



**BLUE  
SKIES  
T.C. BOYLE**

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# BLUE SKIES

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T. C. BOYLE

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*For Marie Alex and Griff Stevens*



Blue skies  
Smiling at me  
Nothing but blue skies  
Do I see.

—IRVING BERLIN



# PART I



# 1

## THEY WERE LIKE JEWELRY

THEY WERE LIKE JEWELRY, LIVING JEWELRY, AND SHE COULD see herself wearing one wrapped round her shoulders to Bobo's or the Cornerstone and sitting at a sidewalk table while people strolled by and pretended not to notice. It would make a statement, that was for sure. She'd put on a tube top so you could see the contrast it made with her bare skin—black, definitely black, and she'd wear her black jeans too and maybe her fedora—and she'd just look down at her drink or up at Todd as if nothing were out of the ordinary. And he'd go along with it too, she was sure he would—they were in that phase of their relationship where he'd given her a ring and they'd moved in together and she could have just about anything she wanted.

Except a baby. *Are you joking, or what? I'm no way even close to being ready for that, and plus the expense, Jesus.* He wouldn't let her have a dog either—or even a cat. He was allergic. Hair. Dander. Fleas. And did she have any idea of what his parents had to spend on inhalers and injections and the rest of it when he was a kid? She didn't. And at this point

she didn't care. Talk about impulse buying—the minute she walked through the door and saw them glittering there in their plexiglass cases she knew she had to have one.

The shop was called Herps and it was located on the fringe of the shopping district, where the fast-food places were and the auto supply and a couple hole-in-the-wall Haitian and Cuban restaurants. She wouldn't even have noticed it, let alone pushed through the door, if she hadn't been so bored. Todd was having the car detailed and he couldn't just leave it there and trust them to do the job—no, he had to look over their shoulders while they plied their rags and toothbrushes and sealants, making sure they were on top of it. That was just the way he was, a perfectionist, and he liked to say that the two of them were a good match because she was an imperfectionist. Which might have been passive-aggressive but really wasn't far from the truth. So opposites attract—wasn't that the way of biology?

She'd been looking for a bar, thinking a mojito would brighten her afternoon, when she saw the snake there in the window, thick as a truck tire and stretched out on an artificial branch canted up off the floor at a forty-five-degree angle. It was chocolate-colored, with gold lattice-work that ran the length of it like a pattern in a catalogue. Its eyes were hard cold beads. Its tongue flicked in and out. Most of all, it was *present* in a way most things in this world definitely weren't. She stared at it for a long moment, falling into a kind of trance till the reflection of a car wheeling by on the street behind her brought her out of it. Of course, she'd seen snakes before—at the zoo, in the nature films on TV, smeared across the blacktop on one country road or another—but she'd never really looked at one, not until now, when the abstraction and the actual fused into an idea, a want, a need, a sudden need so pressing it constricted her throat. She paused a moment to dig the Dasani bottle out of her purse and take a long lukewarm swallow before she swung round and stepped inside.

The place was dimly lit, all the light radiating from the individual display cases. The cases lined the walls and stood end to end on low



tables in the middle of the room, some with lizards or frogs or turtles isolated inside them, but most with snakes, which lay there motionless like so many bolts of material in a fabric shop. There was a smell too, subtle and dry, a smell of process, and she thought about that, the snakes unhinging their jaws to take in their prey—mice or rats, wasn't it? Or rabbits for the big ones. And then what? Shitting, she supposed. Snake shit, and what was that like? Was that what she was smelling? They must have pissed too, though she'd read somewhere they reabsorbed most of their moisture. Or maybe Cooper had told her, her brother the biologist, who knew everything.

The snakes barely stirred, but for the one right in front of her nosing in slow motion at the clear plastic lid of its container, so calm and unhurried it could have been narcotized. It was a snake in a box and it had nowhere to go—the box was everything, the box was the world—which somehow struck her as sad. Shouldn't they have more room—a terrarium where they could stretch out to their full length, with rocks and dirt or at least sand? Didn't snakes like sand? Or was that only desert snakes? The term *sidewinder* came into her head along with the quick flash of an image from a nature show, a dun snake looping across a barren landscape, the engine of its own intention. But this one, the one before her, was beautiful, they all were, as if somebody had dipped a brush in acrylics and traced the lines that radiated in a widening V from their mouths to draw reticulate patterns across their backs and down their sides. She was drifting from case to case, peering inside, *shopping*, when a guy was there suddenly, appearing from a door in back she hadn't noticed, and she realized he must have been watching her on closed-circuit TV, maybe from one of those ergonomic office chairs you could push all the way back till you were practically levitating because there was no reason for him to be on his feet in a deserted store in the middle of the day.

“You looking for anything in particular?”

He leaned a hip casually against the waist-high table supporting several of the cases in the aisle, his face lit from below like a Halloween

trick, the brightness settling in his nostrils and sharpening the tip of his nose. He was about her age, or maybe a year or two older, and he wasn't chunky or fat but just undefined in the way of a whole generation of guys who played video games compulsively through all the hours of every day of the week, of which Todd, thankfully, wasn't one.

"I don't know," she said, "tell me about them. I mean, they're gorgeous. Are these the prices here, these numbers on the side?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, but if you see something you really like, I'm always willing to bargain—I breed them, you know? That's my thing in life."

"This one, for instance," she said, leaning over the case nearest her, where a milky pale snake maybe two feet long and decorated with neatly defined bars the color of lemon peel lay inert on its belly, looking at nothing. "What's his story?"

"That's a banana-coral glow. A ball python morph?" He swept a hand in the air. "All these right here? They're all balls. I just got back from Repticon over in Kissimmee—the big expo?"

She nodded, though she had no idea what he was talking about. He was trying to sell her something and she was going to buy it. These were the preliminaries. Part of the price was to listen to him talk.

"And I just laid them out, even my rarer hybrids, in case somebody stopped by. The really primo ones go back over to my house when I close up at seven, but I am in business and most of what you see's for sale."

"It's pretty," she said, then pointed to another, this one the color of dried blood with a black imbricate design like something you'd see in a print top at Anthropologie. "This one too. But the one that really caught my eye is the one in the window, which is too big, I know, but do you have any like that—I mean, that pattern—of maybe this size?"

"Well, yeah, a couple, but most people want balls. They're the fad right now." She followed him across the room to another table, where there were four cases containing snakes just like the one in the window, only smaller, much smaller—a tenth the size, a twentieth, even. They were somehow . . . cute, if you could describe a snake as cute. Self-contained, sleek, vibrant—she couldn't find the adjective, except that at

this size they were proportional, just right. Neat, as her mother would say. “Are they babies?”

“More or less. These are Burmies, Burmese pythons? They banned them for a while a couple years back because of the problem down in the Everglades.”

“They got loose, right? Didn’t I hear about that?”

“People can be totally irresponsible, let’s face it—just look at the thousands of dogs and cats that have to get put down in the shelters every year—but we got that overturned. Owning a snake is a basic constitutional guarantee—life, liberty and happiness, right? And nothing’ll make you happier than having a snake in your life, and while the anoles and the bearded dragons and all that are fine in their own way, for kids especially, a snake’s the real deal, you’ll see.” He paused. He had a polka-dot kerchief knotted round his neck—to soak up the sweat, she supposed. It was hot outside, hotter in here. He took a minute to unknit the kerchief, slap it against his thigh two or three times as if that would do any good, then stuff it in his pocket. “First time, right?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“No, no, it’s exciting,” he said. “It’s like, welcome to the club. And I love the Burmies, don’t get me wrong—they make great pets, but they do tend to get big.” He was gazing steadily at her now, delivering his pitch, and she wondered if her face was flattened by the lights the way his was, which, of course, it must have been—which only added to the sense of intimacy, of initiation, because this was cool, so very cool, a whole new world opening up to her on a day that was otherwise as ordinary as the two poached eggs on wheat toast she’d ordered at the diner before they brought the car in.

“So what’s the difference, if I take one of these four here—they’re all the same, right? I mean, is one healthier than another or different to your eye? Which one would you pick?”

“Your choice. They’re all from the same mother.”

It took her a moment. “You mean the one in the window?”

“As I say, they get big. You keep it for its life span—and you’re going

to want to, I promise you, because it's a trip and you're really going to get attached to it—but say that's twenty years, or even twenty-five at the outer limit? This little guy here”—he tapped the near case with a forefinger—“could wind up nineteen, twenty feet long, though they average out at something like twelve or thirteen.” He paused, gave her a steady look. For some reason, an image of that mojito she'd been looking for appeared dead center in her mind, frosted and festive. She could feel the sweat on her scalp. Her throat was dry. Her shorts clung to her as if she were dancing a slow dance with an invisible partner. “The balls are smaller,” he said. “Which, truthfully, is why they're more popular right now. That and the really cool morphs people've been creating.”

Todd was going to be surprised. Todd was going to smile and say, “Cool,” but underneath it he was going to resist. Or maybe not, maybe he'd get into it with her, maybe she'd buy him one too and he'd wear it along with her when they went out, just to show off a little, and why not? Why not be different for a change? There was more to life than work and takeout for dinner and Netflix and sitting out on the deck watching the tide carry the beach away as if they were already a hundred years old. But she was getting ahead of herself. And really, Todd didn't need the attention—he got that at work. She tapped the case in front of her. “That's the price here, in Magic Marker? Three-fifty?” The snake seemed to glance up at her then, though its eyes were so opaque she really couldn't tell.

“Yeah. And these are a real bargain. Compared to the balls.”

“You're willing to go down, right?”

“Make it an even three,” he said.



IT WAS PROBABLY HOTTER INSIDE than out, but at least it was out of the sun. The minute she went through the door, riding the high of her new purchase, the sun started building invisible walls all around her. This was fall, hurricane season, and though she loved it, loved

Florida, loved Todd, she missed California on days like this when you were instantaneously converted into a sweat machine and the air was so heavy it was like walking neck-deep through a river that kept fanning out in front of you as far as you could see. Her legs went dense on her. Her tee was glued to her back and her bra straps were like wet rawhide. *Mojito*, she murmured, repeating it under her breath, *mojito, mojito, mojito*, as if she were playing a game, and she began to laugh to herself as cars punched through the wall of light one after the other, their windows rolled up, air-conditioners cranked.

But wait—was that a bar across the street? It was. A place called Cora's, neon sign, double door with awninged windows flanking it, no tables outside, just an expanse of blotched and spat-over sidewalk. A parrot screamed from one of the battered-looking palms that limped down both sides of the street. And here was a jetliner, fat as a blimp, just hanging there in the sky on its descent to the airport. She didn't like going into strange bars alone, guys hitting on her, old men too, or just the way they looked at her, but this was an emergency, wasn't it? And a celebration. She'd have a drink and then call Todd and tell him she had a surprise for him, and if he wasn't done yet and the place was tolerable—really, all that mattered right now was air-conditioning—maybe she'd have another.

The snake was in a cloth bag imprinted with the name of the store just like any other purchase, except, of course, that you couldn't put it in a plastic bag because it wouldn't be able to breathe, as the guy who'd sold it to her—R.J.—had explained, though it should have been obvious. He'd sold her a tank for it too, a hundred gallons, which seemed too big until she thought of the mother in the window, and she'd taken three bags of aspen- and coconut-fiber bedding, as well as a dozen frozen mice for food (*fuzzies*, the next stage up from *pinkies*, which were newborns without fur, another thing she'd just learned today), all of which she and Todd would pick up on the way home. That was fine, and she was already thinking about where she'd set the tank up, in the living room next to the TV where everybody could see it or maybe in the

bedroom where it would be the first thing she'd see when she opened her eyes in the morning, aside from Todd, that is. But Todd didn't glisten. Or writhe. Except when they were having sex—and then she was laughing again because the snake's name had suddenly come to her. She'd call him Willie. And if people asked her about it—and they would—she'd just widen her eyes and say, *It's a private joke.*

R.J. had offered to hold the snake for her till she came back, but she'd shaken her head no. She wanted the thrill of carrying it with her like any new purchase and though it couldn't have weighed more than a can of tomato paste, she was enjoying the solidity of it there in the bag dangling from her right wrist as she debated whether to cross the street here or trudge all the way up to the light . . . but Jesus, it was hot. Which must have been nice for Willie, but it was killing her. She shot a glance both ways, timing the traffic, then crossed the street in a quick skipping stride, pulled open the door of the bar and ducked inside.

She liked the place right away, mainly because it was deserted but for the bartender—a woman, middle-aged, with coral earrings and a generic Northern European face not much different from her mother's, actually, who would turn out to be none other than Cora herself—and a couple, also middle-aged, sharing a plate of taquitos at the bar. All three of them gave her a nod of greeting as if she'd been coming here at two in the afternoon every day for the past six years. Which made her feel she'd lucked out as she made her way up to the bar and took a seat two stools down from the couple, giving them their space, and waited for the bartender to ask the question to which she'd had the answer for the better part of the past hour now. The music was unobtrusive—jazz of some sort—the air-conditioning set so low it was practically arctic, and all the usual bottles lined up on a tier of shelves behind the bar, including, she saw right away, the Flor de Caña white rum that was the only rum on the planet as far as she was concerned. For mojitos, anyway.

She'd gulped half her drink down before she realized what she was doing—she was that thirsty—then asked for another and a glass of ice water and took out her phone to call Todd.

“Hey,” he said, picking up on the first ring.

“You done yet?”

“I don’t know, Cat, another half hour maybe? You okay? Where are you?”

“A bar.”

“A bar? Isn’t it a little early in the day?”

“I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Really? Like one of those surprises where you saved a hundred dollars because the dress you bought was on sale? That kind of surprise?”

“No. It’s something for both of us.”

She could hear noises in the background, the usual thumping and banging, men’s voices, oldies rock echoing hollowly off the walls, and she thought he was going to say something more, make another snide comment or at least ask what it was, but he didn’t, so she just said, “Call me when you’re done.”



SHE TOOK HER TIME WITH the second drink, playing with her phone and idly fishing through the nuts in the smudged glass dish on the bar in front of her. There was a soccer game on TV, not that it meant anything to her—it was just there, always there, in every bar extant, imprinting images on your brain through every minute of the day. And night. They played soccer at night too, at least somewhere in the world, and of course there were rebroadcasts for the convenience of those who’d missed out on all the excitement first time around, twenty-two guys in shorts eternally kicking a ball around a field as green as crème de menthe. A drink she hated. How could anybody ever drink that? Or chartreuse? Or Pernod? Or, even worse, drink it and watch soccer?

She’d hooked her purse over the back of the stool, but she kept the cloth bag in her lap, where she could feel the weight of it and communicate a little of her body heat to the snake—to Willie—in case the

air-conditioning was too much for him, but then she didn't know what constituted too much since all this was new to her.

The thought made her impatient. She wanted to get home, see him, admire him, play with him—or at least handle him to establish trust, which was the first step, reinforced by food. Snakes couldn't love you the way dogs or cats could—their brains were too primitive to foster any higher emotions—but R.J. had assured her that it would definitely recognize her and come to regard her if not with love, then equanimity, which was as much as you could hope for. “Can I take him out in public?” she'd asked. “Drape him over my shoulder, I mean? You know, like you see in ads sometimes? Or this one girl I saw in South Beach?—I think she was a model, but she had a snake wrapped around her and it was really, I don't know, eye-catching.”

R.J. had shrugged. “They can get used to anything.”

So now, because Todd wasn't here and wasn't answering her calls and because she was excited and bored in equal measure and maybe a little drunk, she loosened the string at the neck of the bag and ducked her head down to take a peek inside and admire her purchase. The snake was right there, coiled up and staring at her, utterly calm and unconcerned. If he was cold, he didn't show it, but then she realized she wouldn't have known one way or the other—what was he going to do, shiver?

When she glanced up, Cora was right there in front of her, leaning over the bar to get a better look at what she had in her lap. “*Herps?* Don't tell me you bought yourself a snake? From R.J.?”

She nodded. The couple—speedboat tans, hair dyed the exact same rusted-out color as if they'd gone halves on a box of Nice'n Easy—swung their heads round.

“I've got two balls myself. Mohave mystics? You know mystics?”

She felt a secret thrill. She had a snake in a bag—not even on display—and already she could feel the power of it. “No, I'm sorry,” she said. “This is like . . . my first?”

The admission took the power right out of her, but it didn't seem to



faze Cora. Cora wore a ton of lipstick. Her grin was emphatic. “Well, don’t be shy, let’s see it.”

“You mean here?”

“Where else? I’m a certified ophidian lover and Lois and Larry here love everything—right, Lo?—after the second drink, anyway.” There was a mad spike of laughter that ended with Lois coughing into her fist. Up on the TV, the soccer ball got kicked around. “Come on, come on,” Cora insisted, “don’t keep him to yourself, let’s see him already . . .”

The drinks, magnified by her dehydration, were having their effect, but she hadn’t reached the point where she could just randomly stick her hand in a bag that contained a live snake, so she said, “You sure?”

“If it’s a baby python, believe me, he’s not going to bite you. Unless you’ve got a Gaboon viper in there—and I know for a fact R.J. doesn’t handle anything with fangs.” She shot a look to the couple. “Thank God for small blessings.”

Another jag of laughter. This was fine. This was convivial. This was just what she wanted. She pulled back the flap of the bag and slipped her hand inside, not knowing what to expect—pythons could bite, after all, though their teeth were for gripping only and canted backward to ease the swallowing of their pinkies and fuzzies or whatever it was, or so R.J. had told her. What she felt—the snake’s body, its living body—was as smooth and frictionless as leather, no different from the snakeskin purse she had at home (“This small but mighty accessory has the power to take any look from zero to 100 in *seconds*”). In the next moment, it was gliding up her wrist and then her forearm and when she withdrew her hand from the bag, the snake came with it as if it were an extension of her own body, its head weaving and driving forward so that she had to bring her other hand into play while Willie kept shifting back and forth, flicking his tongue and weaving and coursing and trying to climb a ladder in the air only he could see.

“Whoa,” Lois said, bringing both her feet up off the floor and hooking her heels over the rung of her stool. “You’re not going to let that thing loose, are you?”

The jazz, whatever it was, seemed to time its beat to Willie's movements and she shaped her hand into a funnel and he went right through it and into the funnel of her other hand and then back again. She felt like a juggler, felt connected, transported, as if this were what she'd trained her whole life to do, and yes, she was going with the flow. Literally.

Cora said, "He's beautiful. Love the pattern. But that's not a ball, is it?"

"He's a Burmie," she said, and felt the thrill go exponential—from now on she'd be explaining this and all that went with it to everybody everywhere she went, and talk about a conversation starter . . .

"They get really gigantic, you know that—R.J. explained that, didn't he?"

She grinned. "The bigger the better, right?" The truth was, she couldn't really picture it, this little thing that was no thicker around than a sausage and barely two feet long growing up to be a replica of the truck tire in the window across the street, but then that was life, wasn't it? Wasn't that the point? She herself had grown up to look like her mother, at least to the extent that everybody was always saying they must be sisters, which might have been flattering to her mother but was like poison to her, especially when she was a teenager. But here was Willie, who kept stitching the air with the insistent needle of his head, and now he wanted the bartop and not knowing what else to do she gave it to him and in the next minute he was working his way up Cora's arm and Cora was saying, "Yeah, well, he really is a cool snake, absolutely, and I wouldn't want to put a damper on things, but I tell you I would have gone with a ball myself."

After that, Willie had about sixty seconds more of fame and glory and then Cora handed him back to her and she slipped his head into the funnel of her palm, fed him back into the bag and ordered another drink, which Cora said was on her.



SHE NURSED THE DRINK, played with her phone, called Todd three times—without success, because he wasn't picking up. She was tipping back the dregs, tonguing her way around the shreds of muddled mint, starting to get angry, when Todd finally showed up. In the interim, two younger guys in Marlins caps had come through the door in a quick pulse of light and wordlessly occupied stools at the far end of the bar. Far from hitting on her, they never even gave her a glance. Which was the way she wanted it, of course, but it was somehow disappointing too, especially the way she was feeling. The snake was in the bag. She was no longer the center of attention. And she was drunk at three-fifteen on a Saturday afternoon.

All the excitement she'd felt had drained away, which was depressing, and she'd begun to relive old resentments and bugaboos of one sort or another, maybe even muttering to herself for a minute or two there, but then Todd stepped through the door and everything changed—she had a surprise for him and within the hour they'd be at home setting up the terrarium, which, she realized, was going to go perfectly with the Klee reproduction her best friend Melody had given her when she graduated college, or at least Willie was. He was like a reverse image of the design and the perfect shade too—only the painting was static and he wasn't. The plastic arts, and what could be more plastic than this?

She watched Todd standing there just inside the doorway, trying to get his bearings. She didn't wave, though she wasn't angry, not now, not anymore. He slipped off his sunglasses and the look on his face went from mild annoyance (*Is this the right place? She did say Cora's, didn't she?*) to an inflection point of relief and recognition—here she was, foregrounded against a wall of coruscating bottles, Saturday, party in progress, love and all the trimmings like something out of a movie. He gave a little wave and came across the room to her, leaning in for the quick

peck of a public kiss. “Sorry, Cat, but they just didn’t get it right, or not the way I wanted it, and I had to—” He paused. “Is that your second?”

“Yes,” she said, which was true if you were counting from two.

“I guess I’ve got some catching up to do,” he said, waving a hand for Cora, who was deep in conversation with the two Marlins fans at the other end of the bar.

“This is my fiancé, Todd Rivers,” she said when Cora came to take their drink order, and she couldn’t help holding up her left hand to show off her ring, a two-carat ideal-cut diamond set in platinum that had belonged to Todd’s mother. Who was dead, dead now three months, which was why they were living in Florida in a beach house they could never have afforded on their own even if they lived a thousand years. So what if the beach was eroding? At least it was a beach. Which was a whole universe apart from the one-bedroom apartment in Sherman Oaks she’d had since college, featuring a panoramic view of Ventura Boulevard and the fifty thousand cars that scraped and glinted and honked their way by each day. She was sorry Todd’s mother was dead. Sorry she was going to miss the wedding. Sorry for Todd. But to get a chance to live right on the beach with the ocean on one side and an inlet on the other? That made up for all the sorrow she could even begin to conceive of.

“What’re you drinking?” Todd lifted the empty glass and took a sniff. “Don’t tell me it’s Flor de Caña again, *please*. How many times do I have to”—here he looked to Cora and shook his head. “There’s only one *ron* for me, Bacardí. The Reserva Ocho. Do you have it back there?” There were four *r*’s in this speech he could rattle his tongue over, and he took advantage of every one of them, though he didn’t speak more than ten phrases of Spanish. She didn’t begrudge him for showing off. He was a Bacardí ambassador. That was how they paid their bills. Before they were through he’d buy a round for the bar on his ambassador’s account and give Cora his business card. Like a salesman. But he wasn’t a salesman, he was the next rung up and making good money, which made life even better when you got to live

rent-free in your own house with only property taxes and utilities to worry about.

When Cora drifted down the bar to mix their drinks—yes, she was having another—she took hold of Todd’s arm and leaned into him, pressing her forehead to his shoulder and then thumping it twice as if her head were the axe and his body the tree. “I like Flor de Caña, okay?” she said. “So shoot me.”

His face went dark. “You know it’s a business thing, don’t you? At least in public?” The truth was, and this was a secret even the torturers wouldn’t get out of her, Todd didn’t even like rum. When she first met him, his drink was vodka and tonic, but that didn’t make sense anymore because the Bacardí was free and at that price he found he could just as easily drink rum and tonic, with a twist.

“Just teasing,” she said, and that was the truth. She was soaring, so happy in that moment she seemed to be looking down on the room from a great wings-spread height, the couple shrunk down to half their size and the two guys at the end of the bar all but invisible. The walls dissolved, the ceiling lifted off, the sky gleamed. She could see all the way across the street and down the block to where Willie’s mother lay wrapped round the artificial branch in the store window. “Don’t you want to see what I bought?”

He tried to hide the look of alarm or annoyance or whatever it was—he was a good actor and a good guy and he loved her, he did, she knew that, knew it as well as she knew anything. Love was a negotiation, she knew that too. “Yeah, sure,” he said, giving her his big smile, his ambassador’s smile, the smile of a Saturday afternoon when all they had ahead of them now was leisure and pleasure and more of the same. “Sure, what is it?”

“A snake,” she said, letting go of his arm to bring both hands to bear on unloosening the string of the bag in her lap.

“A snake? You got to be joking.”

But here was Willie, weaving up her arm and stabbing his head at the ladder only he could see and Todd said, “Jesus, fuck,” and pushed back

his stool. She almost laughed. His face was so comical, all popped-out eyes and shrinking mouth—if only he could see himself, she thought, and she felt the power all over again. “Put that thing back in the bag, will you? You can’t—what are you thinking?”

“It’s okay, Cora doesn’t mind—she’s got two of them herself. Todd, isn’t he beautiful?”

“Put it away.”

The walls and ceiling fell back into place and the speedboat couple reinflated as if they were blow-up dolls. The thought came to her that Todd was being a jerk. She hadn’t complained when he went out and spent a full third of his mother’s life insurance payout on his top-of-the-line Tesla or when she’d had to tear up her roots to move out here to Sweatlandia or anything else. She made her hand into a funnel and Willie slid into it and she put him back in the bag. There was a fresh drink sitting on the bar at her elbow. She stared into Todd’s eyes, made a mock toast and drank off half of it before setting the glass back down on the bar.

“Jesus,” he repeated, “you amaze me, you really do. A snake? Who buys a snake?”

“Lots of people. Cora does. Just ask her.”

“I’m not asking her, I’m asking you. Where’re you going to keep the thing? Who’s going to take care of it? Huh? Tell me that?”

Cora was watching them from the far end of the bar, which was embarrassing. They were fighting in public, and over what? She’d meant to surprise him and he was spoiling everything.

“I thought next to the TV, actually, where we could watch him during commercials or when the movie gets boring, like that HBO thing about the race car driver you insisted on watching, because really, come on.” She reached for her drink, snatching it off the bar as if it were about to explode, and so what if she spilled a drop or two? So what? “And if you want to know, I bought this walnut stand for the terrarium that’ll be perfect there where your mother’s ugly lowboy is, and why anybody’d ever paint over natural wood is beyond me. And I bought bedding for

him and fuzzies and all the rest, a snake hook too. And don't you worry, I'm going to take care of him a hundred percent. I mean, I thought you'd be happy, Todd. I thought he'd be for both of us."

"Right," he said, "like you took care of the houseplants."

"I told you, they got overwatered. It was your mother. Years of it, the potting soil all leached out—"

"Fuzzies," he said. "What the fuck are fuzzies?"



ON THE DRIVE HOME, the clouds wrote various messages to her, most of them positive. She was feeling better, much better, the purchases loaded in the trunk and Todd making the car sing with the rush of air through the open windows. Everybody argued. Couples who claimed they didn't were liars, the sort of people who seemed just like anybody else on the surface, but cast their ballots for racists and xenophobes in the privacy of the voting booth. She and Todd had already made up—the best way, with a long mutually communicative kiss in the lot out back of Herps, his body pressed to hers up against the door of the car that was so flawless it was as if they'd just driven it off the showroom floor. The air felt good on her face. It was richer than California air, denser, with a smell of the tides that made her feel as if she weren't in a car at all but on a sailboat cutting across the bay. She was half-drunk still, though she'd switched to water, thankfully, when Todd ordered his second round, and as the tires thrummed and the clouds spoke to her and the radio gave her a song she couldn't get enough of, all the excitement she'd lost hold of came rushing back.

The fact was, she couldn't wait to set up the terrarium and let Willie explore his new home—the rocks, the imitation branch, the bedding and what they called a hide, which was like one of the tunnels for the miniature train set she and Cooper had had when they were kids and was designed to give the snake a little privacy so he could feel secure. Curl up in there, close his eyes—but snakes never closed their eyes, did

they? They didn't even have eyelids. But of course snakes slept just like anything else—maybe they even dreamed, who knew? Snake dreams. If you'd told her when she got out of bed this morning that she'd be entertaining the concept of snake dreams, even putting the two words together for probably the first time in her life, she would have laughed aloud. And what was that all about? She didn't know. She didn't care. She could see the evening playing out before her like a movie projected on the concave surface of the windshield—she'd call for pizza, make a salad, sip a glass of wine and just sit there and watch Willie coil and uncoil and flow like a ribbon in a steady breeze while the light softened and faded over the bay and then she'd flick on the bulb in the terrarium and watch him some more.

Todd wasn't maybe as enthusiastic as she was, but he was coming around. He'd bitched about the cost—"Three hundred bucks for a *snake*?"—but when he saw how much it meant to her and had a beat or two to consider how many times she'd given in to him over these past months and how little a thing this was, really, he'd backed off and before long he was tapping his fingers on the dash and singing along with the radio, all sunshine and love. At home, first thing he did was pop the trunk and carry the stand up the stairs, where he helped her shift the lowboy out of the way. Then he went down for the terrarium while she carried up the rest, including the star of the show—Willie—and the fuzzies that had to be kept frozen till it was time to defrost one of them for his weekly dinner. ("Never microwave a fuzzy," R.J. had warned her. "The insides could still be frozen and that'll kill a snake, if you can picture it, since they're cold-blooded and they can't evacuate it till it's digested, right? So the danger is their body temperature drops beyond what they can survive with. Best thing is to heat up some water or better yet chicken broth, for the flavor, and pour it over your fuzzy to thaw it gradually. That's what I do, anyway.")

It didn't take her long to set things up, the hide propped against the rear wall that featured a faux-rock backdrop that was meant to make the terrarium look like a cave—not that any of these snakes had ever



seen a cave before, but it was aesthetically pleasing to the owner, to her, who wanted to imagine the whole thing a scene out of nature, like the dioramas in the natural history museum, with the exception that everything depicted there was dead and stuffed. Water bowl in the corner. Bedding artfully scattered across the floor, though of course Willie would rearrange it to suit himself. And he'd crap in it too, which was why she'd bought three bags of it just to save her an extra trip. She'd picked the rocks out individually from a barrel in the back of the store in order to give the terrarium a more realistic look, and while Todd went into the kitchen to open the wine, she got down on her hands and knees and tried arranging them in various configurations till she was satisfied. Finally, she eased herself down on the Persian carpet the moths were starting to get to in a major league way—fingertip-sized patches gone bald no matter how many times she sprayed and vacuumed—and took a minute to admire her handiwork. It was perfect, a world of her own into which she could insert her imagination and bring something wild into the house other than flies or palmetto bugs. Or moths. And where did *they* come from anyway? Cooper was always bemoaning the decline of flying insects throughout the world, which was a terrible thing, of course it was, but what about carpet moths? Mosquitoes? No-see-ums? She wouldn't miss them, that was for sure.

From the kitchen came the glug and splash of the wine as Todd poured them each a glass, the homiest sound in the world, and she held on to the moment, gulls crying out like the sentinels they were, pelicans riding a string in perfect equipoise over the crenellated surface of the water below.

"I'm ready," she called. "It's the big moment. Come on, let's see how he likes his new home."

Todd drifted in from the kitchen and handed her a glass of wine—a Paso Robles zin he got by the case that was so full-bodied you could almost chew it—and she took a sip, set the glass down on the floor and rose to her feet. Willie was an S-shaped lump in the cloth bag, as well behaved as you could hope for, just lying there patiently on the coffee

table where she'd left him. She lifted the corner of the terrarium's mesh top, unloosened the strings of the bag for the final time and laid it inside on the glass floor amid the shavings, letting Willie do the honors himself. If she'd expected him to be tentative, it was just the opposite—he slid out as if he were being extruded from a piping bag and began exploring the terrain, happy to be free of the bag, sure, but more especially that plexiglass display case R.J. had squeezed him into, which really couldn't have been all that much fun for him, talk about artificial.

“Ta-da!” she sang, and turned to Todd to give his bicep a squeeze and pull him to her for a kiss, a deep kiss, a soul kiss, and in the next moment they were all over each other. She didn't know what she must have smelled like, sweating all day like that, but this was the moment and she was in it, and she tugged the tee up over her head and he helped her with her bra and then they were down on the rug. Of course, the pizza guy rang the bell right in the middle of it and Todd had to pull out of her, step into his shorts and go to the door, but she didn't move and he came right back to her and it was all the hotter because of the interruption, if that made any sense. Then it was the pizza with artichokes and prosciutto and more wine and they both felt so hot they did it again, right there in front of the tank.



FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, even before putting the coffee on, she went to check on Willie. She was feeling fine, considering how much she'd had to drink the day before, though she had the beginnings of a headache and there was a faint acidic gnawing down there deep in the diamond mines of her stomach that the coffee was only going to make worse. Normally she'd fix herself eggs and a medley of fresh fruit—papaya, kiwi, honeydew, blueberries or raspberries or whatever looked good in the market that week—but she thought maybe she'd go for a muffin, blueberry, with a sprinkle of sugar, just to settle her stomach, and skip the coffee. The air was thick enough to sit on. Everything

smelled of rot. Under the impress of her bare feet the floor felt vaguely vegetative, as if a miniature forest had sprung up overnight—mold, the ubiquitous mold the whole state must have been built on. Outside the windows the sky was dark and close and the sea hissed at the shore and somewhere there was the high whine of a speedboat breaking through the endless sound loop of gulls keening and squalling as they picked over whatever the tide had brought in. From the bedroom came another sound of nature—Todd’s cascading snores that were like the last gasps of a drowning man, or no, a manatee, if manatees could drown, which she didn’t think they could.

If he slept on his side, he was okay, but the minute she left the bed, he’d roll over onto his back and start in. He was only twenty-six, but the doctor said he had sleep apnea and lectured him about drinking, how drinking only made it worse, but for Todd—and her too, she’d be the first to admit it—drinking was a way of life. They weren’t athletes, either one of them, not since high school, anyway, when she’d been on the cross-country team junior year and Todd had played baseball, she thought it was, though they walked on the beach once in a while or swam out beyond the breakers when the mood took them, but there was no tennis or jogging or anything like that in their lives. They liked bars. And while they didn’t go out every night, they wound up having drinks at cocktail hour because that was a way to relax, that was what cocktail hour had been invented for, plus Todd’s profession involved drinking and hosting parties to promote the brand. If he snored, it was no big thing. Except when she couldn’t sleep. Then she’d shove him and he’d gasp as if she were pushing him off a cliff and thirty seconds later he’d be snoring again.

The tank was dark because she’d shut out the light when she went to bed, even though in a state of nature Burmies were mostly nocturnal, but then they wouldn’t have had an infrared heat bulb in a state of nature either. Or a night-light, for that matter. She went to the tank and flicked on the light, then settled down on the carpet so she could watch him in the way other people might have watched TV, which made her

feel good, superior, really, because morning TV was nothing but crap anyway. The only thing was, she didn't see him right away. She shifted closer, till she was inches from the tank, studying every angle of it, and, of course, snakes could hide in plain sight, which was what their ravishing patterns were all about—camouflage—but still she didn't see him. She tapped the glass, thinking he must be in the hide, but nothing happened. Finally, and she didn't really want to disturb him but just couldn't help herself, she rose to her feet and unlatched the mesh top, not even noticing that the fastener in the far corner had worked loose because she was new to all this and wouldn't have caught such a minor detail anyway, especially on a morning when she hadn't had her coffee yet and probably wouldn't have any at all, for the sake of her stomach. In the next moment, she reached down for the hide and lifted it out of position, expecting to see Willie coiled up there in the vacant space beneath it, sleeping late, lazy snake, lazy, lazy, lazy—but he wasn't there.

# 2

## ENTOMOPHAGE

BECAUSE OF HER SON, BECAUSE HE WAS AN ENTOMOLOGIST and because she loved him and because it was the right thing to do, Ottilie decided to add insects to her diet. She'd resisted at first, but Cooper had worn her down. The death of the planet, that was his theme. The Anthropocene, our species a curse, et cetera. The polar bears. The monarchs. The frogs. "The planet's dying, can't you see that, Mom?" he'd asked—or actually, demanded—the last time he was over for dinner, which was almost two months ago now, plenty of time to consider all the angles.

She saw it. And she felt guilty about her part in it, every child of Western industrial society burning through thirty-five times the resources as the average Indian or African, but there wasn't much she could do about it aside from cutting her credit cards in two and recycling every scrap of everything that came into the house. She had no problem with the latter proposition—as it was, she rigorously separated items for the recycler and composted the better part of her organic waste. It was the former

that gave her pause, because you had to buy things just to keep the economy going and she'd gone paperless on her credit card statements and all her other bills too, so that was a step in the right direction.

"But actually, the planet's not dying," she'd said, glancing up from the cutting board on which she was dicing peppers, onions and eggplant for the marinara sauce she was preparing for dinner (with the turkey sausage unincorporated in deference to her son, though he'd already complained twice about the smell of it frying in the pan). "Latest I heard it's got at least four and a half billion years left before the sun swells up and boils us all like lobsters in a pot. Or five. Didn't I hear five?"

"Come on," he said. "Cows. Pigs. Goats. Jesus, we're chewing ourselves into oblivion."

"Your father just isn't into vegetarian, you know that."

"That's what I'm saying—you need the protein content, B<sub>12</sub>, choline, amino acids." He'd given her a long look. "Especially as you age. Both of you."

So she went online and bought herself an Entomo Farms cricket reactor in order to produce her own endless supply of high-fiber, low-fat protein while ever more efficiently recycling her kitchen scraps into the bargain. A click of the mouse—and yes, a credit card number—and four days later a three-foot-high box appeared on her doorstep along with a padded envelope stamped LIVESTOCK that rustled and chirped when she picked it up. The reactor was made of plexiglass so that you could watch the life stages of the crickets as they progressed from eggs to larvae to adults, as if the farm itself were a science project—like the ant farms that were all the rage when she was a girl. Only in this case, it was crickets, and the crickets would be harvested as food by way of reducing the methane load produced by the earth's billion or so cattle and the felling of all those forests to provide pasture for them. Not to mention sparing sentient creatures the horror of the slaughterhouse, which was another argument Cooper had used to soften her up. And yes, she'd seen the films of chickens dangling by their feet on a disassembly line, awaiting the whirring blade to decapitate them, and the steers taking

the blow to the head while their knees buckled and they pitched forward in dark avalanches of flesh.

So she felt good about herself as she sorted out the individually plastic-wrapped components, studied the directions and put the thing together, including the drawers for her kitchen scraps and the tray at the bottom to collect the frass, which, according to the promotional literature, made an incomparable high-grade fertilizer for houseplants or for use in the garden. *Are you an avid gardener? Do you grow begonias? Tomatoes? Zucchini? You'll be amazed at the way they'll thrive with even a few teaspoons of this end-product added regularly to your soil.*

Following the directions, she fitted the components together, filled the feeding station with scraps of lettuce and potato peels left over from last night's dinner, then set the reactor in the double sink preparatory to releasing the crickets inside their new home, where they would chirp and breed and begin producing up to a pound of what she'd have to get used to calling meat per week. It was exhilarating, as with any new project, especially one as green and self-redemptive as this, and the most exhilarating part of the process was the final step, the crickets themselves. There they were, scrambling and frantic-legged, all bunched up in the bottom corner of the narrow extra-long plastic bag in which they'd come. They chirped, twitched their antennae, fought for purchase. She shook the bag a few times to dislodge the more adventurous ones and concentrate them before removing the twist tie, upending the bag over the reactor and letting gravity and cricket initiative do the rest.

The sun slanted through the kitchen window, picking out the coffee maker and toaster oven on the countertop, both of which she was going to have to slide down to make way for the cricket farm. Everything was awash in a soft reddish glow, the light refracted through the particulate matter drifting high in the atmosphere from the fires in the Bay Area, and though she knew it was only a matter of time before the chaparral in the hills here in Santa Barbara went up in flames, as it seemed to do every other year, she couldn't help thinking it beautiful. It was different, anyway. A change. The skies had been clear for months, since the end