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Ever Since Eden  
by Laura Resnick  
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The dream always begins the same way. I'm in the reptile house at the zoo. How did I get here? I am incredulous. I never go into the reptile house. The last time I was in here was 1975, when my skunk of a brother dragged me inside by my left braid and smooshed my face against the glass of the coral snake's cage.

The musty smell in here is unmistakable, remembered across the span of years. It is a reptilian odor, the stench of something legless and silent. It is mingled with the smell of my own fear.

It is shadowy in this building, as it always has been, and each shadow is a slithering menace. I must leave immediately. If I don't, I'll undoubtedly have nightmares tonight. I begin looking for the exit. I try to be casual, nonchalant. I don't want the other visitors to know I'm sweating with terror and trying not to throw up. I've vomited in here before, but that was twenty-five years ago. I'm a grown woman now, and it would be very embarrassing.

Then I realize there are no other visitors. Just me. I'm all alone in here. With them. I start to panic. I run toward the exit, but it just gets farther away. The hall grows larger, longer, darker. And narrower. The glass-fronted cages are suddenly very close to me, lining either side of this endless tunnel.

I try to swallow my terror and think clearly. This is a public building. There has to be a way out. Sinuous figures twist, rise, slide, and twine in my peripheral vision. A triangular shaped head weaves toward me. I leap forward. A pointed tail wiggles away from me.

I realize there is no glass in front of the cages.

There is nothing between them and me. I panic.

They start escaping. Slowly, at first, one by one. A green mamba slides to the floor and blocks my path. A gaboon viper -- short, fat, and deadly -- flops at my feet like a dead fish, trying to turn over and strike me. A garter snake twines around a branch in its cage and slowly extends its head toward me, as if curious.

I back up, gulping, shaking, trying to call for help.

They start escaping in droves, slithering along the walls, in and out of each other's cages, along the floor. They are everywhere. I cannot move without touching one. I cannot escape.

A sidewinder comes for me. I step back and trip over a rock python. It twines around my ankle. I shake it off and nearly fall. I put a hand out for balance. My fingers brush across a water moccasin. It looks straight at me and

opens its mouth to display its poison sacks. I am paralyzed as I watch it move to strike.

\* \* \* \*

"And I wake up screaming," I tell my analyst.

"What do snakes mean to you?"

"Sheer unadulterated terror."

"Why?" Dr. Seltzer asks.

"I don't know."

"Think about it."

Ninety-five dollars an hour this is costing me.

"Look, Doc, I've read that this is the third most common phobia in America. You must have read some literature on the subject, heard a lecture or two. What do you think snakes mean?"

"The question is: what do they mean to you?"

"I'm way ahead of you. I know what Freud said. But when the grass rustles near me, and I jump sky high and go white as a sheet, it's not because I'm afraid a penis is creeping up on me."

She chuckles. I wonder if I can get a rebate for entertaining her. I'm spending more than a dollar a minute to resolve something which is so deeply buried in my subconscious I can't explain or control it; yet it is so powerful it has affected -- occasionally even ruled -- my life.

\* \* \* \*

"What do you mean, ruled?" Dr. Seltzer asked me about twenty-five hundred dollars ago.

Here's an example. I will never again set foot in Texas. While this is not in and of itself an aberration (I know lots of people who will never set foot in Texas), I should add that I once had a decent job and very good lover there. I left them both one fine summer's day; and given the same set of circumstances, I'd do it again.

I had a teaching job near San Antonio. Jake was a mile-high cowboy who didn't like to talk all that much, but he loved good music, had a dry sense of humor, and knew exactly what to do with a woman when the curtains were drawn. I got off work late one Friday afternoon and stopped at the corner store to get gas and a six-pack before meeting Jake at my place.

I was still at the pump when a pick-up truck pulled up right next to me. The man who got out of it was dripping with sweat and shouting. He also had a six-foot long snake dangling from his right hand.

I was inside the store and hiding behind the cash register before I realized that he wasn't just trying to scare me with the creature he held dangling from his fist. He was in trouble. Things got pretty chaotic when he followed me inside. I screamed and threw up. Several other people screamed. The cashier phoned 911 and screamed for help while simultaneously screaming at the man to get the hell out of her store. And the man was babbling wildly, trying to ask for help.

The thing had bitten him in his own yard, and for reasons which elude me to this day, he had chased it under his porch and captured it. It bit him a second time. He seized it by the throat and was taking it with him to the Emergency Room; this way, he claimed, the doctors could identify it and give him the correct treatment.

As far as I was concerned, shooting this idiot would be the correct treatment. The young police officer who arrived a couple of minutes later seemed to agree with me, since he approached the store with his gun cocked and pointed straight at the man.

"Sir, put the snake down!" the cop cried.

"Where's the hospital?" the man screamed, red-faced and shaking. The snake wriggled.

"Don't put it down!" I screamed. I was cornered behind the cash register. My refuge had become a trap.

"Put down the snake!" the cop shouted, his gun shaking. "I'm going to shoot it."

"No, no! The hospital! I've got to get it to the hospital!"

"Sir, you're hysterical! I think you may be delirious! Now put the snake down!"

"You afraid of snakes, son?" the cashier asked the cop.

The cop pointed the gun at her. She hit the deck. I never took my eyes off the snake. I had a plan. If the man dropped it, I'd climb up on the refrigerator unit.

"I think that thing is dead," the cashier said to me when the two men went back to shouting at each other. "It couldn't breathe with the death-grip that guy's had on its throat all this time."

I apologized for throwing up in her store.

The cop finally convinced the man to drop the snake. I jumped on top of the refrigerator unit and cracked my tailbone. The cop fired six shots at the snake, which danced all over the floor until it finally lay in a motionless, mangled heap. The cop dragged the raving man out to his squad car and took off.

I went home, packed up my belongings, and left Texas forever.

Now, you may think this story is a feeble reason to abandon not only job and boyfriend, but to also eliminate any chance of ever again setting foot in the biggest state in the coterminous United States. Frankly, that's what Dr. Seltzer thinks.

But I notice she's not living in Texas.

\* \* \* \*

I've tried hypnotherapy. I saw a lot of shiny, white cubes floating in space and I gave up smoking, but my daytime fears and nightmare horrors remained unchanged. Regression revealed nothing except the fact that my brother was an absolute shit who frequently took advantage of an already existing fear. I even tried past life regression and learned that I was Scarlet O'Hara in my previous incarnation; I didn't have the heart to tell the excited hypnotist that Scarlet was fictional.

I tried the educational approach, too. All it did was horrify me. I now know things I wish I'd never learned. For example: snakes can't close their eyes; no eyelids. Isn't that disgusting? Imagine a snake lying on a rock, just peering and peering and peering at you, never blinking, never closing its eyes, for all eternity.

They don't piss, either. Their bodily waste emission is a sort of pasty substance. They conserve bodily fluids, getting most of what they need from the prey they devour.

They have two kinds of locomotion. They undulate when they want to move fast; otherwise, they walk on their ribs. They have no vocal chords. They smell with their tongues. They can't hear; they register your approach by vibrations on the ground. (Hence, the heavy, stomping walk I adopt whenever I suspect my surroundings).

I used to buy flashcards at every zoo and natural history museum I visited. I can now identify almost any snake in existence and tell you all about its habits, physiology, habitat, and prey.

The acquisition of so much knowledge did not dissipate my ophidian fears. On the contrary, the ways I could consciously and unconsciously terrify myself seemed to multiply geometrically. I responded accordingly. After learning about urban snakes, I moved into an apartment that was at least six blocks away from the nearest patch of grass. I refused to visit a cousin living in a trailer; I knew that snakes get into the plumbing and walls of mobile homes. I did everything I could think of to ensure I would never again see another one.

But the dream always begins the same way.

\* \* \* \*

"Have you seen the papers today?" I ask Dr. Seltzer.

"No."

"A man in Texas walks into a major discount department store. He goes to the automotive department and reaches up to pull down an oil filter. Puts

his hand atop a stack of these things." I mime him reaching above his head.  
"And he gets bitten by a rattle snake."

"In the store?"

"In the store."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Like I was right to leave Texas."

Dr. Seltzer returns to her favorite question. What do snakes mean to me?

"Ultimate evil," I say, thinking this sounds good.

"Go on," she says.

Those two words, I estimate, cost me sixty cents apiece.

I think back to the days before my mother got divorced and became a Unitarian. I remember the incense-scented church and the chubby, white-haired priest who seemed to live with his arms spread at a forty-five degree angle. He didn't speak, he intoned. And the snake, he told us, was the most cunning of all God's creatures.

"Subtle, sneaky, insidious," I say. "It was the snake who seduced Eve."

"Interesting. You said you weren't religious."

"I'm speaking metaphorically. Anyhow, the writers of Genesis obviously shared my feelings in this particular area, and that was thousands of years ago." This makes me feel validated.

I am about to develop my theme. Then Dr. Seltzer says our time is up.

\* \* \* \*

The dream always begins the same way. I am in the reptile house at the zoo. How did I get here? I am incredulous...

At the moment that I realize there are no other visitors, the Egyptian Cobra crawls forward and speaks to me. It sounds like Anthony Hopkins in Silence of the Lambs.

"Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree in the garden?"

"Where are the oil filters?" I ask.

"Eat from the tree and you will find them."

"Can't you just tell me where they are?"

"Here, let me show you." The cobra slides forward.

I realize there is no glass between us. "Wait! No!"

The cobra strikes.

\* \* \* \*

"And I wake up screaming."

"Are you sure you've never been bitten by a snake?" Dr. Seltzer asks.

"Never. Even if I blocked it out, I'm sure my mother would know." My mother has always been baffled by a phobia which, she says, I've had since I was a toddler.

"Perhaps you should start coming twice a week," Dr. Seltzer suggests.

\* \* \* \*

One year and nearly ten thousand dollars later I stop seeing Dr. Seltzer. Analysis is getting me nowhere, though my sessions have contributed amply to the tuition fees of Dr. Seltzer's oldest son, so at least someone has benefitted.

I continue to live a life governed by this single, obsessive fear. In other ways I am quite normal. Really. I hold down a job, occasionally date, pay my bills, eat Healthy Choice frozen dinners followed by a pint of Ben and Jerry's Chubby Hubby, play racquetball, buy all my underwear in the January sales, read Sara Paretsky, and vacation at the beach.

But the dream always begins the same way.

\* \* \* \*

I am in the reptile house at the zoo. I am awake this time. I know I am because I enter and leave several times, just to make sure it can be done.

After long and strenuous thought, I have decided that the truth lies here. The dream always begins here and now. All my other attempts to conquer this phobia have failed, so I have come to confront this moment, this place.

I walk slowly down the aisle. The musty smell in here is unmistakable,

remembered across the span of years. It is a reptilian odor, the stench of something legless and silent. It is mingled with the smell of my own fear. I leave the building again, just to make sure I can, then force myself to re-enter it.

My eyes adjust as I force my feet to keep taking steps. It is shadowy in this building, as it always has been, and each shadow is a slithering menace. A little boy runs past me, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

The green mambas are involved in a mating ritual. He stimulates her body, moving his head over and over her length, again and again. They twine around each other, their lithe, green bodies twisting in the branches of the tree. There is something hideously, distressingly erotic about it. The serpent beguiled Eve; now, watching the mambas writhe ecstatically in their tree, I finally understand how. Repulsed, I back away.

The Egyptian cobra sits up and spreads its hood as I approach its cage. Its obsidian eyes stare directly into mine. Its pose frightens me. I remind myself that the Egyptian cobra is a slow striker. I should have time to move back if it attempts to bite me. Then I remember it's in a cage.

Feeling silly, I walk away so the next visitor can have a good look at it. Then I glance around and realize there are no other visitors. The small boy and his family have left. No one else has entered. I am alone. With them.

I leave the building, just to make sure I can. Aware that I have not yet found whatever it is I'm seeking, I force myself to go back inside. I pass the cages I have already visited and continue where I left off.

The anaconda hides in its small jungle pool, curled beneath the fallen limb of a tree to conceal itself from unwary prey. Its unblinking eyes peer up at the painted walls of its cage. It waits for something -- or someone -- to come down to the river for a drink, a bath, a bucket of water. It waits for a child, it waits for a woman, it waits for me. There is enmity between us, as God promised the serpent, as the priest promised me. Nausea, hatred, and fear engulf me as I watch the blank, evil face which watches for a sign of its next victim. It is ancient and eternal, this horror.

I walk on, increasingly overcome by revulsion. Maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea. What am I accomplishing? I'm already shaking and covered with a sheen of sweat. Better to leave before I start gibbering. I walk past the king snake and follow the tunnel round to the exit. I stop short. The exit is blocked. A sign says: Please Return to the Main Entrance. I don't want to go back. I step forward and try the door handle. It's locked.

I turn around and look down the long corridor. I've never suffered from claustrophobia, but I feel the building closing in on me now. I'll have to go all the way back. Damn, damn, damn. I stand in the shadowy corner, breathing deeply and trying to calm down.

A kid approaches. He looks thirteen or fourteen. He peers at each snake avidly, clearly fascinated by them. He obviously doesn't see me. I feel soothed by the presence of another person. In another minute I'll be able to face the walk back to the entrance, past all those cages.

The kid reaches into his daypack and pulls out a cloth sack and a hammer. Before I realize what's happening, the little bastard smashes open one of the glass cages and reaches inside. He's pulling a black mamba out of the cage by the time I start screaming. The shrill sound of my terror startles him, and he looks over his shoulder at me, wide-eyed with surprise. The second mamba strikes him.

The boy screams and lets go of the snake in his hand as he reels back against the opposite wall, sobbing and clutching his arm. The black mamba is a very aggressive snake, I recall as I watch both reptiles spill out onto the floor and wriggle in agitation. The venom is deadly, the bite painful and quite often fatal.

I crouch in my corner, screaming. The serpent beguiled me to come here. The dreams called me forth, and now I am trapped with the devil.

The boy flails at the mambas. Why doesn't the idiot just run away? One

of them strikes him again. He falls, screaming. Why doesn't someone come? Can't anyone hear us?

With the boy blocking their path and with me on their other side, the mambas feel threatened. They rise up, watching, warning, awaiting their opportunity.

I try the door again, pushing with all my might. There must be a lever for emergency access or something. As I turn, I feel sharp daggers in my calf. I look down just in time to see the creature flex away from me. The poison seeps into my system. I am still screaming as I hit the floor and feel another agonizing bite, this time on my arm. I flail, hit back, fight against yet another strike.

"Don't move! Hold still!" someone cries.

I see lights and shadows, then nothing. The screaming has stopped, but someone is sobbing in agony. I think it's me.

"Don't move!"

The dream is always the same.

"Jesus Christ! Get a medic down here! Call an ambulance! Oh, dear Jesus God!"

I can hear my desperate heart, smell my own mortality, taste my own death.

"Oh, God, God! Someone help her!"

My destiny has come for me.

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