

Far worse than the big snake

By Ruth Ostrow

"QUICK," I yell to my girlfriend, as a large, dark brown snake slithers over the grass outside my window. "It's a deadly poisonous snake!"

"Where?" says my friend, narrowing her eyes. I point, I jump, and point again at the form moving quickly towards us. Some snakes are harmless. But this one is almost black. It looks like the extremely dangerous type shown in my book. It slithers towards my daughter's trampoline. There is no way we can ignore it.

"Let's call the snake-man," I say.

"You go stand on the grass and watch he doesn't disappear while I phone," says my friend, who lives on a nearby property. But I can't. A year ago, I had a close encounter of a serious kind with a snake, which made me fearful.

I was wandering around our property in open shoes, blithely believing that hitting the grass with a stick would chase all snakes away, when suddenly, inches away, there was a brown snake, leaning back, ready to strike. During mating season, brown snakes defend their turf.

I froze. We looked into each other's eyes. He was either going to attack or not. It was that simple. Ground combat. My life flashed before my eyes. But after a few long seconds, he turned and darted away across the hill. I stumbled home in deep gratitude, but was unable to sleep properly for days.

My girlfriend has called the snake-man and joins me on the deck where we attempt to keep track of the blackness.

Until finally a jeep arrives. The snake-man gets out looking weather-beaten, dressed like a military commander, holding two long bars in heavily gloved hands. He is a legend in these parts, a volunteer who comes to the aid of damsels in distress.

"Stand clear," he yells, and starts to comb the grass. "He's gone in there," we say of our enemy, pointing to the bushes. The snake-man lifts rocks, hits things, shakes trees, but there's nothing there. He wanders metres in each direction, shaking, hitting, lifting, but there is no snake to be seen.

"Typical," I throw my hands up. "He's gone."

"Now how will you kill it?" asks my girlfriend.

"Kill it? Kill it?" the snake-man spits in alarm. "I have not come here to kill the snake. I've come to rescue it from people like you," he says, as my friend's jaw opens in surprise.

"Why would you kill it? It is a sacred animal. Beautiful. This is his land, too," he says, searching for something in his shirt pocket.

"Why must people think this way?" he mutters, walking over to me and putting something small in my hand.

I know the answer. We humans don't like anything that we don't like wandering into our domain. While most people will save a ladybird, any creature ugly or unpleasant, like a spider, will meet its immediate demise without a moral twinge.

I look down. There are tiny spinal bones on the palm of my hand. "These were taken from one of the deadliest snakes known to us. These are her sacred bones. It is an ancient shaman belief that they will protect you from harm. No one will hurt you while you carry these, no one will treat you with disrespect," he says, his eyes holding me fixed, entranced.

I cling to the tiny bones in shock. They are shaped like ribs but thin like needles, fragile and beautiful. A shudder travels the length of my spine like someone has walked over my grave.

My girlfriend has had enough of the mumbo jumbo. "What do we do now? We have a child to protect and a snake on the loose," she says, glaring at the cage the snake-man has brought to collect the creature.

"The property is very clean. No long grass. It'll be fine. He can see you. You can see him. He probably knows you, and has been trying to keep clear of you, but something must have made him take fright to come over here. Normally, snakes have a great respect for the people they share land with."

"Great respect?" She laughs.

"If the snake comes back, call me. Don't let anyone kill it. Black snakes eat the brown snakes. If it weren't for this snake, there would be more brown ones. Do you understand? There is a natural order to things," says the snake-man firmly.

My girlfriend looks away. The snake-man drives off. And I am left staring down at the sacred ribs in my hand, given as protection against those who would harm me.

And sadly, I know that one day I'll need their mythical powers. Because we humans emit far more venom, and are far crueller and more disrespectful as predators on this planet than any snake ever was or could be.

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