

the snake charmer

by Jerry Ratch

It was especially hot the day they towed my mother's trailer down to Lake Elsinore from the nudist camp, which was situated on a dry creek bed at the base of the Santa Ana Mountains. Harris, who is (or was) my brother, had found her this really cheap spot at this eyesore of a run-down lakeside court. They had kicked my mother out of the nudist camp (which was like the Garden of Eden to her) because you couldn't stay there for longer than six months at a time — until you became a permanent resident/member, because, as my brother's girlfriend said, they had their “rules, you know.” God forbid you should break one of the camps precious “rules,” which were more or less like the Ten F'ing Commandments around there. So, Bess, my mother, was on their waiting list now. But see, the real problem was that she and Quebec, or Becky, as my brother called her, just could not get along that well under the same roof, and they fell to squabbling over damn near everything. Well, in basically a one bedroom trailer (whose only shower stall was used as a closet to hang my brother's suits,) what did you expect? And Quebec was on the damned board of directors at that camp, too! (Ah, just don't get me started, or I'll have heart attack or something.)

The water in Lake Elsinore (notice how close it is to “eyesore?”) seemed dead to my mother. It barely moved, if ever, and lapped weakly over the footings of the lampposts, which had become submerged after the water had risen, probably sometime in the 1940's or 50's. Huge spiders came crawling up out of the stale sludge, while at the same time monstrous power boats kept going around and around in circles way out in the middle of the lake, as if they had lost their purpose, with a noise that was like giant metallic dinosaurs doing battle against one another. And the worst part was that you had to keep your f'ing clothes on around there! And my mother was 82, and wasn't used to having to stagger around in 110

degree heat, because while my father was still alive they'd been living up in Northern California in a mobile home park outside Santa Rosa. At least they had semi-normal rains up there, if not actual defined seasons, like fall or whatever.

I know how you can't wait to hear about what it feels like to be running around without your clothes on and all, but keep your collective shirts on for awhile here, okay? We'll get around to it, I can assure you.

The town of Lake Elsinore itself seemed like something stuck back in the 1930's, when it was a fashionable and somewhat secret hideout for the Hollywood favorites. But at some point the lake water had risen up over the cement dance area, and now it looked like something out of the National Geographic Bess had seen once about Venice, the way the water was coming up and lapping over things.

In its heyday, there used to be a dance at this particular spot every weekend. Folks would come down from as far away as Los Angeles, and up from San Diego. It was the hot spot to come for a special date, or for those who were having a fling with someone they weren't supposed to be with. Couples would stay in their cabins the entire weekend. You could tell which ones didn't want to be seen in public, and everyone always knew what was going on.

Now the whole town was dilapidated, and full of eye-sores. Abandoned cars were parked on the front yard of nearly every house. A forlorn For-Sale sign was attached to anything that didn't move. You never actually saw people. All you saw was the results of them having been there. The entire area gave off the feeling of having been used up, discarded. It looked like a giant flea market abandoned overnight.

It was a hundred and ten degrees in the shade, and my mother sat in an aluminum lawn chair fanning herself with a piece of rolled newspaper the day that Francine appeared in front of her like a mirage, as if she had popped out of nowhere like a cartoon figure. Francine was my brother's second wife. They had just finished their divorce, and my brother, Harris, was getting prepared to marry that

bureaucrat Quebec back up at the nudist camp with her damned “rules.” And I was going to be his best man at this wedding, and it was going to take place at the camp too. And, you guessed it, in the nude! And everyone at the camp had to go around in the nude — it was one of their damned “rules.”

“Hi there, Mom!” Francine gushed. She put both arms around my mother, and my mom felt the clammy dead-white skin attaching itself to her back like an octopus. Francine basically had the appearance of the underside of a mushroom. She’d come from Oregon originally after her family had migrated there during the dustbowl from somewhere in the South.

Francine planted a big pink kiss on my mother’s wrinkled cheek. My mother tried to wriggle free. “What is it you want, Francine?”

“Now, Mom, you don’t want to be that way, do you?”

“Francine, I’d appreciate your not calling me Mom anymore. You and Harris are divorced.” Bess didn’t say anything more. Her large brown eyes watched the woman warily.

“Oh, now, Bess, c’mon. You know how we were related for such a long, gosh I don’t know, such a long, long time. And you know how much I loved your son, don’t you? Huh?”

That is a fat lie, thought Bess. Her head wobbled a little, like it always did now. She looked down.

“My, it sure is a hot one day, isn’t it?” Francine remarked. “You wouldn’t have a little of that yummy iced tea in your fridge now, would you? I wouldn’t mind a snort of something. If you could drop a little something in it, that would be real nice too. Do you still have any of that brandy that you always went to sleep with, Bess? It sure is a hot one out today, I’ll tell you.”

My mother got up from the stair she’d been sitting on, in the shade of the awning. The air looked as yellow as sulphur. You could smell things simmering in the waves of the heat. Something oppressive and large had clamped its hand down on Lake Elsinore. The motors of dinosaurs kept roaring out on the lake.

“All right,” said Bess. “Just one drink, and then you’ll be on your way, Missy. I’m onto your tricks.”

“Now, now, Bess, you needn't talk that way. We were related for the longest time. I was married for such a long time to your son. You were like my replacement mom. Don't forget how we always used to say that. You know how much I always loved your son.”

“Oh, sure. Now you say that.”

“You know how much I loved your son, Bess. Harris was one heck of a swinger. Don't you recall how we even got married, in the nude? Sure. We sure surprised you with that one, didn't we? Remember? And Bess, just look at who's the swinger now! My, things sure do change, don't they? It sure is one heck of a world, I'll say. I'm betting you would have never guessed you yourself would end up at a nudist camp too — like the rest of us, huh, Mom?”

“You'll get one drink,” Bess said. “Then leave me be in peace. The likes of you with my Harris I will never understand, that's all.” Bess went into the trailer, and Francine followed right behind her like one of those damned French poodles she nearly always traipsed about with. *Where were her yipping little mutts now?* Bess thought. Francine seemed to swoon in the heat and plopped down on the mini couch.

“Whew, Bess,” she said, waving a piece of paper in her pasty kewpie-doll face, “I'm afraid I need to just sit for a spell. I believe the drive down here in this heat has got me sick.”

Bess poured iced tea into a tumbler. She opened one of the overhead cabinets and pulled out a pint bottle of brandy. After unscrewing the cap, Bess topped off the iced tea with a shot of the amber liquor, then handed the glass to her former daughter-in-law. The full glass trembled.

“What exactly is it you've come for, Francine? You're not here on a social visit.”

“Bess, I brought this here piece of paper that I just needed your little ole signature on, right here, see?”

“Uh, huh, I thought so.” Bess looked hard at the woman sitting on her couch. “They told me not to let you in the door if you showed up.”

“Who said that?” Francine said, drawing on a hurt face like a teenager, though the skin of her face was sliding to one side a little with age. She no longer had that crisp white kewpie-doll look that she used to nurture.

“I was told not to sign anything, and I'm not signing anything of yours, so there. You can just drink up your drink, and I'll thank you to leave me be in this heat. I'm doing just fine by myself, thank you.”

“Why won't you sign this one little piece of paper here, Bess? I'm owed this much.”

“No, I won't!”

“It's just something about me being able to be in the nudist camp too, that's all. It's my right, Bess. I have a right to be there, just like you do. And they'll let you come back there soon too, Bess, I can assure you that. They told me so. Why, you wouldn't even have been there yourself if I hadn't planted the idea in Harris first.”

“So, it was you who put him up to that?” Bess said, surprised.

“Course it was me. Who do you think would come up with a plan like that? Quebec? Tuh! That bureaucrat? Not in a month of Sundays.” Francine wiped the sweat from her armpits.

“Well, why?” asked Bess.

“Because Harris was going bankrupt again, Bess. Your money was the only way we could've ended up owning his place to live free and clear. Otherwise he would've lost that too, just like everything else. He couldn't afford to keep up those payments. Of course, he had to add on that family room to the side of the trailer — to make it look like your money actually went to something. That room didn't cost no stinking ten thousand dollars, I can tell you that. Oh, no. I was the bookkeeper, I ought to know.”

“Yes!” Bess spit out. “You sure ought to know! You know everything! It's you that's been withholding all those financial papers that made that investor John Lytle go so crazy and start threatening everybody. I know all about your shenanigans, so don't you come sniffing around here for anything out of me. You can just leave now and let an old woman be. Go on, scat!”

"No, it wasn't!" Francine retorted. "It wasn't either me! I wasn't responsible for any of that — business. Who said I was? Who said that? I want to know who!"

"None of your business, that's who."

"Nobody ever said anything of the sort. Nobody, that's who. Nobody! Why, that is an awful thing to go around accusing somebody of! Anyways, Harris should know better than to keep trying to do business with that madman John Lytle, after the bad blood that's been brewing between them, heading into bankruptcy and all. That's his own fault. That is not my fault at all. That's not my fault, do you hear? If anybody, it's Quebec's. she ought to be warning Harris not to go anywhere near that John Lytle. And not to keep doing business with him. He's a dangerous man! Everybody knows that who knows anything at all. Harris is just so damned greedy! And it's Quebec who's been urging him on to make some money. It's Quebec, that's who! ... So, anyway, I heard about the wedding, Bess. I have to say, I'm hurt ... that I wasn't invited. And that it's happening so soon, after our divorce."

"Why, it's been fifteen years, Francine. They've been with each other fifteen years, for goodness sakes. What I don't know is how he put up with you and all your fooling around with everybody for so long. All that running around that you do. For goodness sakes!"

Bess went and sat down on the stair outside her trailer and looked straight ahead at nothing in particular. Her face tightened around the distance. A frown came upon her face, which then fell into a serious droop, and tears that were hotter than the current temperature of the earth slid down through the patches of rouge on her cheeks.

"Bess," said Francine from behind her, "so, can I get your signature here?"

Bess didn't answer because she couldn't hear the question. She hadn't put in her hearing aids today. It was too hot out to be wearing a hearing aid. And when she turned her back to you, she couldn't see what you were saying. Bess was unsure if what Francine told her made any sense or not.

But if this nasty Francine woman showed up at the wedding, there was no telling what would happen next. That was all Bess was certain of right now. If only one of her sons were there right now to help her.

Nope, she told herself, shaking her head. That stuff about Harris, and her money — there's just no way Harris could possibly be that way. No way at all.

“Okay, Bess, just sign right here,” said Francine, tapping on her shoulder, “and I’ll be on my way. I’ll make sure they let you back into that nudist camp once I’m there. Don’t you worry about a thing. Them and their darned ole rules. We’re all going to be like one big family again, once I’m there. We’re going to be okay. You’ll see. Everything will be just fine. Sign it right — here. That’s the way. Sure.”

