

Ophidiophobia

It was a good move. When the Dutch girl bent down to peer through the lens, Ben hovered over her. He didn't touch her, but he placed his hand next to hers on the telescope and gazed past her head at the hornbill in the distant tree. She stepped back to offer him a turn, and that's when she made the first contact, colliding with the full length of him. Ben settled a hand on her shoulder as if to steady her, and when he moved to take his turn, his hand slipped down her spine to rest on the small of her back. He leaned sideways around her to peer through the lens, allowing the girl to stay close if she wanted. And of course, she did.

Watching her son flirt with backpackers wasn't what Camille had in mind when she booked the jungle excursion, but after the trauma of his freshman year, she was happy to see such an ordinary moment, even if she wasn't thoroughly convinced by it. She watched as the two young people stepped away from the telescope and started back to join the rest of the group eating alongside the road. As they walked, their arms brushed against each other. Camille could imagine the electricity that passed through that accidental touch, how it shocked them apart and drew them back together. They approached the songthaew, the pick-up truck used to transport them all through the jungle, and as they passed, Camille ducked her head.

Ben saw her, though. He accepted his lunch from the guide, and shaking his head as if to scold her, he sank onto the curb next to Camille while the Dutch girl played it cool on the opposite side of the road.

“Stop studying me.” He grinned and glared at her. “It’s creepy.”

But she couldn’t stop. From the moment he hauled his backpack off the carousel in the airport, Camille had started watching. For what she didn’t know exactly, invisible cracks, a residue. Ben assured her he was fine. He joked and laughed. He even made like a helicopter whenever she started hovering, teasing her concern. He assured her that everyone involved in the shooting had gone through counseling. He was fine. Everything was fine. No worries, Mom. No worries except for the fact that after learning how to dodge bullets, her son had dropped out of college and come running home to mom. Except that home was now on the other side of the world.

Ben shoveled a spoonful of rice and vegetables into his mouth and immediately scowled. “There’s food you eat hot and food you eat cold. Why don’t these people know this?”

“Maybe you should offer to install a microwave on the songthaew.”

He mimed laughing and took another bite. “Thai food does not live up to its reputation.”

“And yet you’re not wasting away.” Camille pinched Ben’s expanded biceps. A year of competitive swimming had encased him in a strength she didn’t recognize. “She seems impressed.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “She thinks it’s sweet that I’m traveling with my mother. You’re like a puppy or a baby. I should use you in Chiang Mai to pick up girls.” He gulped down the last spoonful of vegetables and tipped the container over his mouth to catch any of the rice that still clung to the sides. When he picked up the desert, he eyed it suspiciously, holding the greasy banana leaf at arm’s length. “What’s this?”

“Sticky rice. It’s good. Sweet.” Camille grinned. “Like you.”

He unwrapped the leaf and stared at the small lump of rice. Camille was expecting a comment, but he only shook his head and sighed before shoving the whole thing in his mouth.

His eyebrows lifted.

“See?” she said.

“It’s coconut.” Bits of rice fell from his mouth.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Ben stuck out his tongue, and Camille groaned. When he finished chewing, he glanced across the street. The Dutch girl was definitely watching.

“She thinks I’m twenty-three,” he said.

“Not after that display.”

He pointed at the sticky rice bundle balanced on her knee. “Are you gonna eat that?”

Camille handed over her dessert, and while Ben unwrapped it, she scanned her legs one more time for leeches. At the beginning of the trek, the guides had handed out canvas booties and instructed the hikers to put them on over their socks and pants and to tie them tight around their knees. Considering the heat, nobody wanted the extra layer of clothing, but once they were in the jungle, everybody was glad to have it. Camille had never seen leeches like that. When she was a kid, leeches were slimy things that swam in lakes. They didn’t live in the floor of the forest, and they definitely didn’t stand up straight and leap onto any warm-blooded creature passing by.

“So?” Ben asked. The hikers were starting to stir. Across the road the Dutch girl was twisting her blond hair into a thick coil. “What did you observe? During your recent field study of the mating habits of backpackers?”

Camille shook her head. “You’re not a backpacker. You’re a nineteen-year-old boy visiting his mother. Remember?”

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There were seven people on the tour, but Ben and Camille were the only ones whose native language was English. The French woman spoke some, but her daughter didn’t speak any, so the mother was reluctant to join in a lengthy English conversation. The Dutch girl, Dieke, spoke enough to keep Ben’s interest, which left Camille with a young Spanish couple. They were kind and tried to include her, but after the initial stimulation of the multi-lingual environment, Camille was happy to sit back and listen.

Because Khao Yai National Park encompassed more than 2000 square kilometers, they could only hike so much of it. After a morning tour into the jungle, the majority of their trek was spent on padded wooden benches in the back of the truck. The roads were well paved, so there wasn’t any dust to breathe, only a cool breeze filtered by the jungle canopy. They actually saw more wildlife along the side of the road than they had in the forest. It was as if the animals knew their job and when to perform it. Lek, their guide, kept an eye out and hollered at the driver whenever he spotted them. They stopped to photograph deer grazing around the tents in a camping site and monkeys begging at the side of the road.

The monkeys broke Camille’s heart. As soon as the songthaew pulled to a stop, they leapt onto the hood. Lek advised everyone not to feed them, but it was obvious the monkeys considered the tourists their main food source. One of the females had a baby clinging to her belly, and everyone cooed collectively when they saw it. They stretched out with their cameras at every angle, trying to get the best shot, but the mother knew her job. She stepped into the middle of the road and positioned herself on the yellow line. Slowly, she stood up straight, and with both

arms spread wide, she put her baby on display. Then she sat down, hugged her baby close with one hand, and held out the other for payment.

“Ben, don’t.” Camille reached out and pushed his camera down.

“It’s not natural,” the French mother said, “the behavior. They are a different creature now, no? The contact with people changes them.”

At one point in the afternoon, Lek, who was standing on the back bumper of the songthaew, banged on the roof. The driver immediately braked, but nobody knew why. Both sides of the road were lined with a dense tangle of trees. They didn’t see anything. But Lek jumped down, and with one hand raised, the signal for them to be silent, he crept into the undergrowth. That was when they saw the thin yellow ribbon draped over the branches. Only no one had lost a ribbon.

Lek approached from behind, and with one quick jab, he had the snake by the tail. Every nature program Camille had ever watched showed the handlers holding the snakes behind their heads. It made sense to her. The head was where the fangs were. But as they’d discovered with the bats the night before and the tarantula in the cave and the giant scorpion in the jungle, Lek enjoyed frightening tourists. With the snake writhing to escape his grip, Lek stepped onto the road and beckoned for everyone to join him. No one moved.

“It’s not dangerous,” he promised, and to prove his point, he brought the snake to them.

Camille had been sitting at the end near the tailgate, and when Lek headed toward the songthaew, she instinctively edged back. She should have jumped down when she had the chance, but she didn’t expect him to come any closer. He wouldn’t actually get on the truck with a snake. But he did. He climbed up with one hand on the tailgate to catch his balance and the

other holding the snake out like an offering. Its body bucked and twisted, and when it shot out, trying again to escape, it aimed straight for Camille.

Camille screamed. She leapt back, or up. Somehow she ended up on Dieke's lap. She was scrambling, climbing over Ben's shoulders. Her legs were stuck behind his back, and her torso was sprawled over the Dutch girl.

"She's frightened. Stop!" It was the French mother. Camille assumed the woman's daughter must be frightened as well, that she was protecting her, but when she looked up, the little girl was leaning toward the snake, enthralled.

Chastised, Lek climbed back out of the truck. He apologized and assured them again, several times, that the snake wasn't dangerous, but to be considerate, he walked several feet away before he placed it on the road. Once more he beckoned for those who wanted a close-up view to join him, and when the driver came around to lower the tailgate, everyone climbed out – everyone except Camille. She apologized repeatedly to Dieke and tried to arrange herself upright without jamming an elbow or knee into the poor girl. Ben helped. They both did, but Camille saw the glance they exchanged. She was humiliated. Dieke tried to commiserate by explaining her own fear of flying and how she simply faced it by getting on a plane. "Fear is not such a problem." Camille encouraged her to go photograph the snake while she had a chance.

Lek had released the snake, but he was dancing around it, enraging it from what Camille could tell. Still there was something compelling about his fearlessness. She wondered if Thai culture taught less fear, what it would be like to walk through the world with a degree of trust. Bit by bit, she slid from the far corner back to the tailgate to watch. Every time the snake tried to dart past Lek into the safety of the forest, he waved his palm in front of its face, and each time it reared back. Its body was coiled now, ready to strike, but Lek encouraged them to give it a try.

There were a few tentative giggles, but no one took him up on it. Lek looked up at Camille and gestured for her to join them.

“It is not dangerous. I promise. Not so poisonous.”

His promise gave the snake the opportunity it had been waiting for. It dropped its body to the ground and turned, slithering away from Lek, but there were more people in the way. There was Ben in the way. Camille gasped, but Ben responded automatically. Like Lek, he dropped into a wide crouch and waved his palm in front of the snake. It reared back, a face-off, and a murmur of admiration passed through the circle like “the wave” at a football game.

He’d done it. He’d won them all.

Camille remembered his first touchdown, how he’d come jogging off the field, ten years old and already triumphant. He was bursting with it, but he couldn’t show her, not in front of his friends. When she cheered, he grinned, but he didn’t stop. He ran past her to his teammates, seeking their high-fives. Later, alone at home, he recounted the game for her, over and over, his voice speeding with astonishment and pride. It was hours before the adrenaline wore off, but even then he couldn’t sleep. They made popcorn and watched movies, and when Camille finally surrendered after midnight, curling herself into the corner of the couch, Ben had grinned at her.

“This is the best day ever.”

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Khao Yai was a long day. They had started at eight after the standard backpacker breakfast of scrambled eggs and white toast at the guesthouse, and still there had been a line of songthaews and minivans at the gate to the park. October was high season. Thailand worked on a different schedule than the rest of the world. School started in May at the beginning of monsoon season, and the first semester ended in October at the end of the rains. Every family in Thailand

was on vacation, and it was a perfect time for Khao Yai. After months of monsoon, the park was gorgeous, the green more vivid than ever, the rivers swollen, the animals energized, and except for a few obvious destinations like the visitors center and Haew Suwat Waterfall, it was also large enough to hold them all.

Their last stop was an observation tower. When they pulled into the dusty parking area alongside four other songthaews, Camille was disappointed. The watering hole was supposed to be their big chance to see the elephants, and she didn't know if it was possible with a crowd. Exhausted, the tourists climbed down to stretch and gaze at the scenery, while the drivers talked rapidly on their cell phones, confirming sightings. Camille wandered off by herself to the far edge of the parking area to take in the view.

She was in awe. There was no purpose to this land except to be land. As she gazed at the scope of it, Camille felt the muscles in her face relax, her breath, her mind. The natural world. To think that nothing had ever been built there, nothing ever mined or harvested. The path, a narrow trail of red earth that disappeared over the crest of the first slope, was the only evidence of humans.

Lek called them over, and one by one the groups started down the trail, the guides delaying their departures to allow a gap to form between them. Within minutes it felt like the eight of them were the only people on the planet.

Camille had no idea how long they walked, but she lingered behind, breathing it all in. To her left the grassland sloped down into the intimacy of the jungle, and although she couldn't see them, she could hear the gibbons calling, their slow crescendo like wind-up sirens. To her right, the hills rolled toward slate blue mountains in the distance. The leaves of grass were thigh high and tipped with seeds, and when they caught the breeze, they danced in the light.

Ahead of her Ben and Dieke were talking, and Camille's attention drifted in and out of their conversation. They were reliving the incident with the snake, Ben's voice animated but controlled, cool, as he declared that it was no big deal. He'd rarely seen snakes where he grew up in New Hampshire, but there were all kinds where his mom lived now. He'd seen one on his way to Chiang Mai just last week.

"Do you drive here?" Dieke asked.

"Yeah, sure. A motorcycle."

Camille smiled. Her timid little moped had been upgraded to motorcycle.

When they reached the observation tower, Dieke gravitated toward a group gathered under a tree. Like her, they were tall, solid, and blond. Camille thought their guttural conversation might be Dutch. Like everyone else, they seemed greedy for the shade after the hike across the fields.

The tower was built on a low hill overlooking a natural reservoir. They had reached the end of the grassland, and the jungle was creeping in close. Trees twined together around the water, and on the opposite bank, the forest formed a wall around a lush green meadow. Camille could understand why animals might want to gather there at dawn and dusk. It was a refuge, a place designed for liminal moments.

While most of the tourists milled around at ground level, Ben immediately climbed the stairs to check out the highest view. Camille followed and stepped up to the railing beside him. Behind them more tourists were clambering up the steps, and down below the guides were herding the stragglers toward the tower. Lek waved up at them and pointed across the water. The elephants were coming.

"You've got your camera?" Camille asked.

It was a false alarm. After several minutes, the guides were back on their phones. One of the park rangers was somewhere behind the elephants and had seen them headed toward the reservoir, but apparently, they'd taken a detour. The guides assured the tourists they were still coming, but people were starting to get restless. The Dutch group went back down to stand under the tree while some people perched on the stairs, halfway between hope and giving up. One of the guides started to tell outrageous stories about previous sightings and close calls. He was a natural showman with a booming voice, but only a handful of tourists gathered around him. They'd been sightseeing nonstop for nine hours. It was time for the finale.

When the loud guide gave up on his dwindling audience and started off down the hill, they thought something might be happening, but Camille saw Lek's posture droop. Dieke approached and asked him a question, and in response, he shrugged and pointed her toward the tower.

"What did he say?" Ben asked when she joined them.

"He said maybe. But it's too loud. Too many people."

"But aren't there always people?" Camille asked.

The girl ignored her. "How long do we have to wait here?" she asked Ben.

"I don't know."

Dieke puffed up her cheeks and blew out an exasperated breath. "All we do is wait. We walk and then we sit and wait. We drive and then we sit and wait. We sit on the road. We sit on the truck. We sit at the waterfall." She sneered at the scene around them. "It's boring. They're not going to come." Like a child, she kicked at the floor. "I'm hungry."

Stunned by her outburst, neither Ben nor Camille responded. After a second she huffed and stomped back down the stairs. She found Lek again and threw a similar fit, only louder.

Camille glanced at Ben. “Don’t you have some crackers in your bag?”

“You think that would satisfy her?” The condescension in his voice said he’d already written her off, and the thought that he could dismiss the girl so casually disturbed Camille more than his skill at picking her up.

“She seemed nice,” she said after a moment.

“Seemed.” He dug the crackers out of his backpack and offered her one.

The crackers were stale and too sweet for her liking, but Camille held out her hand for another. “You have to admit it’s been a long day and a long time since lunch. Maybe she has low blood sugar. You could give her a chance, you know. At least spare a cracker.”

Perhaps because there was nothing better to do, Ben decided to take her advice. He went down the stairs to find Dieke, and Camille drifted over to the railing. She wondered if all parents became voyeurs of a sort, watching from the sidelines of their children’s lives, hoping they’d got it right. Dieke accepted a cracker, but it obviously didn’t appease her mood. She was kicking at the short grass near the foot of the stairs and glaring at the forest. Her voice was quieter, but the rant continued. When Ben held out the package to offer another, he kept it at arm’s length. Camille could tell he wasn’t really listening.

There was a commotion at the bottom of the hill, and like grass bent by the wind, they all leaned toward the sound. Camille imagined the scene about to play, a family of small Asian elephants emerging from the jungle into a halo of sunset. She could picture them stopping once they became aware of the people. For a breathless moment, they would all watch each other, a silent appraisal, gauging safety and danger. Camille wondered if it was easier for animals to make that distinction. It had to be. Which is why the elephants weren’t there. Camille realized the elephants weren’t coming, not with a crowd of worn and weary humans waiting.

Instead, there was the loud-mouthed guide climbing up the hill. Holding a snake.

Camille stepped away from the railing. She recognized that ribbon of yellow and the subtle zigzag of brown stripes. It was the same variety Lek had caught earlier.

The crowd split. Half moved closer, and half edged away. When he reached the crowd, the guide started in on stories about near-death experiences with snakes. He claimed to be an expert, but watching him, Camille realized that, unlike Lek, this guide was nervous. He had both hands on the snake, but he kept switching his grip, and when he dropped the head and the snake's body dove and twisted toward his legs, he flinched. So did Camille.

She was glad to be in the tower, and she took another step away from the railing. Only a few people had remained upstairs. On the other side of the tower, the French mother and daughter were watching the sun descend over the land, and Camille joined them.

"He's crazy," the French woman said.

The guide's voice drifted back into Camille's awareness. She glanced over her shoulder. "At least he's down there." She turned back to the woman. "Did you have a good day?"

With an arm wrapped around her daughter's shoulder, the woman nodded. "It's good for her to see different places."

"You're lucky," Camille said to the girl. "Bon chance."

The girl looked confused, and the mother laughed. "Vous avez de la chance."

Camille shrugged. "I was close. High school French was a long time ago."

"Hey!"

Camille turned. It was Ben's voice. The loud-mouthed guide appeared at the top of the stairs. Instinctively, she backed up against the railing. She felt the French woman's hand on her arm. The people in the tower were dividing, moving closer, moving away. The little girl stepped

forward, and her mother reached out to stop her, releasing Camille's arm. Camille edged away. She refused to become hysterical again. She'd had enough humiliation for one day. She just wanted to leave. But the man and the snake stood between Camille and the stairs.

Ben stood behind the man. He was pleading or explaining. Camille saw that, but somehow the moment had been muted. *Leave her alone*, she imagined. *Can't you see she's scared?* Of course he could. He was a bully, and like all bullies, he enjoyed her fear. Lifting the snake over his head, he laughed and stepped closer.

"Flying snake," he jeered.

Camille clambered onto the railing. It was an automatic response, but her movement was all the guide needed. Lowering the snake, he stepped toward her. He held it out. Its body rippled between his hands as if an electric current were pulsing its muscles, and when he released the snake's tail, it coiled in the air. Camille must have whimpered or gasped because Ben leapt forward. He grabbed the guide's arm, but the guide wasn't expecting him. He wasn't confident with the snake. The impact of Ben's hand jarred him, and he dropped the snake. Instantly, it slithered across the floor. Fast. Faster than Camille would ever have imagined.

"Mom!"

She had always known it was irrational, her fear of snakes. If she left them alone, they would leave her alone. But in Camille's world that truth no longer applied. In her world all fear was rational. The snake slithered across the floor, and Camille reacted. She jumped back, an instinct for escape, but she was already on the rail. She fell as her son reached for her. Camille fell, and the snake coiled around the post, seeking its own safety.