

La Femme Serpent

It wasn't a snake that left me for dead in that field. No, that was the work of another kind of beast. Most folks seem to think snakes are vicious and cruel, but they're gentle if you give them a chance. If you talk to them, explain your mind to them. They'll listen. But excuse me, I'm getting ahead of myself. It's just been so long since I've had a human to chit chat with and today's a fine day for such things. Here in Professor Reed's Carnival of Wonders Most Fantasmagorial—I know it's not a real word, but real things had to come from not real things at one point didn't they—we don't get to speak much to the rubes; beg your pardon—customers. And here I am just stepping out for a smoke and here you are with your eager ears. Parfait.

You're here for my show, aren't you? You're here to meet "The Voodoo Snake Woman". You're here to gawk at my slithery babies, but also at me. Don't worry, darling, I am not embarrassed. I feel your eyes on my body. I feel you caressing my skin, gazes colder than the scales slipping along my arms. That's alright, it's alright. I've felt it before. There's nothing to be ashamed of you. You pay good money to see the Serpent Femme.

So, you're here to meet "The Voodoo Snake Woman". Well, I've bad news for you. Someone must have sold you a bad ticket, because I have the day off. No Snake Woman show. I'm just Tilly today. But if you've got a few minutes we can chat. Oui, I can tell you about snakes if you'll listen.

Tilly. That's the name my mama gave me, down on the island. What Island you say? Non, no matter. It was hot and full of trees, fields, men with rum on their breath and a mixture of tongues floating about us. That's all you need to know. There were snakes there, oh oui, and not just the kind that slither on their bellies.

Mama told me to watch out for *that* kind of snake. But I didn't listen. Nah, I figured I knew a thing or two. I've always liked snakes...the slithery kind, mind you. They're graceful, quiet. They don't need to kick up a fuss if there is a problem. No yelling, no throwing things. They just quietly go about their day, until maybe you get in their way. Even then, no yelling....they're quiet...dignified...

Unlike the men who ran that sugar field. They were loud, calling things to the pretty girls when they walked by, and barking orders at the men who weren't moving fast enough. Mama and I had worked there as long as I could remember: bending over in the sun, sweat dripping down our brows. Working our fingers to the bone so that the white man who lived up the way in a big beautiful house could get money we never saw. But it was alright, it was *alright*. Mama and I, we had each other, and you know, we just didn't worry about anything else. Until that rich man's son came slithering around. I suppose he was bored up in his gilded tower or maybe

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he was just curious what us poor black folk did all day. So, he came out of his pit for a little while.

Mama wanted me to be educated. We read everything we could get our hands on and one of the words I always loved was 'rapscallion'. Sounds like some sort of spice you put in your soup. Tastes good at first, but then, oh oui, it is poison through and through. And, oui, this snakey boy...this rich man's son... he was a rapscallion through and through. He rode his pony all around the fields, chatting here, asking questions here. Oh, his words were so sweet in my ears, his face so tasty in my eyes. He swayed to and fro, back and forth, before my eyes. Enchanted, I followed his dance.

Now, *that...*that's the part that's not alright...I should have known better. Mama told me about snakes, I knew about snakes: the kind that walk on two legs and the ones that slither on their bellies. "Watch out for both, my girl. Beasts come in many sizes, and they all want to fill you with their poison,"

But this king cobra...he caught me in his blue, blue eye. *To and fro, to and fro. Back and forth.* We watched each other from across that field.

It's not uncommon for us dark native girls to catch a rich white man's eye. Mama says having a mighty high opinion of one's self is a sin, but I knew I was a beauty. I know I still am. The Lord won't strike me down for telling the truth. I'd caught many a man's eyes in those hot fields, but I could handle myself. I knew how to play by the rules: Don't lead them on. Don't get caught alone. But this man, mon Dieu, he was something else. He spoke politely, gently. He didn't kick up a fuss, he was dignified...and when I said that I needed to return to the field, that I had left behind my handkerchief...well Mama didn't ask any questions. I ran back down the rough path as fast as I could, the darkness slipping over the trees, the heat finally receding bit by bit. He was coming the other way, on foot this time. Perhaps, he had forgotten his handkerchief as well. We crossed paths, and I met his blue, blue eyes, and I smiled, hoping I wasn't too mussed from running. He smiled back, oh so very politely (*back and forth*). He asked me my name, so so softly. "Tilly," I told him. Well, that was the prettiest name he'd ever heard. He told me I looked thirsty. I *was* thirsty. He offered to take me a little ways to his house. He had a special bottle of something he thought I would like. He spoke so softly, a gentle hiss of words (*to and fro*). Now, if you know anything about snakes...the slithery kinds...if they're hissing, you may be in trouble. But like I said, I was caught in that blue, blue gaze. I'm sure that bottle he gave me back in the stables of the big house was something special. I'm sure the second bottle was just as special. Well, how could we not go out walking in the moonlight on such a special night? The ground in that field was just so soft, how could we not lay down on it?

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Excuse me for one moment. Mon Dieu, this part is hard. If you don't mind, I'm going to light another cigarette.

When a snake bites you, it's usually quick. The snake may bite you more than once, but there's no malice in it. It's just its nature, to fill you with its poison, then wander off, leaving you to die all by yourself...that's how nature works. You shouldn't have crossed its path in the first place, you should have remembered your rules. I should've remembered my rules.

When I woke up, the sun was nervously creeping over the sky, as though afraid to see what the daylight would show. I could barely crack my eyes open, but I could hear and taste and smell. I heard flies buzzing all around me, felt their feet tickling my skin. I tasted blood. I could smell blood too, and I could smell something else, musty and masculine. I couldn't move for a long time. My men's trousers were torn beyond saving. Dieu, I must have fought like a wild thing. At least I could be proud of that. I kicked them off and tried to crawl. Everything hurt. Everything burned. My brain filled with the hissing of snakes. But after a moment, I realized the sound wasn't in my mind. I had managed to crawl only a few feet, but I had interrupted a rendezvous between a thick brown macajuel—boa constrictor— and his even larger lady friend. They gazed at me, cold eyes unreadable.

"Aidez-moi, s'il vous plaît," I croaked "Help me, please," I must have been hysterical. Maybe I lost a lot of blood. Maybe, with only the faintest taste of what violations had occurred before, I wanted to die. But, I know—and I'm sure you'd agree—that a person in their right mind would never ask two very large snakes, in the middle of a dalliance, for assistance. Most people would be back pedaling as fast as they could. But my head was not right. The snakes were probably more concerned for my sanity than anything else.

Now here's the part you won't believe, but remember you're here to be dazzled and bamboozled anyways. The two snakes, thick as tree branches, both with dark saddles, slipped away from each other and down towards me. Their tongues flicked the air, eagerly, curiously. For a moment, I was sure they spotted an easy meal. They would wrap their coils around my broken body and lovingly squeeze until all the pain and burning faded away. I almost welcomed their embrace.

The snakes came closer, scenting the blood and sweat and lord knows what else with their sharp, quick tongues. Their eyes never left mine. In a moment, they were mere inches from my battered face. The female—I knew because she was much larger than her beau—regarded me closely. I don't know if you're ever been in a staring contest with a snake before, but there are some strange rules to that game. Cold and absolutely nothing human in there: completely alien and otherworldly. Perhaps in those hazy moments I stared into some ghostly spirit's visage. This spirit must have found something worthy—or wanting—in me. She

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slithered beside me. Prodding my belly with her snout, she burrowed under and out the other side. It hurt; I must have had a broken rib. After a considering glance at me with his alien eyes, the male followed his lady friend. This hurt as well. It felt like lying across two thick, muscled tree branches. Tree branches that were not acting as nature intended them to act.

Gently, oh, so gently, the snakes began to move. The world began to slither around me. I had lived my entire life running through those fields and jungles and I had never seen a snake carry anything on its back. But there I was, riding two huge snakes like some goddess's avatar in an ancient legend. I lay still, breathing slowly, unsure if I was about to be eaten, finding I just didn't care.

The world looked interesting from that a snake's eye level. I saw things I'd never seen before. It was a slow and strange journey. Insects whirled by us, chattering in strange languages. Some lapped at my blood, delicately. I didn't mind sharing. The plants eyeballed me suspiciously, although a few flowers seemed concern. The air was cooler down near the ground, but my skin still felt sticky and feverish. The snakes occasionally whispered to each other. A few times, I felt as though I could almost understand them.

How long we crawled along through that hazy world I have no idea. I wondered briefly if the snakes beneath me were tired, but they never slowed or hesitated. I slipped in and out of consciousness, or perhaps I dreamed the whole thing as I crawled along bruised and battered.

Eventually, the land began to look more familiar. The tall trees faded away, and I could see the green thickets that my mama and I worked in during six days of every one of our weeks. I could hear voices calling to each other and snippets of singing. The snakes stopped, hissed softly once more and glanced back at me. I looked up at them. The female bobbed her head twice and then pointedly glanced at the field. The male just stared at me, cold eyes, far far away from this world. The snakes wiggled beneath me. I may not have had all my wits about me, but their meaning was quite clear. Slowly, feeling every ache and bruise and twinge in my body, I rolled over onto the soft grown. I moaned softly, and tears welled in my eyes.

The male slithered away almost immediately. His business was done. Perhaps he went in search of another female, or a snack. The female put her face close—real close—to mine and her dark tongue flicked out. She tasted one of my tears, before following her mate.

When her pointed tail disappeared into the brush, I was unsure if it had ever been there at all. Maybe I had crawled out of that field, listening for voices, stumbling along, crawling when necessary. The details of the previous evening's dalliances came bubbling up to me, flavored with rum and violence and shame. I tried to spit to clear my mouth of the sudden taste, but it

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lingered. I jerked suddenly; sure I had felt rough hands on my things. There was nothing there but dirt, blood, and a small, shimmery piece of dried snake skin.

I have no idea how long I stayed in that spot, huddled in a heap. Eventually, people found me. People carried me. People put me in my bed. Strange dark faces that shimmered in and out of view hovered over me.

My mother's voice.

A gentle hiss.

Rum on my tongue.

Flies buzzing.

Heat and ache.

(To and fro, back and forth. Hands on my body...)

I awoke with a start.

Our hut was warm, evening wrapped around it like a blanket. My mother sat, rocking in her favorite chair, eyes closed. She was humming, softly.

I tried to sit up, a gasp of pain escaping me like a dark rain cloud. Her dark eyes snapped open almost immediately. She rushed to my side and gently cradled me. "My baby, my baby..."

She wouldn't tell me what happened at first. I drank water and a bit of a strangely spiced broth. But eventually, with a bulbous moon glowering over us and the sticky warmth clinging to our skin, Momma told me what had happened after I left and never came back.

"I searched up and down the road, calling your name, but there was no sign of you. So, child, I went, to that VooDoo woman down by the river. Heaven forgive me, but when you didn't come back, I knew deep down in these old bones, that something weren't right. Well, she shook some feathers and said some words that the Good Lord never uttered before, and she asked for a drop of my blood. She threw this into the fire and it hissed just like a pit of snakes. I saw snakes too, writhing in the flames. Oh, girl, if I hadn't been so scared for you, I would've been terrified of that little VooDoo woman. We stood around that hissing fire for hours and hours. When the sun came up, I just knew you were dead. But that little old woman held up her wrinkled finger, and told me to wait,"

My mother couldn't stay in the hut much longer, she had to get to the fields or the overseer would find her, so she quickly whispered the rest, as though frightened of her own

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story. The VooDoo woman had told her not to worry, her beasts would bring me to her. She had sent two of her beloved macajuel to find me.

“And so they did, my girl. So they did,” My journey with the two snakes seemed impossible on this side of the day, but my mother never lied. I thought back to those tree trunk beasts with their cold eyes and felt a rush of gratitude.

I asked her if she had seen my king cobra with his blue, blue eyes. Nervously, she answered by telling me to drink more broth.

Shortly after, I fell asleep again.

When I awoke, my belly burned and writhed. I felt hot blood between my legs. I sat up, crying out. Mama watched from her chair. Her face, in the dim candlelight, seemed skeletal and grim. She watched me silently for a moment, resignation on her face.

The sun did rise the next morning, in case you were concerned. I know that during that long, painful night—my second one—I had my own doubts about the dawn. But it broke over the land like a buttery egg yolk.

My spirit felt wrung out, but my body felt surprisingly strong, despite everything that had happened.

“What did you feed me?”

“Snake Venom,” Mama answered, voice empty. “A concoction from the woman to...help you...”

Well, that was alright. I would have to worry about the bruises, cuts, and what felt like a broken rib, but I wouldn't have to worry about any baby cobras.

I asked her if I could go to the fields with her that day, despite the shame bubbling beneath everything. I had broken my own rules; I had dallied when I knew better. Instead of answering, Mama held up a sack. It was full of my few possessions: a few shirts, shoes, pants, and the books we had managed to procure down at the docks.

“What is this, Mama?”

That cobra had a taste for me, the VooDoo woman had said. He would either kill me out right, or use me again and again. “Beasts like that,” she had told my Mama. “They've got a taste for violence and they like a girl that'll fight,” I had to go somewhere colder, where a snake wouldn't survive.

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“Far way, girl,” Mama whispered sadly. She was to disguise me as a boy and take me down to the docks at nightfall, where a ship was waiting to sail to the continent. She wouldn’t hear my protests and eventually I gave in. A part of me felt relieved. Maybe it wasn’t my fault, and this beast couldn’t help his nature. Mama cut my long hair, her rough hands gentle and loving. We bound my breasts without speaking. She placed a cap that may or may not have been my father’s and smiled, although I could see tears.

“Just another dark boy looking for work,” she said.

At nightfall, we slipped silently to the docks. Mama had gone to the fields all day. It wasn’t her day to rest. Besides, she wanted to reassure everyone, on a horse and in the fields, that I was well and sleeping in the hut. She never told me if my cobra was slithering through the field, trying to hypnotize another young lady. *To and Fro. Back and Forth.*

We arrived at the docks and mother spoke with the captain of a weathered merchant’s ship. He needed another pair of strong hands. The food would be terrible, there would be storms, and we may not survive the trip, but I wouldn’t need to pay a cent for the privilege of a hammock below board. They would set sail first thing in the morning, all hands on deck.

That last night with Mama was not as sad as you may think. Oh, oui, there were tears, but there was laughter as well. I promised I would come back for her. I would make my way, and buy her out of her servitude on that island. As we embraced one more time, she slipped something into my hand. It was a small hemp bracelet. Instead of pearls or beautiful charms, three sharp fangs dangled from it.

“For protection,” Mama said. “So, you remember who the real beasts are,”

I’ll spare you the details of that voyage away from our hot little island. It was long. There were storms. The food was terrible and some of us didn’t survive.

But we arrived at a port, shiny and new. In the distance, the tallest buildings I had ever seen stood proudly in the strange, new sunlight.

We disembarked, blinking like creatures that had just found their way up from the earth. The captain, who’s initial gruff manor gave way to an affable fellow, had even paid us for our troubles before setting us of on our own.

I stood on that dock, alone, battered, and bewildered. The world buzzed around me, cold and bizarre. With no other option, I began to walk towards the statuesque buildings. I needed lodging and work. Unlike some of my travelling companions, I spoke the language of this place fairly well, so I was able to ask people around me for directions. Most people ignored me. But one old lady told me to find the train station. A circus was in town, and they needed

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hands to work. I only had the faintest notion of what a circus was, but I thanked her and began to follow the route she had told me.

It was the hissing that guided me to where I needed to be. Of course it was more brutish than any snake in the forest I had heard, but I heard the slither of snake bodies over grass all the same.

I found the circus train and inquired about a position. I'm sure I smelled of the sea and was filthy and ragged, but the proprietor took one look at me and said, "What's a gal like you doing wearing those nasty fangs?"

And, well, the rest is, as they say, history. I told him some of my tail and he gobbled it up greedily. "A snake woman from the VooDoo islands! That's just what we need!" he cried. "La Femme Des Serpentes...or something...I don't speak that gibberish very well,"

What what else could I say? I agreed and signed a contract, the teeth at my wrist jangling merrily.

And I've been here ever since.

So, that is my story: the story of Tilly, the snake woman. It may not be much and you may not believe all of it. But, you were such a good listener, that I will make an exception. I will stub out this cigarette, go back in the darkness, paint my face, put on my tight costume, bring my sleepy babies out of their cages, and I will perform for you.

Non, non, do not be afraid of the snakes. You see they are really quite gentle, but you must remember there are rules to follow. For some beasts, it's in their nature to bite. However, I've learned that that's not true for all of them. Some, just want to fill you with their poison because it's a beautiful night and the ground is soft. But my beauties here, oh, they would never hurt you out of malice. Many are actually from nearby fields and valleys. I thought that this cold land would be inhospitable to such creatures, but there are serpents wherever you look.