

Paper Thin

In my backyard, there's an old farm wall that's covered in scrub and dry dead leaves. The weathered flagstone probably came from the fields and farms years before the houses were built. As the yards became terraces running in steps down the street, the walls were fortified and the stones built up in orderly lines. The wall holds off the woods that sprawl out behind the house. Living in the forty-foot wall is a brown copperhead snake. It comes out in the afternoon sun to bask and warm its cold blood. When Gary, my nosey neighbor told my wife that copperheads are venomous, she lashed out. She said, "Well, we won't be having any children with those snakes back there. No child of mine will live with that kind of death waiting in the grass." That's why she doesn't rake the back part of yard. When she uses the push mower, she eyes the wall looking for the serpent. She wears gloves, even when she isn't doing anything in the yard. If she thinks of it, she brings a spade with her to hack up anything that might spring out of the grass. Grass got real tall around the wall when June came. So, I took the weed whacker back and trimmed it down from time to time. I liked the grass short back there so I might see the snake out on the rocks.

"Why don't I kill the snake and then we can have kids," I offered.

"And if you die trying to kill it – then it will just be me and that snake. Then I'll have to sell the house. How would that make you feel?" In her mind, the whole backyard was infected.

"I'll be dead, Helen. Won't matter to me at all." I always said bitter things when she went on and on about the snake in the back wall. For a while she was calling the hospital to see if they had plenty of snake anti-venom. She was calling two and three times a week. They stopped taking her calls.

I didn't tell her about what I found in the basement when we moved in. I guess you might say I've spared her from some of the more graphic moments around the house. The cable guy was coming and I went looking for the wire that ran up the wall. There is a hollow between the basement wall and the wood sill of the house. It is about six inches and goes way back where it's dark and dusty. I climbed up on my step stool and followed the cable into the hole. I felt a wire – with little knobs on it. As I moved down the wire, wishing I had my flashlight – I felt it come loose. It wasn't stuck in the wall. When I pulled it out I was holding a mummified rat! I shuddered and tossed the corpse on the floor. Jesus Christ! That is the biggest rat I've seen. Then I started looking at the petrified remains sitting idle on the floor. Big teeth – bucked out like knives and a hulking body. Big rat – no, it's a small squirrel. His head was too big for the common rat and his tail was knobby twisted strand. After looking at it for awhile, the body of the dead squirrel looked more like an empty vessel than vermin. It didn't smell – it didn't move, it didn't even look scary – it looked like it had long since passed by and this shadow on the floor was a frame, an abstract outline of life. It was the natural refuse of the living. I couldn't even tell Helen about it. It was one of those stories you tell to your buddies but never tell your wife.

After a while, I threw the leathery, petrified squirrel's body in the garbage. I couldn't keep it – then she wouldn't come down in the basement. More and more limits – more and more things to avoid. Fear was the last thing Helen needed – there was plenty of that now that she was thinking of children, now that she was hearing it from her girlfriends, thinking it over when she read her spy thrillers.

Sitting under the elm tree in the back yard, I looked over my book and saw that old copperhead sitting in the sun. His eyes were black and cold. I have to admit it was a bizarre symbiotic relationship between reptile and asshole husband. He looked at me sometimes with complicit intentions. She won't come out this far, he hisses. Have you found the squirrel that got away from me? I gave him a bite, but he slipped into the basement before I could gobble him up. She doesn't like what slithers in the rocks.

One Saturday about three weeks ago – I crawled under my back deck to clean out some old wood and put up some lattice so the skunks couldn't make a nest under there. My wife, stood over me on the deck, while I belly crawled toward the stone footing of the porch.

“What if that snake is down there and you get trapped.”

“I have a hammer, maybe I could--”

“You can't trust it. It can kill you – they say these things live for fifty years. It's too dangerous. We need to just get rid of it.”

It was dusty and dingy but at least I didn't have to see her trembling lip, something she practiced and used against me for sympathy. But it's act. When her aunt died and she was crying – no trembling lips at all. She turned and listened to me crawling along. Moving closer and closer to the window, I stopped and looked at something in the dirt. I found a hollow piece of skin that looked like onion peel. It was a little skin, but it had the imprint of my friend from the rock wall. That three-foot snake was getting bigger. Above me she turned it, “Go ahead and let him thrive – bigger snake – bigger problems.”

“There's no snakes under here,” I said with complete assurance, holding that delicate snakeskin in my hand.

When you see him out there – just sitting in the sun – you realize that everything needs to rest. Even fears stop and soak up something to keep the energy and momentum going. Everything needs its time to warm up to the world. How dangerous could that snake really be? So, with a few sewing pins, I mounted the snakeskin on a nice piece of pine. I got out my wood burning tool and carefully burned the date into the wood with careful, diligent strokes. My hope was to find skin, other things that might be related to this long primordial sun-soaker. Three feet, seven and a half inches – he's been around awhile.

Sitting inside one rainy afternoon, I snapped on the Croc Hunter – Steve Irwin. “Look at this beauty – isn't she a darling... by the colors on this snake its says Danger, Danger, get away from me. I'm a king cobra. Swish – and he'll pump ya' full of poison. Like all snakes, they pump their victims full of venom and wait for the prey to die. Then, they open up, dislocate there jaws

and swallow their food whole. They can devour a rabbit, or even a small fetal pig. Crickey! She's a beautiful creature."

I searched the yard, around the wall and under the Hosta and flowers. I picked weeds and I snipped little blades of grass, always looking for him. I wanted to add to my collection of skins. I wanted to see the increase. Little by little, he was giving me little gifts, something to look forward to. Something to burn into the wood, proof that he was growing. Each skin was an extension of the big snake – the big problem. That's my wife. For me – new skin meant new life, new feelings, new growth, and hope, all from a skin so paper thin. The shedding skins were a reward for letting him live among the daffodils and the roses in my wife's yard.

Two days before the neighborhood garden competition, Helen came out and looked at the back wall. She stood on the deck and shook her head. I was cooking on the grill. It had been almost a week since I last laid eyes on the snake. One week, two days and a few hours, something like that. She turned and said, "That snake is still out there."

I flipped a burger and closed the cover of the grill, "How do you know?"

"I saw it."

"When?"

"It's out there."

"Where did you see it?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's dangerous."

"Seriously, where did you see it? Was it on the wall?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Near the bird bath, they do like water."

"I don't know – near the house," she said and turned to go inside. "It's not safe. It's not right to have a snake so close. What if it gets in the house?"

I thought of the skin on the wood in basement.

"Never happen. They don't like houses – he's got a nice wall back there. Where did you see it?"

"Around," she said and closed the screen door.

The smoke wafted from the grill, "Damn it."

When the garden judges came to tour the yard, I sat out in my chair reading about twenty feet from the stone wall in the back. The judges came back and stopped, "Helen, dear. Why don't you plant a nice forest planting by the rock wall? Ferns, holly shrubs, maybe some Hosta, it would make a nice transition from the woods into the yard."

She looked sad, "We have a snake problem." And all the women on the committee turned and looked at me. Snakes – infested with snakes. Everyone looked disgusted. One old lady broke out in a denture-laden smile and said, "At least you don't have rats, dear."

One woman actually tiptoed out of the yard. I know she was thinking – don't let me step on one – it isn't safe. I smiled behind my old copy of *A Moveable Feast*, and looked over to the wall. Now, it's infested? What we have here – is a pit of vipers. I could see his head looking out

from between two mossy rocks, hissing a laugh. I went back to Pound boxing with Hemingway. I gave the snake life and Helen thought of ways to end it.

Over the next few days I searched for skins while working on damage control with my wife. She had won first prize in the gardening contest for best front yard – but because of the back wall, she had lost first place overall. The judge said, “A little shabby in the way back, dear.” Helen hardly came out into the yard at all. She talked on the phone to her mother and always stopped when I walked by, waiting until I was out of earshot to continue her tired and constant chatter.

So, the backyard became my yard, my problem. I kept the grass tidy and deadheaded the flowers when it seemed right. I gave the snake the weeds along the wall. I stopped trimming back there. There was an uncertainty about the yard that could be seen in the blood red roses and the purple lilac, the color of blood through the veins. The lilies trembled among long blades of overgrown grass; the Impatiences were wilting in the hot sun and the grass was burning out. I was losing control.

I was pruning the red bud tree on the side yard in September. A van pulled up in front of the house. He got out, whistling and fetching a few things out of the van. I came off my ladder as he walked into the yard, “Can I help you?”

“John Maccino – you have some kinda pest thing.” He was clean-shaven but his tattoos splashed out beneath his collar and his gold chains stuck to his sweaty skin. He didn’t have any idea what he was getting into.

“Did my wife call?”

“Yes, sir. Helen Graham. That must be your wife?”

“That’s her. So, what does it take to get to snakes – find the den and chop them up with a shovel?”

He smiled, “No sir. I have these special traps. They call ’em “Have a Heart” traps. They don’t hurt the animal. Just catches them so we can relocate them.” He showed me the traps in his hand.

“What can you trap?”

“Get a lot of squirrels and skunks with this one. So, if you don’t mind I will look around. Your wife said something about a wall.”

“Sure, go ahead. Straight back. I am sure she mentioned copperhead snakes.”

He paused, “Snakes, yeah. That poisonous kind.”

“I would say so, seen it take a squirrel with one shot. One of those fat, nut filled kind, not the lean spring time kind.” That should get him thinking. I watched him walk across the yard – eyes fixed on the wall. She sent a trapper to catch my snake – with a “Have a Heart” trap.

I watched him set the trap and position them by the wall. My thought was – let trapper John try – then I will look in the traps and if the snake does get caught – I will bust him out before the trapper comes back. So, he left and later, my wife came home. I had left Trapper

John's card on the counter in plain view. She looked out the back door and saw the traps by the wall. She didn't say much.

"Looks like the trapper man came."

I nodded, "He did. Left a bear trap for a little two foot snake."

"Can't live with poisonous snakes in the yard," she said.

I sat down to read the paper and watched the passing ads on the television – a skin cream commercial – and the super model smiling and rubbing her face, "Love the Skin you're in with Avoleen face cream." I thought about the snakeskins in my basement. They were acknowledgments of life. Watching the snake getting bigger and bigger – shedding off layers of growth for a new skin was rejuvenating and hopeful. It was better than science – it was sentimental.

That night, I had a dream that the snake was in the trap and I tried to let it out and it bit me on the hand. I was poisoned. Steve Irwin stood by and said, "Crickey that's a wallop of a bite, Mate. Never saw a hand turn green like that." I was so pissed off that my copperhead had lashed out at me – so betrayed and so angry – my wife was... right. Damn it. I picked up the trap and brought it inside, Steve Irwin trotting in behind me. I put it down on the counter and I said, "Is this what you wanted?"

Helen looked in the cage with horror – my heart was lashed in the cage. Steve Irwin smiled, "Have a Heart Traps are just what you need for those pesky things that get in your way. Order now and I will send you a Croc' Hunter ball cap."

So, the next morning I went out to the trap and looked inside. A small chipmunk had sprung the trap. He looked at me with a genuine fear. I could see his heart beating in his chest, breathing in short little gasps. I cut him loose from the Have-a-Heart.

The next night I couldn't sleep. Helen and I made love – all well protected and insulated. She was snoring, but I couldn't sleep. I tired, but I couldn't stop thinking about the trap. I went to the spare bedroom, with the lights off and looked to the wall. I could catch the moonlight gleaming off the metal frame. I could see the yard in splashes of light. You know better, snake. You know.

I went down to the basement and turned on the light over my shop. I touched the dry skin on the wood and it felt like feathers on my fingers. Something soft and delicate can only come from nature.

The next morning I went out early, before Trapper John came to see if we caught another yard critter. I could tell it had been sprung as I approached and my heart fluttered. Inside the trap was my copperhead snake – which was sleek and fine looking and could easily weave in and out of the mesh wiring of the cage. I knew my snake was smart and that trap – even if the snake went in – could just slide back out through the mesh openings. But, that morning – the dumb chipmunk came back and fell for the same trap again. While he sat there, heart beating out of its chest - my

copperhead came along. Crawling in – the snake knew he had an easy meal. He bit the chipmunk and then gorged on it. He dislocated his jaw and swallowed the cute little chipmunk in one long swallow. And in the ecstasy of eating a fine, full rounded meal – he had made a terrible mistake. He couldn't get out of the trap with a chipmunk size lump in his beautiful body. It made me see a lot of things that morning. If we caught all the copperheads in Connecticut, my wife would still see the evil – and that type of venom had poisoned my hopes. I looked at the snake and his beautiful scales. He was coiled in the center of the trap digesting it all.

My first thought was to let him out – let him go. But, that wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to Helen. So, Trapper John came and took him away. He was impressed with his catch. After he drove off, I went back inside. I walked into the kitchen and sat down next to my wife and said, "Snake's gone. Nothing out back to kill our kids." And she looked at me sad and obstinate.

"There's probably more, Jack. Probably a whole den of vipers out there."

I put my hand gently over her trembling fingers and I nodded, "Probably a lot more."