

## Red Rocks

I had lived in Morrison before, so I knew the dangers of rattlesnakes in Red Rocks Park, which is why I decided to do a short hike in the early evening when they would likely be in for the day. I needed to reboot my mind, get a fresh perspective. It seemed I had little time to think anymore. My husband Bob was out to dinner with his daughter, so I knew I could get away for a short while without being questioned. I hadn't talked to anyone; the situation was so weird.

I met my husband in January, an internet date. When I walked into the pool hall that day, I saw him, a tall man with long brown wavy hair standing at the bar with his back to me. I approached him, stood a bit to the side behind him, smiled in the bar mirror in front of him, and said, "Well, if you aren't a long tall drink of water." He acted as if he had never heard that before. How sweet.

He turned around with a big wide toothy smile. His dreamy blue eyes crinkled at the edges. I soon learned he had a whole impressive panoply of different eye expressions for his feelings; one of the things I fell in love with about him. When he reached out his hand to shake mine, I noticed a snake tattoo winding around his arm with the head on the back of his hand.

"So, what's with the tattoo? I am sure there is a great story there."

"I just got this a couple of weeks ago. Snakes are a Native American symbol for transformation."

"Oh, I just thought they were a penis symbol."

He quickly looked up from admiring his tattoo to see if I was kidding. I was... sort of...

We played a few games of pool and realized we were about equal in skill. I was still smoking at the time, and he lit my cigarette from a pack of matches he got at the bar. I was charmed.

The energy between us was as thick as fog. At the end of the night, he walked me to my car. We touched for the first time, and I winced from the electricity bolting back and forth. He leaned me over the driver's side door, gently kissed my lips, and nuzzled and kissed my neck. I was seasick from the intensity. I felt owned and wet.

When I got home that night, I told my daughter, "You would not believe how gorgeous he is, I could just melt into his eyes. He is tall, like 6'5", and you know how much I love tall men."

"Wow, mom, you have been on a lot of dates. I have never heard you talk this way before."

"I know, right? He looks like Eric Clapton. Damn, I am so gone."

That night I had a dream about a snake. It was on his arm; it came to life growing in three dimensions and slowly unwound itself from his arm and coiled in front of me. I was terrified and woke up.

We married in July, and he moved into my house. I lived in a very walkable neighborhood we both loved: restaurants, a coffee shop, a bookstore. Everybody I knew, my teenage kids, friends, family, coworkers were concerned it was too soon. I was in love, and I didn't listen to anyone.

I replayed this in my mind as I walked the dusty, rutted orange trail in Red Rocks Park. The fading blue sky contrasted with the blood-colored rock formations. The trail was very familiar, one of my favorites; the view was panoramic. I took my time and turned around 360 degrees to appreciate it all. I was primarily alone, with few people on it this time of the evening. I enjoyed its beauty and felt the dissonance of this moment and the rest of my life. Whenever I needed to get away to think, this was the place I gravitated toward. After these walks, I usually felt clearheaded and calm.

We had been married for a couple of months when things started happening, I couldn't quite figure out. About once a week, Bob had these unpredictable eruptions of extreme anger, for very petty things, or so I thought. I often didn't know what I had done or said to set him off. But he was always unequivocal that it was my fault. I spent a lot of time apologizing to get back to the status quo. Arguing with him only made it worse. After my capitulation, we would have mind-blowing sex.

Lately, these situations were getting stronger, closer together, and escalated faster. One day he was very angry with me for something to do with the family plan on our phone bill. I didn't understand why he was upset; we had agreed on the plan months ago. My two kids and his daughter were on our plan, and we had unlimited minutes. He threw his phone across the room and hit me in the eye with it.

"Omigod honey, I am so sorry. I wasn't even looking where I threw it. Are you ok? I will get an ice bag."

I had a puffy eye and a bit of a bruise the next couple of days, nothing serious, but in the back of my mind, there was a stirring. The people at work looked skeptical when I told them about the accident.

Recently there was the car door incident. He was angry about the concert tickets I had bought for us.

"You should have consulted me. Those were expensive. I told you we need to be more careful with our money."

"I know you love Stevie Nicks, and I didn't think we would ever get another chance. It's your birthday present. "

"I don't want it, and I am not going; find someone else to go with you."

He got out of the car, slammed the door, stalked around to my side, and opened the back door. We had just bought groceries, and they were in the back seat on my side. I got out of the car to help. He was getting groceries out. I leaned my hand on the inside of the door to talk to him. He pulled bags out of the car, turned away from me, and with his foot, kicked the door closed behind him with my hand in the door. I screamed, opened the door, pulled my hand out, and slid down to the ground. He instantly kneeled next to me and grabbed my hand to look at the damage.

"Oh no, Val, I didn't realize your hand was in the door. Get back in the car, and let's go to the doc; it looks like something may be broken."

I held my limp hand, cried, and shivered when he touched me.

When we got to the doctor's office, Bob explained what had happened. I had two broken fingers, eight stitches, and a severely bruised hand. Doc set my fingers, put a splint around them, and wrapped my whole hand. I believed Bob's version of the story, but something was uncoiling.

I remembered the Nest camera facing the driveway. It kept 24 hours of video. After he went to work the next day, I pulled up the app and looked for the time of the accident. There he was, getting a couple of bags out of the car and standing, berating me. I walked around the car, had my hand on the inside of the door, trying to calm him down. Then he turned away from me and kicked the car door closed. Sure, it looked just as he had described it to the doc. Then I saw the look on his face after slamming the door before he turned back to me.

That was yesterday, and today was the first chance I had to get away and reflect on what I had seen. I called in sick to work. I said nothing to him. My hand was throbbing, and I had to hold it up for comfort. I tried to imagine my life without him, and all I could see was a big black hole. I loved him so much, my kids loved him, and I was sure he loved me, so why?

I was deeply in my thoughts as I walked, not paying much attention to anything other than the step right in front of me. Sunset was sliding over the top of the hills, and I decided I should turn around and start back. When I did, the diamond-patterned snake appeared before me. I could hear a hiss like air let out of a tire. It coiled slowly, about one foot ahead. I froze and stared at it. Its head bobbed just a bit, and it was looking straight into my eyes. I could not look away, and I could not move. Then it struck and bit my bare leg. It didn't loosen right away, and I sunk to the ground. The snake slowly disengaged and slithered away but not too far.

I knew I had walked a lot further than I meant to, and it would take me a long time to get to my car; no people in sight now. The funny thing was, I didn't feel panicked. I felt calm. It didn't hurt. I felt tired, tired of worrying about Bob's temper, tired of trying to make ends meet, tired of making stupid mistakes, tired of trying unsuccessfully to be the perfect parent. I wanted to rest for a minute. I sat down and laid back, and though my vision seemed to be getting blurry, I gazed at the last of the stunning sunset and the few stars peeking out.

The snake was looking at me from the grass nearby.

I hallucinated. I was a child, carefree, playing kickball in a vacant lot. Graduating from college. Birthing my son. Being at my first husband's deathbed. Moments in my life began rushing by, moments when I felt strong, safe, and unafraid. I could see all the constellations moving around interacting with each other. They made the most beautiful patterns in metallic colors.

I became nauseated. It felt like toxic sludge was coursing through my body. I leaned over and retched in the dirt. It was brilliant green and flowed like lava. It happened again and again, and all the time, the snake watched me. I wasn't afraid. I was relieved. Then I began to cry, sobs which hurt my ribs, as if there were anything wet left in me, it would now come out in my tears. I reached for the snake; it was just out of range but never leaving. I felt naked but not cold. I melted into the dirt, the grass, the sky.

I slept. When I woke up, the sun was rising. I was spent, clean, new, and hyper-aware. My leg had two tiny blue dots. No swelling, no pain. I could move it, and my hand surprisingly didn't hurt. I slowly got up, stumbled, felt a little disoriented, and began to walk down the trail. I stopped and went back. I bent close to the ground, spoke softly, moved the tall grass around,

searching for the snake. All I found was a long flimsy transparent fabric of perfectly formed snakeskin. I gently picked it up and held it to my chest.

It was still barely sunrise when I got to my car. I carefully placed the snakeskin on the seat next to me. I looked at my phone, saw all the calls from Bob, and listened to his vile messages wondering where in the hell I was. I made a couple of phone calls to my brothers and sat in my car with the windows down, taking big breaths slowly in and out. The air was fresh and cool. I once again felt strong, safe, and unafraid.

I waited there about an hour, drifting in and out of a sleepy dreamlike state, then I slowly drove home to a new life.