

## The Snake Steals a Rose

The snake lived in a flower garden which he had inherited and in which, in his younger years, he took to practicing activities such as horse-back riding, frisbee, and slalom-sliding. Lord, he was an outstanding slitherer, highly slippery. World renowned, in fact, for some time. But despite his fame he remained woefully celibate though he did have a lot of sleepovers with lovely little snake-girls who, seeing as the snake was a very very good looking snake, were, time and again, enticed into his home and despite his lackluster or rather nonexistent performance in the hours thereafter, left the next morning quite content having at least found a night's free accommodation which given that the economic climate had forced most of these snake-girls to default on their mortgages was a real champagne-toastworthy accomplishment for them. Indeed, the snake had a very comfortable bed which he always relinquished to his esteemed guest while he the benevolent host would either sleep on the floor or else spend a restless night practicing backflips, soccer-tennis, or jumping off the high-dive at the neighborhood pool, all the while contemplating or perhaps pulling his hair out over what had, as all those before it, begun as a successful night with lots of smiling and giggle-induced forearm-grabbing and then slithered into a high-pH North-Atlantic-iceberg-disaster of miscues, mixed signals and tense explosive laughter otherwise known as nervous cackling. Now in this neighborhood lived an eagle, a respectable fellow, very stern, recently married and charmingly caught up in the throes of building a family. On such a night of snake-girl frustration, in autumn as I remember, the eagle was up in the skies taking his baby egg out for a fly, which is normal for eagles, actually, though admittedly not at such a peculiar hour of the night. And so it happened that the cold November rain loosed the egg, the soon-to-be-firstborn child which the eagle had been so carefully cradling, too carefully perhaps, and it fell from the eagle's steady arc across the heavens, fell through the rainy sky and landed right in the pool. The snake saw this standing atop the high-dive and without hesitation jumped into the water and rescued the egg. What bravery! By the time the snake had surfaced the eagle was cowering at the edge of the pool, and with that relief-full-of-gratitude voice which transcends normal speech and lands somewhere past whimpering he thanked the snake and asked in what way he could indemnify this charity. Now remember, the snake had just been brooding over his snake-girl failure, ruminating over bits of conversation, meditating over gestures, practicing his cackle every once in a while to make it less cackly. What had he done? Too much? Too little? Ah ha hi ho hu. Why wasn't the whole snake-girl business just as easy as chessboxing or saving a baby eagle? Eagle...and in this moment of inquiry it occurred to him: he had heard long ago of a rose garden not far away in which there grew a single red rose, the others being a softer shade of pink, which was said to cure all those sicknesses which pertain to love, and in those days the snake had tried to get it but had been thwarted by the iniquitous thorns despite his professionally slithery efforts. But the eagle! That great soaring marvel of creation could swoop down from the skies and take the flower in his claws, flap his wings and circumvent the thorns. And so the snake said to the eagle: please go to the rose garden and pluck for me that red fabled rose amongst those of a softer shade of pink. And so the next morning at sunrise the eagle went, that great soaring marvel of creation, swooped down from the skies and took the flower in his claws and flapped his

wings and circumvented the thorns. The eagle returned with the rose to find the snake, who had of course not slept that night, asleep in a locked house. So he took home the rose with the intent of returning it at a suitable hour, but when his wife received him on the porch the look on her face as she saw the rose awakened something dark and embarrassing within him, like some old sinister family secret kept wrapped away from prying eyes before being discovered in some compromising situation which only worsens the shame. She took the rose, thinking it a gift meant for her, and within a matter of hours the eagle noticed that her shoulders, tense since starting the family, relaxed, her had feathers regained their old luster and in general all the tension which had risen out of the hectic family-building phase like an angry suffocating cloud of smoke seemed to blow away, the ugly banal forces that had driven the frustrated eagle out into the night with the egg in the first place were gone. And so the eagle, an honest man, decided that no, there really was no hurry to bring the rose back to the snake, it was perfectly safe here anyway and what's more he was the one who had gone through the trouble to get it so it was really technically his at the moment, right? Many months went by. The eagle began to take the rose out on nightly flights, so great was his love for it. The egg stayed home. He even began to develop that drunken maniacal look that comic-book villains are so good at. The snake never got wind that the eagle had fetched the rose and was using it to cure his own troubles. The eagle was too intimidating of a creature for the snake to ask that his request be fulfilled on some kind of schedule. Besides, he gave the eagle the benefit of the doubt and concluded that getting the rose must have turned out to be harder than expected, that the eagle had tried and failed the first time (embarrassingly) and was now surely devising a plan to succeed. Many more months went by, in which the snake struggled with his usual problems. He began to develop the first signs of clinical depression. On one of those lonely nights at the diving board the snake saw the eagle flying across the neighborhood, unusually low and wobbly over the houses like a drunkard, clutching something which glowed slightly against the night and seemed to the snake to be the cause of the eagle's hyper-infatuated delirium though the snake could not quite say why. And as the eagle passed overhead the snake saw it: the red fabled rose. That scoundrel, he had it! And very calmly and altogether snake-like he jumped from the tower, swam backstroke to the opposite end of the pool, got out, dried himself, slithered over to the eagle's house, slipped through an open window and lay waiting in the shadows underneath the dining table, where the empty vase stood suspiciously empty. When the eagle got home he was so heavily intoxicated by the rose (whose long-term toxicity the fables had failed to mention) that he barely managed to toss the rose into its vase before collapsing on the stairs, fast asleep. On the coffee table in the corner stood a vase of pink roses. The snake carefully chose one, cut himself deeply on a thorn and let his bright red blood fall onto the petals. Then he placed the blood-rose into the vase on the dining table and slithered off into the night with the red fabled rose in his teeth and fire in his heart. For several months the eagle noticed nothing for he was still substantially sedated by the effects of the rose. The snake, meanwhile, was having all the success he could handle; now his sleepovers (they were more than that now) included more than just one snake-girl, so many in fact that he had been forced to custom-order an ultra-oversized bed. He became famous once again and they called him Casanova and he liked it although he did not know what it meant. On the first Saturday of the third month after the snake

stole the rose he had such an enormous entourage of snake-girls at his house that despite his giant bed and renovations to his bedroom he found himself standing at the door, every centimeter of bed or floor or sleeping space of any kind covered by some limb of a peacefully sleeping snake-girl, and with satisfaction he decided for sentimental reasons to go spend the night at the high-dive, for old time sake. And standing atop the high dive does he see flying out of the darkness none other than the eagle, with a mild starboard list and still a bit of flap-arrhythmia with the blood-rose in hand. And now it begins to rain. And as you may well have guessed the rain shook the eagle out of a momentary rose-induced stupor so violently that he dropped the rose. And into the pool it went, bobbing innocently at the surface and for a second, in which the snake's heart leaped in momentary relief at the possibility that the blood wouldn't come off after all, and he jumps in to get it dry asap, but as he hands it to the sheepish eagle who says no it's yours you keep it I meant to give it to you months ago I'm sorry, a droplet slides off the petals and plops between them into the blue-glowing pool water which mind you is taking a lot of droplet traffic at the moment, but with the textbook red/blue color contrast it is impossible to miss, the red rose is definitely bleeding. The eagle is no botanist by any means but he's pretty sure this doesn't compute an sure enough before he's even done checking his work he looks back at the now pink rose the snake is holding, frozen staring at his own blood diffusing gently though the clear pool water and it dawns on the eagle and it dawns on the snake and he screams and well that's the story of why our neighborhood pool has blood red water.