Northeast of Eden (Memoir; Editor: Charlotte Curtis)

by Rick Rofihe

1. I don't know very much about snakes, just that I grew up far enough north in North America that there were no venomous or constricting snakes around, and that if you saw a snake there was no good reason to be afraid. Still, it can't be denied that to most people, snakes are startling—you see a stick but then you see it's a snake. It was startling in the Bible and it's startling on your lawn.

2. In the country, when my cat killed a bird, I told no one. When he killed a snake, I told everyone; no one ever said I should put a bell on him because he kills snakes.

3. New York City is a scary place. One begins to sense this when taking note of the many pet shops selling 90-cent mice, the preferred live food of pet boa constrictors kept by many New Yorkers. “There's hardly a block without a boa,” said one mouse dealer. “It's scary.”

4. G. Gordon Liddy, of Watergate fame, said in his book *Will* that he didn't want to be afraid of anything so as to be able to act freely in all situations. However, he *was* afraid of rats and decided to overcome his fear by roasting and eating a rat. This, like many of Mr. Liddy's actions, though amusing, and all right for Mr. Liddy, holds little promise for the common, fearful man. After all, won't anyone who is afraid of say, snakes, probably be afraid to *eat* one, even a poached one with sauce? Also, do we overcome our fears, or our enemies, by consuming them or their kind? Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev didn't say, “We will *ingest* you.” Further, even if you ate

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one snake, it doesn't mean you wouldn't be afraid of the next one you saw (or were served).

5. A while back, a small-city newspaper in the Northeast dropped the Doonesbury comic strip over its use of the term “knocked up”. The editors published a lot of letters concerning the matter—one, written by a person who was either a master of irony or *really* afraid of snakes, was headlined “Afraid of Snakes” and went like this: “Sirs: Yes, sure, keep Doonesbury going. If I want to read it or not it's still OK. I have been reading your newspaper since 1929. I am really scared of snakes. If I see a picture of a snake in any newspaper, I soon burn the paper or throw it out of my house. If I see a snake on TV, I shut it off. Lizards, etc., are OK. If I see a snake two inches long, he takes his road and I take mine.”

6. My brother, a clothier, tells of a businessman he knew who imported goose down from the Far East to use in the manufacture of ski jackets. The fellow was wearing one of his own products one day when it began to feel askew. He tugged at it—but it tugged right back. He whipped off the jacket, flinging it on the ground—a snake egg had been imported with the down, and had hatched. (When my brother tells this story, he always gets asked: “What kind of snake?” “Did he kill it?” “Did he feel like a father?” “Did the guy make sleeping bags, too?”)

7. Snakes have no eyelids, no hips, no lobby in Washington (some creatures do!) and little support at home.

8.One summer I heard of a rural woman who became distraught upon discovering snakes in her basement. Believing that these snakes were punishment for past sins, she thought to get rid of them by confessing her life's wrongdoings, for absolution, to anyone who'd listen. Different people told me a few things she'd divulged, always sins like “I was unreasonable with my daughter when she was growing up,” or “I was impatient with my in-laws,”—the

forgiveness of which just might not drive out snakes, or even reseal a good-sized can of worms.

9. If you have a psychiatrist and you dream of snakes, don't tell him/her about it. The symbolism may give you more things to fear.

10. Not too long ago I came upon an unfamiliar term, “land eel”, in a magazine article. I consulted an old fellow, a fisherman, about it. “Land eels?” He gave me a look usually reserved for tourists. “Eels is eels, they all got gills. If they have to travel over land sometimes, they're still plain eels.” When I asked him why anyone would use such a term, he said: “Probably meant snakes. Some people scared t'see a snake. Some might be scared to write one down.”

11. I was talking to a naturalist from Pittsburgh about snakes and she said there were some dangerous ones in Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains. “Pennsylvania?” I worried. “That's close. I live in New York State. Are there any poisonous snakes in New York State?” Her facial muscles shifted and she took a quick long trip—two seconds to another time and place; two seconds back—before replying. “My husband lives near Schenectady.”