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**OPHIS**

As long as I can remember, I've had nightmares about snakes, of serpents swimming up through the sewage system and crawling up my vagina when I sit on the toilet, of asps insinuating their way under the bedcovers. I wake, screaming, and slimy with sweat. I'm hyper-vigilant about checking all possible access points before I go to bed; I anaesthetise myself with alcohol and sleeping tablets.

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The psychiatrist looked at me over the rim of his tortoiseshell glasses.

“So, Cass, tell me about your childhood,” he said, uncapping his pen.

I laughed and left his beige and cream office, and never went back. After a while, the nightmares went away on their own.

When I married, the dreams returned. My now ex-husband thought they were funny, and would tease me by pressing his erection into my buttocks and hissing in my ear. My new therapist recommended exposure therapy. After a few months of gradual conditioning, I was ready to enter the reptile house at the zoo. A handler brought out a python and I touched it. To my surprise, I found I was able to control my panic. I could even appreciate the beauty of the animal; I was astonished to find its skin not at all slimy, but dry and smooth. At this moment, though, I have forgotten the majesty of the animal - the sheer design genius - and the terror returns.

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I watch the snake move over the dry grass, its muscles propelling it forward like peristalsis, its scales iridescent in the sunlight, and I glimpse its ruby underside. It stops in front of my booted foot and flicks its tongue out, touching the toe. I feel the blood draining from my face and will myself not to faint. The snake forks its tongue again and moves its head to the left, changing direction, gliding away from my feet, unhurried. My breath comes back in a whoosh, and I gulp air like it is water. I run, crashing through the bush, my arms and face whipped by branches. I fall, twisting my ankle, and lurch to my feet immediately, imagining the snake is chasing me. I reach the car and lean on the boot to catch my breath, then vomit onto the asphalt.

“You alright love?” asks a man parked nearby.

“Snake...snake...” I gasp.

“Yeah, well, as long as you leave them alone, they’ll go their own way,” he says, as he pulls a backpack out of his car and trudges into the bush.

At home I peel off my boot and sock to inspect the damage. My ankle is starting to swell and turn a bluish-purple. I sit on the couch with my leg propped on the arm and drape a bag of frozen peas over my ballooning ankle, lie back, and close my eyes.

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*A little girl, no more than four years old and small for her age, is walking in a rainforest, holding the hand of a man. The day is hot, but the thick, arching branches above block out the sun like a verdant parasol. The ground is uneven and densely layered with moist leaf litter. They have diverged from the path; she stumbles occasionally, but he prevents her fall with his tight grasp. She is getting tired but he pushes on, taking them deeper and deeper into the forest. The light dims, becomes brackish; it seems to the girl that they have been walking all day, but her sense of time is not fully developed. Breakfast is a distant memory - even though they ate only an hour ago, her stomach is growling.*

*The sound of running water becomes louder as they penetrate the thick foliage. They are descending into a gully; at the bottom, a stream traverses the forest floor. They stop, and the man bends down to scoop a handful of water, which he holds to her mouth. She gulps – she hadn't realised how thirsty she was - then leans down herself and catches fistfuls of water, bringing them to her mouth and sucking greedily. When they finish drinking, they lie, side by side, on a large rock at the edge of the stream, letting the mottled sun dry the droplets of water that had fallen on their clothes. The girl, lulled by the sound of the stream and the cool air on her face, falls into a half-sleep. She is conscious of the man's leg touching hers, and is comforted by it. She dozes for a little while, listening to the sounds of the forest: the buzzing of insects and the belching of tree frogs. The air smells mossy and green. She hears a rustling nearby; something is close, very close. It gets nearer; she doesn't want to open her eyes, but she feels she must. The man feels her stir and puts his hand on her shoulder.*

*“Shhhhhh. Be very quiet. Don't look. It's just a python. It's harmless. It won't hurt you, but you need to stay perfectly still so it doesn't bite you.”*

*The rustling stopped a short time later. He took his hand from her shoulder.*

*“Good girl. It's gone now.”*

*She had kept her eyes closed so tightly that when she opened them the sun burned brighter than she had ever seen before, and the edges of her vision were as black as a crow's wing.*

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The phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Cass,” he says, lingering, as he always did, a little too long on the last syllable, “...my love, how are you? It's been ages.”

“Oh, you know how it is, I've been busy with work...”

“Too busy to call?”

I let it slide.

“So, what have you been up to?” I ask.

“You mean aside from waiting for you to ring? Not much. I don't get out much these days, you know...”

I half-listen to his string of complaints and look down at my ankle. The bag of peas has defrosted and my foot is sitting in a puddle of lukewarm water. I sit up and carefully put my feet on the floor. Pain - white and hot - radiates through my ankle as I stand and try to put weight on it. I sit down again, part the curtains and look out the window. Dusk has fallen and the sky is like a bruise.

“...so, my darling, have you been seeing anyone special?”

I think of the last man I had been with – I draw a blank on his name – and shudder.

“No, nobody special.”

“I'm a hard act to follow, eh?” he chuckled down the phone.

I pause, anger racing hot shame to the surface of my skin.

“What did you want?”

“Hey, no need to be defensive...”

“I have to go...”

“OK, OK, before you go, let's have lunch. My shout.”

I hesitate, and he seizes on my indecision.

“We'll go to The Apollo. I know you love it there.”

“Alright. When?”

“Tomorrow, twelve o'clock.”

“OK.”

"I'll meet you there. And sweetheart..."

"What?"

"Wear a pretty dress for me, OK?"

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*The TV glows blue and white with the images of a nature documentary: a great white shark cruises through the water, accompanied by foreboding music, full of sawing violins and stabbing synthesisers. It is graceful, despite its size, as it hunts through the water, its head moving from side to side like a pendulum. The narrator describes the feeding behaviour of the shark - the tearing of flesh, the crushing of bones - then the footage shifts to the sky: a seabird is in full flight, swooping and elegant, slicing the air on an invisible updraft. It changes course and dives down, and down, towards the ocean, where a school of fish can be seen swimming close to the surface. The speed of the film slows, and the shark rises from the water, teeth bared in a rictus grin, and swallows the bird whole, its jaws closing together like the teeth of a zipper.*

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I'm running late: nervously pulling down the hem of my too-short red dress, my heels clattering on the tiled floor of the restaurant lobby. My hair streams behind me like a veil.

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*A red plume spreads on the surface of the water. The camera submerges and the shark is thrashing its body, churning the water like the propeller of a boat. The jaws of the shark can be seen through the bloody murk, the teeth opening and closing on the body of a seal. The seal is alive, just, its eyes wide in panicked comprehension. It struggles, twisting its sleek black body, but the match is uneven, and it is soon still.*

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I see him at the back of the restaurant, at his favourite table. Despite his age, his hair is still a thick and lustrous onyx. He stands and embraces me, then holds me at arm's length, appraising me, nodding his approval. We sit down, and he calls over the sommelier. After a short conference, he orders a pinot noir, then takes my hand in his as we read the menu. The waiter takes our order: wagyu steak, rare, for me, and rack of lamb for him. We chat about superficial things: the weather, politics, people we know.

The food arrives, and the waiter exchanges the ornate silver knife to my right with a wooden-handled steak knife. The steak is cooked perfectly, the outside seared and caramelised, with a thick seam of crimson flesh in the middle. A rivulet of blood is pooled around the mound of mashed potatoes on my plate: a garnet moat. I spear the steak with my fork and cut off a generous mouthful; the knife cuts through the muscle of the beast with ease. The meat dissolves on my tongue, the buttery texture of the rendered fat mingling with the iron tang of the blood. Memories come to me, unbidden, of first dates with men who thought I would be impressed by fancy restaurants where steaks start at fifty dollars, who watched in fascination as I devoured the meat and wondered if my appetite extended to the bedroom. When I finish, I lay the knife on top of the fork, and push my plate away. My companion takes his time, dissecting each rib from the rack with precision and chewing each mouthful with deliberate care. I watch the way his large meaty hands grip the knife and fork, and the way he bares his white, white teeth as he takes each bite. Once he finishes stripping the meat from the bones

with his cutlery, he picks up each curved rib and nibbles the remnants of the meat adhered to the bone, sucking noisily. He holds my gaze as he wipes his mouth and hands with his napkin.

"You were hungry, huh? I think we'll skip dessert today," he says, glancing at the nascent roll of fat encircling my waist.

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*A shark is hauled into a trawler by some fishermen. The beast is suspended in the air on a pulley, a giant hook skewering its mouth. Its unseeing eyes are clouded over and it swings lazily on its gibbet as the fishermen take turns at having their photograph taken with it.*

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I pick up the steak knife and plunge it into his chest, then put the knife back on the plate, on top of the fork, and take a sip of wine. I motion to the waiter to bring the dessert menu. He glances at the man - gasping like a dying fish, a vermilion stain spreading across his crisp white shirt - and hands me the menu.

"Would madam like some coffee with dessert?"

"Yes, I'll have a short black, thank you. And the ambrosia," I say, passing back the menu.

"Very well, madam," he says, with a slight bow.

I lift the glass of wine to my lips and drain it, rolling the cherry-flavoured tannins around in my mouth. Frowning, I wipe the smudge of red lipstick left on the rim with my thumb. I take out my phone and wait for dessert.

