovely, isn’t it?” Spots of color blurred his vision. The sun was so damn bright.

“Sarah! I was just talking to Jim about pottery class. I cannot get over how great it is going to be!”

“Johnny is so excited,” she smiled.

He saw himself feeding Tina’s blonde hair to the goats. He grinned imagining her awful screaming.

“So, Honey,” Jim cut in, “I had an idea about blowing out the candles.”

“Yeah?”

“I thought maybe we could wrap Betty around Johnny’s shoulders as he blew ‘em out.”

“Who’s Betty?”

“The snake. Sorry, the python. Over there.”

Tina seemed amused. She was ready to make some wisecrack.

“I don’t think so,” Sarah said.

“Yeah,” Jim spoke fast so Tina couldn’t butt in. “Probably right.”

Jim left the women and approached the handlers. They would understand his plan. They watched the goats with beers in their hands. Jim asked them how they were enjoying the party. He wanted to be on their good side.

“Fellas,” he said, patting them on their shoulders. “That python is really something.” They nodded in agreement. “I’ve got a great idea I think you two will love.”

He told them that it was his son’s tenth birthday; a big milestone in a boy’s life. He told them how his son adored snakes, how it was his favorite animal and how much it would mean for him to blow out his candles with the help of good ol’ Betty. “So,” he proposed, “why don’t we wrap that python around him when it comes time to sing happy birthday?”

The men looked at each other.

“I don’t know, Jim.”

“It is going to be fantastic! No one could ever beat it.”

Jim dug his hands into his jean pockets. He pulled out a brown leather wallet and began shuffling his bills. “How much will it take?”

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When the time came to sing happy birthday Jim corralled his son over to the handlers. The boy protested to his father that he didn’t want to. He hated snakes.

“Please, Dad,” Johnny said. The boy’s lip quivered.

He told his son he would get him a pottery wheel, he would get him whatever he wanted. He was spouting nonsense and he knew it.

Jim approached his son with the snake on his shoulders. His son's eyes bulged. Betty let out a loud rasp when Jim lifted and lowered it onto Johnny's bony shoulders. His body seemed more than frail, his ropelike arms slowly being wrapped in the ironlike sheen of the snake. The snake seemed to understand its dominance over the boy. Betty's tongue flickered from her mouth, watching Johnny as though he were simply a prop from her cage.

Quickly, Betty wound herself about his torso and fixed her eyes on his. The snake's head dropped and its body wound about his son once more, this time around his neck, coming over his right shoulder and resting there. Jim's heart pounded in his ears. The crowd seemed to shift apprehensively. His son had become half-boy, half-snake. He was thrilled by the image.

Jim glanced around the yard. Everyone was watching. Some of the men laughed in astonishment, too afraid to speak in dissent. He dared not look at his wife.

The happy birthday song had begun and the cake was brought out by Tina and placed before his son and the snake. The singing was strained. Jim sipped his whiskey and crushed ice with his teeth. He stared at his son, at the boy's pale body.

He wanted someone to speak up, to challenge him. When no one did, he pulled Betty off of his son and handed her to the older handler with gray hair. Johnny, crying silently, blew out the candles. The backyard was quiet.

Jim walked inside. He had grown tired of the party. He poured himself a drink and stood at the kitchen counter, staring at his reflection in the stainless steel fridge.