

Snake Dreams

by Katrina Denza

As soon as I pull into my father's driveway, a light goes on inside the condo. I don't have to wonder what he's doing up this time of the morning; he's always had a knack for knowing what I'm up to.

He's there, under the bare bulb outside his front door when I climb out of my car.

"What's happened, Eva?" The red stripes and lime background of his pajamas glow like a marquee under the light. Proof of his last girlfriend's lack of taste.

"I need a place to crash."

I slink past him, his peculiar smell of cooked onions and Old Spice a comfortable annoyance. I unzip my jacket and lay it on the hall table.

My father stands near the door, scratching his chest, his eyes not fully open. "You're okay then?"

"We'll talk in the morning, Dad."

"I don't have the sofa made up."

"I'm capable." I stretch up to give him a kiss and catch the side of his rough chin.

From the hall closet, I grab a couple of mismatched sheets and a blanket. I walk into the living room, suddenly drained, and yank the sofa flat into the bed position. It creaks and lands in place with a thud. My clothes reek of the club: spilled beer and smoke. I take them off and throw them into the corner of the room, nearly knocking over my father's lamp. I slip into the cold sheets and adjust my back so I'm not right on top of the metal bar that runs down the middle of the bed. Sometimes when I lie on it, I imagine this absurd, elongated version of myself draped around the pole in my mother's closet like a snake on a branch. As if I could go back in time and scare her away from her future.

The sum of what my mother left: one shell pink blouse with a rust stain near the bottom hanging on her closet's iron pole. I was eight when I ran into my parents' bedroom, so sure my father was mistaken. When I slid open my mother's side of the closet, the door catching for a moment in its groove, the emptiness of that rectangular space was the loudest thing in the room. And the shirt, still swinging slightly from the breeze of the door's motion, invited me to tear it from its padded hanger, to dive into its pinkness headfirst. What I should have done was mold it into a ball and stuff it into my mouth. Instead, I stood there and yelled, hoping she'd hear me.

In the morning, I wake to my father grinding coffee. He's singing along with some country tune on the radio. I dress and try to push the bed back into a sofa without him noticing, but somehow he hears the springs over the whine of his music. He pokes his head into the living room.

“Ready for some eggs?” he asks.

The thought of it flips my stomach.

“I've gotta go.”

“Not before you tell me what's going on,” he says. His voice has turned hard-edged. A warning. “Come have juice and toast.”

My father's kitchen is a miniature replica of the one in our old house. It's painted a similar yellow—a yolky color, the same little kitchen table and chairs sit in the middle, the window over the sink has the curtain with the ducks, and the fridge is covered with all the old magnets. This kitchen is more efficient though, and safer, as it holds no memories.

I pull out a chair and sit. My father's hips jiggle as he scrambles the eggs.

“What?” he says when he sees the look on my face.

Smiling, I tell him he's the weirdest person I know.

“So why do I have the honor of making breakfast for you once again?” He scrapes the eggs out onto two plates and drops the hot pan into the dish water. It sizzles before sinking.

“Myria locked me out.”

He sets our food on the table and joins me. “What did you do?” he says.

Of course he knows it's something I've done. Myria's pissed because I slept with her boyfriend—not that I blame her, but her reaction is a bit extreme considering the circumstances: Frank and I were both a little drunk, I was having an emotional moment, and we have no plans to do it a second time.

“It wasn't working out,” I say. My eggs are runny but I slide a forkful onto my toast anyway. “I might move in with Jim. He's been bugging me about it.”

My dad's face is almost a square. Sometimes, when I'm mad at him, I call him Blockhead—never out loud. It's like the rest of his body, substantial, not flabby. He wears his hair short against his head which makes his reddened ears stand out against his tan skin. I know he's thinking about telling me I can live with him; he's got that I-don't-want-to-appear-too-eager-look.

“Don't even say it.”

“Why not?” He shakes his head and peppers what's left of his eggs. “You could enroll in school again. Live here for free. It's ideal.”

If I wanted a nun's life.

“No, thanks.” I get up and walk over to rinse my plate. There's no view of the back yard through the window over the sink. In our old house I could see the willow tree, close to the house, and further back, three gnarled apple trees I used to climb. I used to sit under the willow with my mother until the heat of summer came and the needle-like legs of Japanese beetles made me cry. Before the bugs, she and I would sit in a circle of cool shaded grass and pluck it clean of buttercups and daffodils. Yellow was my favorite color then. Here, through the smaller window above my father's new sink, there's only a peek at a brown painted fence and a patch of dun-colored grass.

“I'm picking Jim up from the airport tomorrow,” I say.

“You working tonight?”

I nod. He tells me I can stay another night. There's something he needs to talk to me about, he says. He glares down at his plate as he talks.

I kiss the top of his head and tell him I'll see him later.

The wind whips at my face as I slide into my car. My foot pumps the gas to keep it from stalling and I wait while it warms up. The sky is a wall of gray threatening to push down and smother all things beneath. It feels like snow. I wonder what it would be like to live in a warm climate. The week after my mother left, my father told me she went to live in Kenya. I was in fourth grade and not long after I heard the name, I got up the nerve to stay after school and ask my teacher how far away it was. He got this funny look on his face and nodded. He asked me to wait a minute and walked out the door and down the hall. He came back with a book on Africa. I took it home and never brought it back.

I read Kenya was another country on another continent. It had a desert, jungle and a snow-capped mountain. It also had lions, giraffes and snakes. Over a hundred and twenty different kinds of snakes. For years after, snakes slithered through my dark imagination. In my dreams, they hung from trees above my head, waiting for the chance to drop on me; or I'd watch, helpless, as a snake swallowed my mother whole, like the snakes I watched gorging on eggs three times the size of their heads on Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Or I'd have nightmares of my mother showing up in my room with snakes wrapped around, and springing from, her body.

I knock on my apartment door and this time Myria answers.

“You,” Myria says, opening the door wider. “Come in.”

It's weird how the place already feels as if it's rejected me even though all my stuff is still inside. I walk past Myria and grab a stool by the breakfast counter.

“We need to talk,” I say.

"You're a bitch," Myria says. She walks over to the sink and slides two mugs off a rack that hangs over it. "Want caffeine?"

"Yeah, sure," I say, grateful. "You changed the locks."

Myria spoons instant coffee into the cups. "You fuck my boyfriend and expect to still live with me? Come off it, Eva. Besides, we need the room for Frank's office stuff. He's moving in, and there's no way you and he are going to be in the same room, alone, again."

Frank wears a dog collar and has a thing for rubber masks. He's always pulling one out of his jeans. Last month when the three of us went to Dairy Queen, the girl working the counter screamed when he yanked Brad Pitt's face down over his own. She later told us she was scared he was going to pull out a gun. The night Frank and I slept together, Myria had flown to Florida to see her mother. It started out all right—we sat on the sofa watching this movie, *Rabbit Proof Fence*. A part of me watched the movie like a normal person and another part of me identified with the girl who fights so hard to get back to her mother. Except I didn't fight; I didn't do a thing. And then I was bawling and Frank was rubbing my hair and telling me I was going to be fine and then his mouth was on mine and all I wanted was to stop crying and feel something else. When we were done, I wiped my stomach off with his shirt and threw it at him. "Asshole," I yelled. He picked up his shirt and stormed out of the room shaking his head.

Myria hands me a cup of black coffee. "We're out of milk," she says.

The coffee burns my throat—part of my penance.

"Even if you hadn't totally screwed up by messing with Frank, it wouldn't have worked out anyway," Myria says. She leans against the stove, her fingers wrapped around her own coffee. "You're a pain in the ass to live with. You constantly boss me around, leave these tight-ass notes everywhere that tell me to pick up this, wash that. You change the way the place looks all the time and you don't even ask me. First you paint the living room some fuck-wad orange, then it's lilac the next month."

"You said you liked the orange."

Myria rolls her eyes. "I used to like you, Eva."

There's no emotion in her voice as she says this, as if she's over what happened. I know she probably isn't, and she and Frank most likely won't last more than a few weeks.

"Fine. I'll stay at my dad's tonight and when Jim gets back from his trip, we'll come pick up my things."

Myria looks relieved. "I won't be able to give you your half of the deposit for a while."

"Keep it," I say. I set my cup on the counter and go in my room to pack a few things.

On my way to work, I call Jim. He's in London visiting his expatriate sister and her family whom I've never met.

"How's England?"

"I miss you," he says.

"I'm homeless," I tell him. Jim and I met at the club where I bartend. He used to come in every weekend and one Saturday, after last call, I invited him to stay and have a drink with me. He went to UVM; I started at Castleton state and never finished. I wanted to be an anthropologist, but I couldn't stand all the requirement classes I had to get through first. He got his degree in Social Services and works in a home for troubled teens.

"Seriously? You and Myria have a fight?"

"Something like that."

"You know what I'm going to tell you."

I do know. He's been asking me to move in almost since we met. Why pay rent for a place to hang my clothes, he asks, when I could hang them at his place for nothing. It's a nice sentiment, but it's never for nothing.

"Okay."

"What do you mean, okay?"

"I'll move in."

I move the phone away from my head when Jim yells, "Yes!"

"I'm staying with Dad, tonight. When I pick you up we'll talk about getting my things over to your place."

"I can't wait to see you," he says. "And other things," he adds. His soft laughter irritates me. There's always been something proprietary about Jim. My chest is beginning to feel tight and I'm not even there yet.

"I have to go. I'll be late."

At work, Mavis has already set up the bar. She gives me the evil eye as I walk by into the kitchen to punch in. She won't be mad for long—it's not as if I haven't covered for her before. It's a Tuesday night and the live music is mediocre, so the dance floor's empty except for the mentally-challenged kid that always stands and bounces next to the front speaker and Anita, our local transvestite. Most of the night, Mavis and I lean against the beer coolers and watch the band.

We offer last call at 11:00. Two guys near the bar talk about heading up the street to the corner pub for pool. I let it slip to Mavis during clean-up I might be looking for a place to live. I don't know why—I've already told Jim I'd move in with him. As it turns out, she tells me she knows this guy, a friend of her boyfriend, who wants a roommate. "He owns a house on Maple," she says.

"Jim would flip," I say.

"What's the big deal? It's not like you're signing up to sleep with the guy."

"He would," I insist.

Mavis shrugs.

My father is up when I get home around 11:30. He's wearing a different pair of pajamas—orange footballs on a background of electric blue. As far as I know he's never played football in his life.

I drop my bag on the kitchen table and put the kettle on for tea.

"You'll be up all night," my dad says, following me in.

"It's chamomile. Didn't you want to talk or something?" I walk back to the sink and wash my face with dish soap. Eyes closed, I hold my hand out for a towel and my father pulls one out from the drawer.

“Make one for me, too,” he says, sitting down at the table. His sigh collapses into a soft whistle.

When they're ready, I grab our cups of tea and join him. He rubs his face in his hands as if he's trying to wake up.

“You're doing it again.”

“What?”

“Blowing it. First it was college—

“You hated that I wanted to be an anthropologist.” He's an accountant, something practical and he never fails to remind me of this.

“People get an anthropology degree when they don't know what the hell they want. It's beside the point, since you didn't finish.” He leans back in his chair, studies my face. “You're always getting kicked out. Why? For Christ's sake, tell me why you have such a hard time with people?”

“Have you noticed most people are stupid?”

“Antagonistic.” He hits the table.

“That, too.”

“I'm talking about you. You're deliberately antagonistic.” He gets up from the table, his leg bumping the edge and sending tea spilling over the rim of my cup, and leaves the room. When he comes back in, he has an envelope in his hand. He drops it on the table in front of me.

“What's this?”

“Open it.”

I rip the top off the envelope and slide out a pair of tickets. It's a roundtrip to Kenya. My hands start to tremble. “What are these?” I demand.

“I booked these months ago. I wasn't sure if we should take the trip or not.”

“Hold on there. What trip?” I'm sweating under my shirt.

My father sits and takes a gulp of tea, his solid hand dwarfing the bone-china cup. “I've set it up with your mother. She's expecting it. Expecting you.”

“You know where she is? Dad, what the fuck is going on?”

"Your mother didn't just leave," he says, his voice low and gentle, "I was the one who made her go."

"Back up. Rewind. What are you talking about?"

"She met this woman, an activist, through the church she'd started going to. They made plans for a tree farm somewhere in Kenya. After a while, she asked me if she could take you. I told her no."

"So we could have been with her."

"Not we. You."

"I'm still confused."

"Your mother and I were splitting by then. She and this woman..."

"Yes?" Why can't he spit it out already?

"They had a relationship."

"Lovers?"

He nods his head. "But it's more complicated than that. The point is, she wanted to take you with them and it wasn't going to happen as long as I was alive. You were everything to me. Still are."

I look around the room. I am overcome with the urge to throw something, but there's nothing. I stare down my father.

"I don't believe this shit!" I pick up the tickets off the table and hurl them across the room. "You lied to me! For years you've been lying."

"Listen, I..."

"No! I've heard enough for one fucking night."

"Your mouth."

"Fuck off!" I yell on my way out of the room.

The next afternoon, I pick Jim up from the airport and we drive back to his place. I think about the tickets once, at the airport, when I watch a mother and daughter walk through security together, but I keep them from my mind for most of the day.

Jim's apartment is really a duplex, set in one of the newer developments on the west side of town. It's neat and attractive in a sterile kind of way. Kind of like Jim.

Inside, we chow down on a couple of grinders we picked up on the way home, leaning over the coffee table and dropping slivers of onion and lettuce onto the greasy sandwich papers. Later, in the bedroom, the both of us still wet from the shower, Jim pulls me on top of him.

“How am I going to get any sleep now that you're in my bed?”

“I'm always in your bed,” I say, letting him gnaw at my neck, my ear.

“Aw, but this is different. I get to have you anytime I want.”

His hands knead at my boobs, clutch my crotch. I'm not in the mood. I'm thinking about the tickets and my mother. Sex and my mother are already too closely linked. It's usually when I'm close to getting off that I see her closet. See its emptiness, the pink blouse. It used to only happen once in a while. Lately, it's as if I've conjured it out of habit. Jim thinks he's brought me to this state of ecstasy, a feeling I deal with by scrunching my eyes shut and holding my breath. He's wrong. It's the picture of my mother's closet slashing through whatever desire I'm feeling that does it. As if it's telling me: Don't even think about letting go.

“I'm tired,” I say. He's disappointed, but he won't say so—he thinks he has to suffer me in silence.

“I'm glad you're here,” he whispers. His hand rubs my back for a couple of minutes and then he's snoring.

I lie in bed wondering how I'll ever be able to live with Jim and breathe at the same time.

In the morning, I call the guy Mavis told me about and he gives me directions over the phone. Outside, it's freezing—there's a thin blanket of snow on my car, on the ground. The place I'm looking for is on the east side of town, on one of the nicer tree-lines streets that leads out to the country club. I pull into a driveway when I get to the group of birches he said marked the start of his property.

The house is a contemporary wood and glass structure. I climb out of the car and run up the gravel path and knock on the door. The

guy opens it. He has an interesting, angular face; he's tall, though slightly hunched, has wild hair and pale, thick lips.

"Todd," he says, shaking my hand. "Come in."

He helps me off with my coat and hangs it on a wooden tree in the foyer. "This way," he says, and I follow him through a series of rooms and down a long hall. At the end is a large suite. "Here's the room for rent," he says. "It's private on this side of the house. We'll hardly see each other."

I like the room. It has high ceilings, large windows with a view of a meadow and the mountains beyond. There's a nice space for a sofa and chair by the stone fireplace and I see a bathroom off to the right.

"What's across the hall?" I ask heading toward another room.

"That's Harold's room. My snake. Sorry, it's a mess."

I feel a needle-like heat spread over my face and under my arms. "A snake? You have a snake?"

"Red-tailed Boa from Brazil. Know anything about boas?"

Once a year, I'd go to this science museum with my elementary class. It had all these hands-on exhibits: a bees' nest behind a clear glass panel so we could watch them; a solar system display all lit up; a giant bubble maker. It also had a couple of snake exhibits—a drawer full of shed snake skins and a family of boas. I wouldn't go near the snakes. One year, a teacher threatened to send me out to sit on the bus alone until I told her, sobbing, nose dripping snot, that a snake had killed my mother. She didn't leave my side for the rest of the afternoon and before we got back on the bus, she snuck me into the gift shop and offered to buy me a piece of quartz if I didn't tell the other kids.

Inside the small room, boxes are stacked against one wall. On the opposite side of the room there's a large aquarium. Next to that is a table heaped with stuff: paper towels, plastic bags, newspaper, tongs.

"Where is it?" I ask, peering into the aquarium.

Todd tucks his arm around my waist and guides me over to the end of the aquarium. "There." He points to the corner.

Harold's just lying there, not moving, but it isn't much of a stretch for me to imagine him slinking out of his aquarium and across the hall to my bed.

"You're not afraid of snakes, are you?"

I keep staring at Harold. Force myself to look until the prickly heat fades.

"No," I say. "Of course not."

I look at Todd, at the amusement in his eyes, then back at Harold, curled up, looking like nothing more than a fat, harmless shoelace. With a head.

When I turn back to Todd, I study his face. His eyes, gray, are underlined by dark crescents beneath darker lashes. The lashes almost touch the top of his cheeks. His hair hangs in mushroom-colored dreads and his clothes hang loose and rumped. It's his messiness I find sexy. I want to bury myself in his gorgeous messiness.

I pull him onto the floor by the aquarium. Harold moves a bit as we pass by him. I shudder. Just once. There's a salty-mint taste to Todd's lips, his mouth. I open my own mouth wide to make room for his tongue. Moving down his body I lift his shirt and kiss the skin near the top of his pants. Unzip his jeans.

Todd's erection rises up through the open zipper. His hands, reaching for my shirt, get caught up in the fabric. I help by pulling it over my head and undoing my bra. I bend down and lick him, watch him bob to the direction of my tongue. We get each other off fast, without talk. So fast, there's no time to think of anything—no closet, no Harold, just a plain white sheet of nothing but physical touch.

When it's over, I lie back, stare up at Harold's home, and wait for my breathing to settle. The morning sun's coming through the window and bouncing off the aquarium.

"I'll think about the room," I tell Todd as I kiss his cheek, his chin, his eyes. I throw my shirt back on. Lie down again to button my jeans.

He looks stunned, bewildered. "Sure. Yeah."

At the door, he watches me walk to my car. "Call me."

I don't answer him.

In a café downtown, I sit by a large window with a latte and a blueberry bagel, though I haven't touched the bagel. There's a guy in a cherry-picker hanging Christmas wreaths on the light poles along one side of the street. The layer of snow that fell in the night has melted in the morning's rising temperatures—there's only a few patches left in the shelter of shaded areas. Inside the coffee shop, a kid whines she wants ice cream and her mother snaps at her it's too early for ice cream. I think, give the girl some ice cream. She could be gone tomorrow, or in the next hour, even. The future cannot be taken for granted.

I think about my mother asking my father for permission to take me with her, him standing there, an unmoving wall of granite, probably sure she'd give up her ridiculous fantasy. Change her mind. Change who she was. I'm angry at both of them. At him for lying. For thinking he had the right to decide things for all three of us. And I'm pissed at her for allowing him bully her into retreat. For choosing that woman over me.

I try to picture my father and me flying on a plane over the Atlantic and getting off on a tarmac on another continent to find the woman who gave me life and left me. I imagine her waiting there for us to step off the plane, her long hair messed by hot, dry winds. Or I imagine riding in a jeep, dust kicked up behind us, to find her in some school house, teaching kids how to spell or multiply. Or outside, showing them on bent knees how to fill deep holes with the life of trees. She sees me, stands up, sways a little. I run to her and wrap my arms around her body, surrender into the circle of hers, in that heat, in the land of snakes. It's been fourteen years, but it feels like nothing and forever all at once.

