

David's mother had become a monster.

In emails to his older brother, David described her tantrums over the setting on the thermostat, the texture of the carpet, the smell of her sons' deodorant. Her rage grew lockstep with her paranoia, which had escalated to the point that she rarely left the basement, except to check that all the curtains were closed. Day and night were lost. The outside world was gone.

Anything the boys did, or neglected to do, was more than a mistake. It was an affront, a transgression. Mother had always demanded absolute piety, but now she was backing her decrees with threats and blows. An unlocked door meant a beating with her scratching stick. A missed curfew earned a broken wrist, slammed in the door while the other brothers held the sinner tight. David documented these events in detail, making sure his absent brother never forgot that he was the lucky one, away fighting the Taliban while the remaining boys had to suffer their mother.

A year had passed since Grant had slipped away to the Army,

leaving nineteen-year old David as the man of the house. In that time, Mother had moved them yet again, this time to a lonely county in the armpit of Florida where they could rent a house without a credit check. The boys – there were four of them now – went to school, using the same borrowed names they had picked up in Georgia. After class, they came straight home. They had no friends, no sports, no surviving pets. They were all but prisoners in the tiny house with the weed-choked yard.

They could have run away. The youngest did, half-heartedly, spending four nights in a neighbor's treehouse. But he came back by his own volition, sobbing in his mother's soft arms. She stroked his hair and kissed his tears. That was her gift: as bad as she made it, she always made it feel better. Her blessings were euphoric and addictive.

The boys were all under her thrall – even Grant, halfway around the world. Like the others, he loved and hated her more than anything on Earth. He remembered the last time his mother had been like this, and what got him through it.

So he send David a short letter with detailed advice, and a single crucial item: his driver's license, so his little brother could buy himself a drink.

Happy Hour

David chose a bar two towns over, a single dark room at the north end of a strip mall. The sign said Happy Hour, but David was the only customer when he arrived. The bartender was on a phone call, explaining where to find the sump pumps, and how to set them up.

The man barely checked the driver's license before pouring David his beer. The glass was cold from the freezer, frosted, and as David scraped a fingernail down it, he tried to remember the last time he had seen snow. Fleeing the cold, the family had headed ever-southward since their father died: Virginia, Kentucky, Texas, Georgia, now Florida. He wondered if they would ultimately reach the equator.

David left the license beside his drink, not sure whether he would need to show it again for some later verification. He then set to reading the paperback novel he had brought with him. It was a bestseller, part of a series. The cover boasted that it was "soon to be a major motion picture," but David was pretty sure

the movie had already come out. It certainly read like a movie, with underestimated heroes and bad guys who were always four steps ahead.

Over the next hour, a half-dozen men came into the bar. Regulars, he presumed, because they made easy conversation with the bartender. They talked about the rain in the forecast, and the skeletal body that had been discovered by deer hunters in Middlefield. The police had not made any official announcement, but everyone assumed the bones belonged to a waitress who had disappeared months ago. David strained to hear more of the conversation, but the topic drifted back to the storms and uselessness of the Channel 8 weatherman.

Just after sunset, the first woman came in. Mid-twenties with a cherubic face, she reminded David of a cheerleader he had for a lab partner back in Georgia: her lips always smiling, her eyes a little sad. She took a stool at the bar and asked for a Long Island. David looked on with interest as the bartender seemed to pour every class of alcohol into her drink, topping it with a shot of Coke.

The woman caught him watching.

"It's been a Long Island kind of day," she explained. There was and an odd curlicue to her voice, like she was always just

about to giggle. "It's either this or put my head in the oven."

David smiled. Held eye contact for a polite moment, then went back to the novel. He could feel her gaze.

"I've read that," she said. "Last summer, I read all four of them in one week. It was like crack or meth or something. How far along are you?"

David tipped the book down, showing her his progress. Barely a third of the way through.

She smiled. "So you don't know what Simon is yet."

"I'm pretty sure I do."

"You think you do. Might be a surprise."

She slid a cocktail napkin down the bar towards him.

"Write it down," she said. "Write down what you think he is, here. If you're right, I'll buy you a drink."

"I could just tell you."

"Write it down. Those are the rules." She dug a pen out of her bag, and set it neatly atop the napkin. "If you're so sure, what's the risk?"

He took the pen and napkin. After a long deliberation, he wrote his answer. He folded the napkin twice before sliding it back to her. She pressed it between her palms.

"Now, you should have asked what happens if you lose."

"I have to buy you a drink?"

"You have to tell me a secret. Something shocking and scandalous. It's your choice. I can give you your answer back, or I can open it. But if I open it..."

"Open it."

"You're that sure you know what Simon is, even on page whatever."

"Yes."

She opened the napkin. Her eyes flickered, first confusion, then recognition. David had written three words: *a fictional character*.

She smiled. She had beautiful teeth. "You get your drink. But I still think I deserve my secret, because you cheated." She waved to get the bartender's attention.

"What if I don't have any secrets?"

"Then you're luckiest person I know. And it's very nice to meet you. I'm Carla." She offered her hand. It was warm and soft.

She took the stool next to him. For the next half hour, they talked about TV shows and weekend plans. Carla worked Saturdays handling tax paperwork for a car dealership. When hired, she had claimed to have an accounting degree. That wasn't true, but she was pretty sure no one had caught on: "I mean, if they understood

accounting, they wouldn't need me, would they?"

It wasn't the only time David noticed her revealing something unusually candid given their brief acquaintance. She admitted to stealing a lawn gnome, having sex in a church and smashing the tail lights of an ex-boyfriend's car. These were all teenage offenses, but she spoke of them as if they happened yesterday, without any trace of nostalgia.

As they talked, she touched his arm, his leg. She held his hand in hers, explaining how the width of his fingertips meant he was destined for creative pursuits, like writing or music.

She was married – he hadn't noticed the ring. Twice, she texted her husband, Rick. He worked for the cable company, and was planning to stop by the bar if he finished early enough. Yet Carla seemed unconcerned about his arrival, or how he might react if he saw her sitting so close to David. She pulled her hair back from her neck, inviting him to smell the new perfume she had just bought.

At her prompting, David ordered a Long Island. By the time he was halfway through it, he felt his face flushing. He excused himself, heading for the restroom.

He suddenly understood the term "buzzed." The world did seem to be humming as he moved somewhat deliberately through the bar.

His eyes locked on other patrons as he passed, trying to quickly size them up. He wondered if he looked strange to everyone else.

The urinal was full of ice, which David did his best to melt. He leaned close to the mirror, wanting to know if his eyes looked different. They were a little red, certainly. He felt warm, the heat and scent that comes just before sweating, so he slicked back his hair with water from the sink. He immediately regretted it as it dripped on his shirt.

A sudden panic: He checked that he still had the driver's license. He did. He looked at his brother's face and wondered what advice Grant would give him. He psyched himself up and headed back out.

Carla was gone.

Standing near their barstools was a broad-shouldered man with work boots, jeans and a tucked-in oxford, sleeves rolled up just far enough to show a snake tattoo curling around his forearm. Sideburns down to his jaw. He seemed to be waiting for David.

"I'm Rick. Carla's husband." His tone was matter-of-fact. David was not sure whether to expect a fist or handshake next.

"Good to meet you," David said. No fist. No handshake. Rick seemed to be sizing him up. David needed to fill the pause: "You

work for the cable company?"

"That's right."

David felt Rick looking past him. He turned to see Carla walking back from the women's restroom. She put a hand on his shoulder. A smile.

"Did you drive here?" she asked David.

"No."

"Great. So come with us. I'll let you ride shotgun."

Rick already had his keys out, headed for the door. Carla took another sip from her drink and set it on the bar. Followed her husband.

David was two steps behind.

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Rick drove a pickup truck – his own, evidently. The cable company logos were simply magnetic signs clinging to the doors. He kept one hand on the wheel, fingers drumming to the radio. Studying him in profile, David noticed a scar running from his ear to his collar. The skin was thick and white, like a dirty seam had ripped open, exposing Rick's original color.

Carla sat between them, one hand on her husband's leg as she performed a near-monologue about the hypocrisy of the modern church and its disconnection from true spirituality. She

recounted her entire religious history, starting with her strict Sunday School teacher who punished her for pointing out the obvious implausibilities in Noah's Ark. "There are seventy-five different species of snakes in this county alone," she said. "Seventy-five! So it's not just two of every kind of animal, it's two of every kind of every animal, and that's before you figure who is going to eat what. I mean, the teacher was trying to say that God made it so that the predators could eat vegetables while they were on the Ark."

"Bullshit," said Rick.

"Such bullshit," said Carla. "I mean, I can accept a flood. I can accept miracles. But don't tell me a snake is going to suddenly not be a snake just so everyone can get along. I stopped believing in the Bible before I stopped believing in Santa Claus."

They had been driving for twenty minutes when David worked up the courage to ask where they were going.

"Hamilton. Didn't I tell you that?" asked Carla. "We live right on the edge of it. We're just going to make one stop first."

Hamilton was easily another fifteen miles away. Sensing David's unasked question...

"We'll drive you back when we're done," said Rick. His tone didn't invite further questions.

Rick parked the truck at the edge of an empty road, only one house in sight. Switched off the engine and climbed out, taking the keys. David opened his door, but Carla stopped him.

"He'll just be a minute," she said.

David watched Rick walk up the long gravel driveway to the small farmhouse, a blue fluorescent bulb glowing in the porch light. The screen door opened before he got there. From inside, a man looked past Rick to the pickup truck, curious. He was wearing rubber gloves that went up past his elbows.

Carla reached into the glove compartment, pulling out a worn plastic baggie. From it, she pulled two small white pills. "It's our secret, okay?" she asked. David nodded.

She put both pills on her tongue, then leaned in and kissed him. He stiffened from surprise, then forced himself to relax. He felt her tongue sliding against his. He was reaching for her shirt when she pulled back, a smile. She dried his lips with a finger, then re-zipped the plastic bag.

His mouth tasted like burnt plastic: the white pills, he presumed. He wondered how much he had injected.

"How many girls have you been with?" she asked.

"Three," he lied.

"It's great, isn't it? Most natural thing there is."

Rick was heading back to the truck, folding money. The other man was still standing on the porch, watching.

"I can tell you're good at it," she said. "I've got a sense about these things."

There was no time to respond before Rick climbed back in the driver's seat. Carla smiled a question at her husband, who nodded back. As they drove off, David watched in the side mirror. Far behind them, tucked in the darkness, a van switched on its headlights.

Rick and Carla lived in a double-wide trailer set a few hundred yards from the main road. Carla apologized for the mess in the living room, stacking magazines and rearranging pillows on the couch, in particular to conceal a repair done with duct tape. In truth, it was much tidier than any house David had lived in with his brothers.

"Why don't you get some beers, Rick?" Carla suggested. "I'll just be a sec. You guys can talk."

With that, she excused herself to the bedroom and shut the door. Rick disappeared into the dark kitchen. Rocking back on his heels a bit, David looked at the pictures on the wall. Family photos: birthdays, recitals, trips to Disneyland. David noticed

several generations, white-haired grandparents to newborns, with several shots apparently from a reunion or anniversary. But Rick and Carla weren't in any of them.

Rick returned from the kitchen, carrying two beers. He leaned against the couch, watching him.

"Take off your shirt," he said.

David paused. Blood rushed in his ears. On an exhale, he pulled his t-shirt over his head, then forced himself to make eye contact. He could feel his back sweating.

Rick handed him a beer, standing almost toe-to-toe with him. He had a good four inches and eighty pounds on David. He smelled like cigarettes and deodorant.

"You know why you're here?" Rick asked.

"Not really. No."

"You're here because we invited you. You're a guest in this house. You understand that, right?"

"I do."

Rick brushed the back of his fingers down David's chest. "Part of being a guest is showing respect. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir."

Rick smiled. "It's not a 'sir' thing, alright? I'm not going to bite you. And don't you go biting people either, okay?"

"Okay." David forced a smile. Drank some of his beer,

spilling a bit.

"My wife and I have something special. Something beautiful. And when you have something like that, you want to share it with people who can appreciate it. People who deserve it. So it's your call. You want me to drive you back, or do you want to stay?"

"I'll stay," he said.

Carla opened the bedroom door. She had changed into a nightgown much like the ones in Grant's Playboy magazines, the first two or three photos before the model was fully nude. David had always lingered on those pages, preferring to imagine what it was like to pull that fabric off and expose what was hidden underneath. Once a woman was nude, there was nothing left to wonder.

He sat on the arm of the couch, drinking his beer as he watched Carla and Rick undress each other. The snake tattoo on Rick's arm actually curled around his entire body, ending just above his ankle. He had other ink: a skull, a star, a phrase in Latin David couldn't read. But the snake was by far the dominant element, and looked the newest as well.

For just a moment, David thought he heard a sound outside: an engine, a crunch of gravel. But whatever it was got buried in the drone of crickets and frogs.

Carla took David's hands, standing him up. She kissed him as Rick watched, unbuckling his belt and sliding down his jeans. As their lips parted, David felt lightheaded, giddy. He smiled broadly, unabashedly boyish.

"God, you're cute," she said.

"So are you." David split his gaze between Carla and Rick.

"I like you."

"I can see that," she said, the same curlicue to her voice.

"Let's have some fun."

Rick led the way towards the bedroom. With his pants around his ankles, David bent down to take off his shoes. That's when it hit him: a surge of warm energy, pure euphoria. The light bloomed. His skin was electric. His heart raced. It was the rush of pure speed, a mad dash across ice, feet slipping out from under him.

He fell to the floor. The nylon carpet felt incredible, like the fur of an alien god. He could smell colors in the dust. Taste music on his tongue. New waves of sensation kept coming, each stronger than the last. He started to cry.

Carla was speaking, asking if he was okay. As she and Rick knelt over him, David managed to make himself speak.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Carla dropped first, collapsing like an abandoned

marionette. She laughed as she writhed, overwhelmed with joy so immense that it resembled terror. Rick fought it longer, bracing himself against the psychic gravity compelling him to fall.

David remembered the first time he had tried to resist it. He was eight, hiding in the attic to avoid punishment. He sang "Mary Had a Little Lamb," focusing on each syllable, trying to keep Mother out of his mind. It was like standing against a hurricane, winds battering him from every direction. She could make you feel yourself falling, flying, dissolving into the floor. David lasted through two verses before he felt his own hands around his neck. Just before he blacked out, Mother showed him maggots feasting on his body, devouring his eyes from the inside. It was the last time he disobeyed her.

Impressively, Rick was still managing to stand. He had even picked up his phone from the table. He would try to call 911, believing he had been poisoned. Believing the visions he experienced came from his own mind, and not that of the monster in the white van parked outside.

With all his might, David pushed up to his elbows. Crawled forward to grab Rick by the ankle, finally toppling him. As he hit the rug, Rick let out a terrified scream. Mother had finally broken through. His mind was falling into a dark abyss. His eyes

swiveled to David, panicked and betrayed.

David whispered into his ear, trying to calm him. "It doesn't have to hurt. Let it feel good." Indeed, Carla had settled into a contented catatonia, each breath accompanied by a gentle purr. If Rick would just allow himself to surrender, the rest of the evening would be a lot less gruesome.

Just then, David's brothers kicked in the door. (He had meant to unlock it, but forgot.) The boys fanned out, each knowing his assigned role. The youngest pulled all the curtains shut, while the second youngest began scouting for cash and valuables. Fifteen-year old Steven had driven the van, following Rick's truck from the bar to the house. Now he carried the axe.

David hated the axe.

Before joining the Army, Grant had been the puller, procuring suitable meals for their mother. Grant had taken over the role from their father, and now it was David's turn. He didn't relish his new post, but he was glad to be done with the bloodiest of the jobs.

Steven pointed to Rick, who was still twitching and alert. "What do I do?" he asked.

"Tie him up with his belt."

"Can't I just..?" Steven gestured with the axe.

"No. He's gotta be awake." Climbing to his feet, David spit out blood – he had bitten his lip in the fall. Woozy, he retrieved his clothes, never once making eye contact with Rick or Carla. He didn't want to think of them as people anymore. They were food, just like the unlucky extra animals on Carla's Ark.

David got dressed outside, grateful for the fresh night air. Distant dogs were barking, probably sensing the disturbance. Remembering Grant's instructions, David ran through a mental checklist of things they needed to do before sunrise: wiping down fingerprints, ditching Rick's truck, destroying the cell phones. They had had good luck with the police so far. Mother's digestion was so thorough that what bones were found – like the waitress in Middlefield – offered little clue to what had transpired.

He opened the back of the van. Mother was coiled tight, her human arms wrapped around her thick serpent body. She hated travel when she was in this form, too big to fit in any seat, her white-scaled belly too slippery to keep herself rooted. Still, she seemed more miserable than usual. She tasted the air with her forked tongue, smelling David.

"They're ready," he said.

She slid head-first out of the van, her filthy flowered housecoat ripping on the door latch. With enough room, she could

still move quickly, her trunk and tail pushing her forward like a sidewinder. She was inside the house, door shut, before David had even closed up the van.

As he was wiping down Rick's truck, he found a pack of cigarettes. Helped himself to one. The smoke helped clear the residual nausea.

About twenty minutes later, Steven emerged from the house, visibly panicked. "Something's wrong."

David found his mother half-curved on the living room floor. Her eyes had rolled back, exposing the milky yellow underlie. It was not uncommon for her to get sluggish after a big meal, but this was different. She seemed completely unaware of their presence. It was as close to sleeping as he had seen her in months, ever since she started her cycle. Her lower abdomen was wriggling from inside. The cloaca, a slit just below her atrophied human legs, was wet and swelling. A bulge moved under the skin, emerging as a veined, leathery egg just larger than a football.

The four sons watched as their mother delivered a clutch of six eggs, fetal shapes writhing inside. They were invariably female - boys were born live, while Mother was in her human form. These sisters would grow to become as powerful as their creator,

and would invariably consume their brothers along the way. Not out of hatred or anger: They would do it because they were snake people, and this is what they were meant to do.

Grant had warned David about this in his letter, and left explicit instructions on how to avoid their father's fate. "We have to burn them," David said. "Before she wakes up."

Three matches and a gallon of gasoline did the job, the egg sacs boiling and bursting, spilling half-formed snake lets into the flames.

Not yet conscious, with no reference to the actual world, the sisters projected a primal storm of images and sensations. For a moment, David felt himself astride Ouroboros, the eternal serpent that encircles the world. He was outside time and space, watching the beast devour its own tail.

As the smoke cleared, all that was left was shell and ash.

Mother would discover what they had done. There would be punishment – but she needed them, and they all knew it. So she would eventually forgive them, and feed them the sensations they craved. She wanted to keep them close.

David's mother was a monster. But she loved her sons.