

The Child and the Snake

(*adapted from:*
THE DARK PATH TO THE RIVER)

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JENNY CARRIED ERIKA dozing on her shoulder as she scanned the names of stores on Third Avenue. Erika sagged in her arms. At a pizzeria Jenny set her down while she borrowed a phone book.

"I want to go home," Erika whined.

"In a minute." Jenny searched the pages. She'd seen the store she was looking for months ago. She had stood outside for a long while staring into its window.

"I'm tired," Erika argued.

"In a minute," Jenny repeated. "We're almost there. Don't you want a present?"

"What kind of present?" Erika brightened.

"You'll see in a minute." She took her daughter's hand and strode up Third Avenue through the Sunday shoppers, past fruit stalls and cafes. Finally she stopped at an empty shop. Inside, a cardboard sign was taped: SPACE FOR RENT/ Caldonia's Moved to 2153 Third Avenue.



Jenny waved for a cab, and Erika dozed on her lap as the taxi sped up the half-empty Sunday streets, through the seventies, the eighties, nineties to 118th Street.

The buildings along the way changed from cafes and galleries and gourmet food shops to boarded-up storefronts, mom-and-pop groceries, garages. Finally the driver stopped in front of a small shop with two cages in the window. Across the street were a discount furniture store, a discount clothing store and an abandoned hardware shop. "Could you wait?" she asked the driver.

"Sorry, lady." And he locked the doors and drove off.

"I want to go home," Erika said.

Jenny drew her over to the window. "See."

Erika blinked in the sunlight. She stared at the cages, then looked up at her mother. "Snakes," she said.

Jenny also peered into the cage where an enormous brown-and-gray snake lay coiled in the sand. In a smaller cage next to it a nest of baby snakes wriggled on top of each other. According to the sign in the window, the snake was a python. As Jenny and Erika stared, the snake suddenly flattened its head and hissed towards the rear of its cage. Erika reached for her mother. "I don't like snakes," she said.

"Neither do I." Jenny took her daughter's hand and entered the shop.

Cages lined the narrow room: brown wooden boxes filled with sand and rocks and bowls of water. Many of the cages looked empty, though on closer inspection, Jenny saw snakes hidden beneath the rocks or in the sand with only their tails or sides protruding. The only other customers were two boys standing in front of the python's cage. When the proprietor wasn't looking, they struck at the snake with a stick, and the snake hissed again.

"You stop that!" the owner called from the back where he was washing sand. A small dark-skinned man came forward shaking his fist. "Get out!" he declared. "You kids, get out!" The boys stepped away from the cage but made no move towards the door. "You come here frighten my snakes. You get out!" They looked at him with indifference when suddenly he opened the cage and hauled out the ten-foot python whose head thrust towards them.

They tripped over each other to the door. Erika grabbed Jenny, who quickly lifted her in her arms and shielded her with her own body. Jenny wondered suddenly if she had made a mistake coming here. She too started for the door, but the snake keeper began to laugh. "Rikki scares away the riff-raff," he said. "I didn't mean to scare your child. Here . . ." He held out the snake, but Jenny stepped back. He stroked the snake who coiled about his arm and shoulders. "He won't hurt you. He wouldn't hurt those boys, but they don't know that."

"Yes . . ." Jenny said, disbelieving.

The man smiled showing his front teeth missing. On this cold day he was dressed in only an undershirt which was ringed with sweat in this warm shop. He again offered the snake to Jenny. "You want to hold him?"

"No," she gasped.

"Rikki, he is very friendly."

Jenny bumped into the cages behind her, then jumped forward for fear the snakes inside might strike. Suddenly she felt breathless. Why had she come here? "No . . . no . . . really. Actually I'm afraid of snakes."

The man frowned. "Why you come to my shop?"

She was having trouble remembering herself. "I don't know. I don't want my daughter to be afraid." She wasn't sure that reason made any sense. She was beginning to suspect that coming here was not a rational act, for she was in fact terrified of snakes. As a child in Texas, she'd been warned of rattlesnakes in the vacant lots around her house. Then one day she'd turned over a rusted oil drum, and in the same moment she saw the coiled brown body, she felt the needles in her leg. She'd screamed. Her mother, alone in the house now, stepped onto the porch. She kept screaming. She was ten years old, and the possibilities overwhelmed her. Her mother ran across the field as the snake cut through the brown grass and disappeared. Even when her mother reached her, she could not quit screaming. Her mother picked her up and quickly carried her into the house where she applied ice, cut the bite and drew out the blood with her own mouth. The snake, it turned out, had not been poisonous, and the cut took longer to heal than the bite. The fear had never entirely healed. But her childhood fear was not why she was here today, though it occurred to her that if she could face down this symbol of her fear, symbol and object in one, that she might master fear itself. She would come home with a snake, meet Kay's brightly colored bird unafraid with her own boa constrictor or python.

"What kind of snake would you recommend for us?" she asked.

"Well . . ." The proprietor slipped the python back into its cage. "You should start smaller . . . a garter snake, perhaps, or small king snake."

He pulled out a green snake and extended it to Jenny, who tentatively touched its scales. "Will it bite?"

"Wanda? No. She's a good snake. Even if she do, she don't hurt." He bent down to show the snake to Erika, who was growing curious. She thrust out her hand to touch it.

"Slow . . ." the keeper said. "Around snakes you got to move slow." He reached into another cage and brought out a larger brown-and-gray-ringed snake he called Pete.

"How do you know their names?" Erika asked.

"I give them names," he said. "It makes them seem more friendly to people."

He rested the tail of Pete in Erika's chubby hand. She touched the slick, smooth skin. "Snakes won't hurt you," he assured Jenny, "except poison ones, and I don't sell them. But a snake is a snake. It's not a cat or a dog. Mother snake has her babies, leaves them, never looks back. Or sometimes she eats them." At this revelation Erika's eyes opened wide. "She's got no mother feelings like most animals."

He placed Pete back in the cage. "But the worst thing you can do is be afraid of a snake because he knows." He opened another cage. "Take a boa . . ." He pulled out a mottled brown snake. "He feels you get tense, your muscles flex, he's going to clamp down. That's his instinct. He'll squeeze you. The only way to get loose from a boa is to relax. Don't be afraid, then he'll just let go."

Jenny stared at the snake nosing its way around the proprietor's neck. "How do you know which snakes are poisonous?" she asked. "I mean if I came across one."

"I don't guess you would. Unless it was a rattler, and you could hear it."

"Can you take the poison out?" she asked.

The snake keeper frowned. "People gotten poisoned trying to do that."

"I used to think I'd burn them out," she said.

"How's that?"

"Growing up, there were rattlesnakes where I lived. I decided I'd burn them out if I ever found them."

The snake keeper laughed. "You'd've burned down your own home more likely. Snake would have only crawled deeper in his hole and hidden from the fire. Probably wouldn't even have got hurt. You want to get rid of a snake, you got to block up his hole, cut off his air and food. But first you have to find the hole and then make sure he's in it."

Jenny watched the baby snakes in the front window and the giant mother in the next cage. She wondered if the mother really would eat her own babies. Erika was peering into a different cage on the floor. Jenny knelt beside her. "Which one do you like?" she asked.

"This one," Erika answered. She pointed to a snake about two feet long,

an inch wide, with red and black rings around her. The snake appeared to be staring back at Erika with its lidless eyes.

The snake keeper stepped over. "Rosy," he said. "Well, Rosy wouldn't be a bad one for a beginner. She's a little fussy about eating sometimes, but usually she'll eat a mouse every few weeks." He lifted Rosy out of the cage and showed her to Erika. "Rosy's a king snake," he explained. "She's pretty gentle though she will eat other snakes, even rattlesnakes."

"We'll take it," Jenny said.

The man set Rosy back in her cage, and he and Jenny went to the rear of the store. Erika remained on her knees in front of the snake. Jenny paid for the snake, a cage, a water bowl, a light for warmth, a bag of sand, an arched tile where the snake could hide. The snake keeper said he'd give Jenny the snake in the sand bag, and she could assemble the cage at home; but Jenny insisted that he put the box together and install the snake himself.

Finally, after half an hour, Rosy was set into her new quarters, and Jenny and Erika were standing out in the snow on 118th Street with their snake, looking for a cab home.



Kay clicked a manicured fingernail against the bird cage. A white bird with yellow tail feathers cocked its head. "He already says, 'Give him the business!' and 'What's cooking, sweetie?' Don't you think Erika will like that?" Kay smiled. She waited for Mark to smile.

Mark sat on the piano bench across from her peering at the bird on the coffee table, but he looked distracted.

Kay kneeled beside the cage nearer Mark. She took a cracker from a box and tried to feed it to the bird, but the bird wasn't interested. Casually she rested her elbow on the stool by Mark's knee. "What's the matter?"

Mark looked at his watch. "I was wondering where Jenny was." He'd hurried home after his meeting this afternoon. He didn't understand what had upset Jenny so at his parents earlier, but he wanted to talk to her now about himself or rather about his concerns over the figures he'd just seen at his meeting and over the cool way the head of the firm had dismissed what he should be concerned about. For the first time he wondered if he were being told the whole truth. He'd come to trust Jenny's intuition though he argued

with her. But now she wasn't here. Because she wasn't here and he didn't know where she was, he couldn't work when he sat down at his desk. Finally he'd come in to play the piano, but then Kay had arrived.

"She's probably out shopping," Kay offered.

"Jenny hates shopping. She wanted to write."

Kay leaned towards the bird, increasing the pressure of her hand on Mark's leg. He looked down, noticing the hand for the first time.

"Thank you again for going with me today to see David in the hospital," she said.

Mark watched the bird pecking at its own image in the mirror. "You should buy David a bird. Have you ever bought him a pet?"

Kay glanced at Mark; she couldn't tell if he were criticizing her. "I don't even know if he likes birds."

"You know Erika less well, and you bought her a bird."

"But I knew she loved the bird your cat killed. She told me all about it this morning." Kay's blue eyes shined behind a thin glaze of emotion. "She's a much more open child than David, Mark. You must see that."

"She's only three and a half. I don't know what she'll be like at eleven."

"Probably very much like you." Kay met Mark's eyes with an assertion which made him pause. He stood and let her hand fall.

"In fact, Erika is more like Jenny."

"Oh? I don't see that. Erika seems . . . well, more lively, but then I guess I don't know either of them very well."

At the piano Mark began straightening loose sheets of music. Kay moved over to him. "You've helped me a lot with David. Buying Erika a present seemed a way to thank you." She laughed then. "Certainly the bird is better than that baby rattle I brought her when I first came to visit a few weeks ago. That's the story of my life with David. By the time I think I know what he likes, he's become someone else, grown up, and I'm forever giving him baby rattles."

"Then spend more time with him. For Christ's sakes, Kay, he's your son. Visit him at boarding school. Take him out of boarding school. Don't be so afraid of him."

Kay laughed airily. "You've noticed that. You could always see inside me, Mark. Why did I ever let you go? I'm scared to death of him."

"He's just a boy who needs a mother. I don't know where his father is, but . . ."

"Neither do I."

"So, you're all he's got."

"That scares the breath out of me. I don't know if you can understand—you're so close to Erika—but here's this person, a stranger really, who's part of me, yet doesn't even like me very much. Yet I *am* all he's got, and that makes him dislike me more, I think, because he's so dependent." She took in air. Then in a quiet voice she added, ". . . And yet sometimes I think he might also be my salvation."

She looked up at Mark. Her sincerity touched him, but it lasted only a moment before she grew conscious of herself and what she had said and the effect it might have. Mark saw in her eyes this change and this fundamental flaw. Jenny was mistaken about Kay, he thought. It wasn't manipulation of people or self-interest that was the flaw; it was sincerity she lacked, sincerity which came so naturally to Jenny. And yet his sympathy was stirred because of his own doubts right now and because Kay cared for him. He put his arm on her shoulders. "I hope David can be your salvation," he offered.

The door opened. Erika stepped into the hallway, followed by Jenny carrying a large wooden box. When Jenny saw Mark with his arm about Kay, she stopped. She stared for a moment, then she took Erika's hand and moved towards the back of the apartment. Kay separated from Mark with an exaggerated motion, offering him a guilty look he did not reciprocate.

"Where have you been?" he asked instead, his own defense, instinctively an offense.

"Shopping," Jenny answered.

Erika broke away and ran into the living room. "Daddy, you'll never guess what we got? One clue: her name is Rosy."

Mark dropped to his knees in front of Erika. "Rosy?" he said. "A bird?"

"No!"

"A cat?"

"No!"

"A mous-se?" Mark drew out the question to make Erika laugh. Jenny had paused in the hallway. They both knew he was really playing to her.

"No!" Erika declared in triumph. "A snake!"

"A snake?" Mark looked up at Jenny.

"Her name is Rosy, and I'm going to keep her in my room."

Mark watched his wife. "I thought you were afraid of snakes."

"I'm not afraid," Erika answered. "The man said you got to know them for a while, and I already know Rosy." She took her father's hand and drew

him over to the box. "See." Mark stared in at the sand and the tile. Only the tail of the snake was showing. "She's hiding," Erika explained.

Mark glanced up at Jenny. Her eyes were luminous, but her expression was closed off from him. He saw this purchase was not a random act, though he had no idea what it meant. "Why did you buy it?" he asked.

"I don't want Erika to be afraid of snakes."

"I didn't know she was afraid."

"She will be if she doesn't ever see one."

Mark frowned. He was missing some point here. "What about you?"

"I'll be all right," she answered. She looked at the snake instead of Mark. The snake had poked its head out and was peering about. "It's a king snake," she added flatly. "It eats rattlesnakes."

"Oh. Well, that's quite useful in Manhattan." Mark's irony had an edge. Jenny didn't smile. "Jenny, there are no rattlesnakes in New York City."

"You assume that," she answered. The fact didn't mitigate Rosy's value to her. "We don't know where Erika will end up living," she added. She set the box on the floor. "She shouldn't be afraid." She opened the lid, and with evident effort, she reached in her hand, and she drew forth the snake. She held the snake behind its head.

"Oh, my God!" Kay declared. The two-foot Rosy dangled from Jenny's arm flicking her tongue from side to side. "Jenny, it's going to bite you! Put it back."

"She won't hurt me," Jenny recited.

"What if it gets loose. Erika's just a child," Kay insisted.

"She's Erika's snake. She won't hurt Erika."

Kay stared at Jenny as if she were an alien being. She and Jenny had worked together as reporters years ago. She'd been the one who introduced Jenny to Mark. She never had understood Jenny; she wondered that Mark did. She saw now in Mark's face his concern. "Jenny," she tried more patiently, "don't you think Erika is too young for a snake?" She moved to the coffee table by the bird, who had begun making low guttural noises as if it sensed the threat.

"Why don't you ask Erika?" Erika was holding Rosy's tail and stroking her. She hadn't even noticed the bird on the table.

"I hardly think she'd know," Kay answered.

Jenny replaced the snake in the box and closed the lid. "Well . . . that's a difference between you and me." Without elaborating, she proceeded with Erika to her room.

Kay searched Mark's face for a shared reaction, but Mark's expression had

turned inwards. "Excuse me," he said and started after Jenny, but before he got to the door, Jenny returned. She was carrying her briefcase.

"I'm going out to work now," she said. "Erika says she's hungry. She hasn't had much of a nap so she should go to bed early."

"Where are you going?" Mark moved towards her.

"Out."

"Where?" He took hold of her arm gently, but she met his eyes with a look which told him not to try to stop her.

"I'm going out to work," she repeated. Glancing into the living room, she added, "If I were you, I'd hang that bird up before the cat eats it." Then she lifted Rosy with her lidless eyes onto the hall table and left her there to watch over her family.



In the living room Kay watched Mark, who stood for a moment without moving, then running his hand through his hair, he turned from the door. He yanked his tie from around his neck and threw it on the chair in the hall. Kay looked away. She lifted the birdcage and carried it over to the window where she strained to raise it to the hook on the pole. Mark stepped over to help her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess Jenny's mad at us?"

Mark glanced at her. He started to say, "There is no *us*, Kay," but he didn't bother. He was furious at Jenny. He had come home needing to talk to her. As he'd left his meeting, he'd wanted to be with his wife and listen to her set his world in order, to comfort her too and help ease her pain, whatever it was. But now she had walked out on him for reasons he didn't even understand. The fact that she misinterpreted what she saw with Kay angered him even more. In his mind he justified himself and censured her for not knowing him better. Yet lingering behind his arguments was the possibility that he was at fault, at least he wasn't entirely guiltless. His infidelity was not that he wanted to have an affair with Kay but that Kay fed some vanity of his, some perception of himself as . . . well, noble or good. That was it, wasn't it? And Jenny saw and knew this vanity and had turned her back on it. He didn't answer Kay's question. Instead he asked, "You want to have dinner with us?"

"Yes. I'd like that," she answered. She was arranging the newspaper in the bottom of the bird's cage and picking up stray birdseed and putting it back in the feeder. She didn't look at him.

Mark moved into the kitchen. Kay followed. "What shall we have?" she asked.

Mark opened the cupboard and took down a can of soup. "Whatever you like."

Kay opened the refrigerator. "Would you like grilled cheese sandwiches? I make an outstanding grilled cheese sandwich."

"Fine." Mark emptied soup into a pot as Kay explored the vegetable drawer, pulling out tomatoes and mushrooms. She set a skillet on the stove and dropped in a slab of butter, then began slicing mushrooms into the pan. She was still wearing her white wool dress from the morning and high-heeled gray leather boots. As the mushrooms sizzled, she sat at the table, lifted up her leg to the chair and unzipped her boots.

She returned to the stove in her stocking feet. "I don't cook much for myself," she said, "but I think you'll like this." Mark didn't answer. He was staring at the water running in the sink. "Actually I enjoy cooking for someone else." Already she was imagining herself as the woman in his house. Today had only confirmed what she'd sensed when she'd first visited two weeks ago. With no other reference than her own, she assumed the discontent she saw between Jenny and Mark arose from their discontent with each other; and now quietly, benignly even, with a show of goodwill, she was considering what kind act she might extend to Jenny as compensation for her husband.

Because Mark didn't see the consequence of his own goodwill towards Kay, he didn't imagine the hurt his next words caused. "After dinner could you baby-sit Erika for a while?" he asked.

Kay glanced at him. She wiped her blonde hair from her face with the back of her hand. "Where are you going?"

"I want to find Jenny. We need to talk."

"Oh . . ." She pushed the mushrooms about with a spatula. "Well . . . I've been out all day, Mark . . . what with David and buying that bird. I haven't done any work myself." She hesitated. She searched his face. Perhaps he needed to find Jenny to discuss the breach between them, but his face offered her no encouragement. She didn't know what she did see, but she saw no clear opening for herself. She answered, "I've got quite a lot to do before tomorrow. Ordinarily I'd be glad to help, but . . ."

Mark just nodded. He poured the water into the saucepan.

Mark and Kay and Erika ate chicken noodle soup and cheese and mushroom and tomato sandwiches in silence at the kitchen table. Erika was so tired that she almost fell asleep twice with her head beside her plate. After

dinner Mark revived her long enough for Kay to present the bird, but by then she was too sleepy to focus on it. Mark carried her into her room where he put her to bed in her clothes.

In the living room Kay had gathered up her briefcase and was waiting at the table for Mark. She'd put back on her boots and her white coat with the white fox collar. "I imagine I'll be quite late," she said, standing when he entered. "You still keep your key over the door? I'll just take a couch . . . in your study or in the living room, whatever's available."

Mark walked her to the door. "I'm sorry I can't help you out, Mark." She forced a smile. "Maybe Jenny will be home soon." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek; then she walked away with the awkward, flat-footed gait of a child.

It was 6:30. The apartment was quiet. In the living room the new bird was clicking its tongue against its beak as if trying to decide what words to offer in its new home. Mark walked about the silent rooms. He was wide awake, unable to work. Downstairs the neighbors were arguing with each other. Mark stood in the middle of the living room listening, then he went to the phone and dialed their apartment. The argument stopped for a moment as Mrs. Rousseau answered: "Now? . . . Well, well, yes. All right. Fifteen minutes," she said.

Mark went to the bedroom, where he took off the sweater and shirt he'd been wearing all day. In his undershirt he stood at the sink and washed his face. He lathered his cheeks and shaved off the day's shadow, then he brushed his teeth and returned to the bedroom. He put on a fresh blue shirt and blue crewneck sweater.

Returning to the kitchen, he began to wash the dishes while he waited for Mrs. Rousseau. Whenever Jenny was upset with him for reasons he didn't understand, he washed dishes. The ritual dated back to one of their earliest arguments about household chores, and the act had an unspoken meaning between them. It was an admission of his own helplessness in the face of feelings he didn't comprehend. When Mrs. Rousseau arrived, he told her he didn't know how long he would be. He went in and kissed Erika again and covered her up. At Erika's request he moved the snake, sleeping now coiled in the sand, into her room, settling it onto a shelf with her toys so that Rosy would be there to greet her when she woke up; then he went to find his wife.

