

THE NEST

By Mark Farrington

Eleanor, weeding the strip of flower garden along the front of the house, almost picked up a snake. From the window Al watched his wife jump to her feet and stumble backwards. She yanked off one of her work gloves and threw it to the ground. He started outside but stopped when he saw her running toward the kitchen door.

She closed the door behind her, pressing her body against it. Her shoulders rose and fell. "Eleanor?" Al said. "What is it? El?"

She eased away, keeping her back to her husband, and peeled off the other work glove and laid it on the counter. Turning, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms, squeezing the fabric of her navy blue windbreaker, and told him. All the while, she fought to recapture her breath.

"What kind of snake?"

"I don't know. A snake. It was in the garden. It was--" She shivered. When Al approached her she passed him, so they ended up exchanging places. "I thought it was a stick. I almost picked it up."

"Is it out there now?"

"It went underneath the steps."

"The front steps?"

(this is not the end, having trouble removing a break here...)

She nodded, and Al went outside. The sun was warm, but a breeze sharp enough to carry snow cut through his short-sleeved shirt. The temperature was in the fifties, and buds were appearing on the trees, but Al did not trust that winter was truly over. In the sky, fat grey-bellied clouds bumped around each other. If they ever locked together, there could be a storm.

He scanned the strip of garden on either side of the steps, then leaned over to look beneath them. Plywood enclosed both sides. He saw no movement, nothing resembling a stick or a snake.

Returning to the kitchen he told Eleanor, "It's not out there now. Most likely you scared it as much as it scared you." He tested a laugh. "I'll bet it's high-tailing it back up the mountain right now."

Eleanor's pale face gave no indication she believed him. Perspiration-soaked ringlets of her dark hair lined the top of her forehead.

Al leaned back against the counter. He'd first learned of her fear of snakes when they were dating and she refused to go to a movie because it was set in Africa. She didn't like Westerns either because somebody usually stumbled upon a rattler. If a snake did appear she jerked away, turning her whole body from the screen, and her hands clenched into fists like she wanted to hit someone. It then became Al's job to inform her when the snake was gone.

He accepted her fear without fully understanding it. He'd always had a fear of heights, until one summer he got a job with a roofing company. At first he took a lot of abuse, tentatively climbing ladders and crawling along edges where other men did acrobatics to show him up. But he never gave in to the fear. His knees always softened when he climbed a ladder, but he did it anyway.

Eleanor let her fear dominate her. Al knew of nothing else she let make her so helpless.

Her hands trembled as she lit a cigarette. He pushed an ashtray across the table. “Do you want some coffee?” he asked. “That wind’s pretty cold.”

“It was right there. I cleared away some leaves, and it was lying there against the foundation. It looked like a stick.” She paused. “Damn it all, that something like that should happen now.”

They’d only moved into the house in December. They were both from New York, she from Brooklyn and he the Bronx, and for the first year they were married they’d lived with her parents. They’d dreamed of moving to the country and starting a family, but not until he landed a job at the General Electric plant in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, did either of them believe it might happen. He’d started work in the summer, coming alone and living at the YMCA. One or two weekends a month, Eleanor rode up with her parents to visit and go house-searching. They’d fallen in love with this house the first time they saw it. The mortgage was high, but Eleanor’s parents were helping.

“Try not to think about it,” Al said. “I’m sure it’s gone, but I’ll go out again just to be safe. If it’s there, I’ll get rid of it.”

A laugh escaped her, tired and sarcastic. “So much for me having a garden.” She shuddered. “I almost picked it up.”

“I’ll go out right now.” Al reached for his jacket, then started toward the back door. Halfway there he turned and headed for the basement. “I’ll go out this way,” he said to Eleanor’s back. She crushed out her cigarette and lit another.

He found a shovel and went out through the garage door. They had an acre of land, flat fields culminating in a slow rise to the top of a small hill, the house perched on

top. The edges of the yard pushed against a line of trees that quickly sunk into deep woods that climbed the mountains ringing this valley. Not great mountains, not Rocky Mountain mountains, but they were larger and more formidable than anything Al had ever known. They spread like a great wall along one side and the back of the house, so that even this house set atop a hill, with no other houses visible in any direction, did not seem grand, but rather like a toy house in the playground of these giants.

It was more isolated than he preferred. He'd wanted to move to the country, but didn't "country" mean small towns, general stores, rows of houses each with its own big yard for kids to play in? True, they were only five miles from the town of Maysfield, and driving over the first crest he could look down upon half a dozen houses, many of them single family homes on an acre of land, just like theirs. Still, if he stood in his own front yard and screamed at the top of his lungs, no neighbors would hear.

It was Eleanor who'd fallen in love with the isolation. Odd, because she'd perfected the ability to disappear inside herself. They could be walking down Broadway and he'd look at her firm, expressionless face, her cold eyes and tight mouth, and he'd know she'd vanished into her own private world, pushing out not only him but the hundreds of others jostling for space as they moved along the sidewalk. They could be sitting quietly waiting for a movie to begin, and it was as if suddenly she turned a switch that transported her to a place even more isolated than this house they lived in now. There was her and no one else in that world. The funny thing was, she didn't like being alone. She'd phoned him several times unexpectedly when he was living at the Y, and he was flattered at first, thinking she missed him so, and when she mentioned that her parents were out for the evening, he thought she might be taking advantage of their absence to talk in a more intimate way than she could when they were there. But she

never did speak intimately, and her tone wasn't that of a loving young wife missing her new husband. Rather, she sounded like a frightened child struggling to put up a brave front. Her voice grew stronger as they talked of trivial things, of the weather and what they'd eaten for dinner, and by the time they said goodbye, (he being sure to add that he loved her, and she replying, as if her parents had returned and were peering over her shoulder, "Okay") he felt as though he'd served his purpose and she didn't need him anymore, until the next time.

Maybe that was it, he thought now, squinting as the sun shot lances between the obstructing clouds. She just doesn't like to need.

She didn't like to be frightened, either, and this snake had to be found and destroyed. Holding the shovel-head backwards, he gripped the handle tightly, as if it were a spear or a lance, and approached the house cautiously, scanning the grass, poised to strike at the snake, chop off its head -- the only way to kill a snake, he believed, though he had no idea where he'd heard this.

He neared the pad Eleanor had used to kneel on, passed the one discarded glove sticking up like a severed hand, its fingers curled. The spot at which she'd stopped weeding looked unexceptional, as if she'd paused for lunch.

The steps looked solid, two steps leading up to a wide platform beneath the door. Shovel in hand, he climbed onto the top and hopped up and down, thumping his work boots. He looked quickly side to side, but no escaping snake appeared. He tapped his shovel against the plywood on one side, then spun to the other: nothing.

He didn't know what to do. He recalled hearing a guy at work talk about a problem he'd had with woodchucks. He'd got out his .22 and sat on his front porch all night, and in the early morning, he'd picked them off one by one. He'd made it sound so

easy, like any guy with half a brain -- and a .22 -- could do it. But snakes were more complicated than woodchucks.

Back inside, he heard the shower running. He couldn't think of anyone from work he could ask about snakes, so he decided to call the Natural Science Museum in Pittsfield.

A woman answered. "Maybe you can help me," Al said. "I have a question about snakes."

She asked him to hold. A man said, "Winter's speaking."

"My wife just saw a snake. She was outside gardening, it was lying near the house and then it went underneath the steps."

"What'd it look like?"

"Didn't see it. I went out to look, but it was gone I guess. My wife, you see, she doesn't like them, and I just wanted to assure her that--"

"Common garter snake, probably. Maybe a wood snake. Nothing to worry about either way."

"It went underneath the front steps."

"I'm sure it's harmless. They're quite helpful, actually, very good for gardens."

"My wife," Al said. He felt pressured to talk quickly. "We're from the city, we've never seen them. I just wanted -- do you think it was a freak occurrence, one coming so close to the house?"

The man on the other end laughed, although he somehow made it seem polite. "You're in the country, Mr.--"

"Ryan."

“You’re in the country, Mr. Ryan. We have snakes. And I daresay if you saw one go under your steps, he probably lives there. There’s a good chance you’ve got a whole nest of them.”

Al wanted to ask what he should do, but he didn’t know how to make the other man understand. He thanked him and hung up.

Eleanor sat before the mirror in their bedroom, brushing her wet hair. She wore a dark blue silky robe and nothing else, Al decided, seeing how smooth and tight the robe stretched across her back and hips. Coming up behind her, he could see her neck and the top of her pale chest in the mirror, the skin flushed pink from the hot water. His gaze trailed down to the shadowed V where the two sides of the robe crossed, then he hastily looked up, seeking her eyes in the mirror to see if she’d noticed. He was sure she had, although her face showed that blank expression announcing she’d divorced herself from him and the world around her. The brush glided through her long dark hair.

His own guilty face loomed above hers, his chubby cheeks and curly hair, a clown stationed behind a queen.

Al had fallen in love with her the first time they met. When they started dating, he enjoyed most of all being out with her in public; he wanted people to notice them, to envy him, to be as disbelieving as he was himself that someone like Eleanor could be with him.

He knew that before he’d met her she’d been engaged to a man who changed his mind at the last minute and left her, running off to Europe. Al knew she didn’t love him as she’d loved that man. But he didn’t need her to forget this other man, or to love him more. He could live with not being a part of her private dreams. He wanted only to make

sure she knew how much he loved her, and in time, he hoped, she'd come to understand that he could provide things for her -- good, practical, honest, down-to-earth things -- that even her ghost lover couldn't have. He wanted her to need him, because then, she would never leave.

He noticed her watching him in the mirror. The switch had turned, she was back. "No luck," she said, without a question in her voice.

"I don't know. I couldn't find it. I really think it's gone."

When she didn't reply he said, "El? Don't you think?"

"I saw it. I know it was there. And I don't believe it was alone."

"What do you mean?"

"If there's one, there have to be others."

"Under the steps?"

"I don't know." For a moment, she looked like she might cry, before she drove the emotion away with a burst of anger. "Damn that thing. And God damn it that it had to be there."

She resumed brushing her hair, more forcefully now. Al's arms hung at his sides, feeling huge and bulky and helpless. "I could take apart those steps," he said. "If they're under there, I'll get them. I'll kill them all." He hoped she'd be buoyed by his words, and that would give him confidence in return. But she'd retreated into her private world again.

"Do you remember that movie you wanted to take me to? It was one of our first dates." Her voice was soft, almost as mechanical as the way her hand continued to move the brush through her hair.

“That African picture,” said Al.

“You remember how I couldn’t go in? You had everything so well planned. I was sure you’d get angry. I didn’t know how to explain it to you, how to tell you what it was like.”

“I thought you didn’t like me. I thought you were afraid to go into a dark movie theater with a guy like me.” He smiled. “No, of course it didn’t bother me. I’ve tried to understand, haven’t I?”

“I was always afraid of them. I don’t know why. You should have seen how it frustrated my father. When I was in third grade, we had this science book, and I turned the page and there was a picture of one. I flung that book across the room, and there was no way they could get me to pick it up.

“They had to call my father to come and get me. Take me home.”

For a moment she glanced up at his face above hers in the mirror. Al tried to read her gaze, to determine what she needed, what he might do. Then her gaze lowered; she appeared to content herself with staring into her own eyes. “That summer my father told me he’d had enough. ‘You overcome fear,’ he said, ‘by confronting it.’ He took me to the zoo. To the reptile house.

“I wanted to go. I believed him. The thought of going terrified me, and I got angry at myself for being so weak. I wanted to go, to prove that I could.

“Then we were inside and something happened. It was dark and hot, and suddenly it felt like I’d been sealed up alive in a coffin filled with snakes. I couldn’t make a sound, I could hardly breathe, and all I kept thinking was, Don’t let him see. And this woman, the keeper, brought over one of those huge African snakes, and my father said, ‘Here, let her touch it. Hold it.’ I pushed out my hand and she touched the snake to it.

Then she laid it around my neck, my shoulders. I could feel the weight of it, the terrible warmth. I could feel the throbbing of its blood. It seemed so odd, that I could feel so cold and it so warm.

“Afterwards they showed a film. In it, a snake just like the one I’d touched ate a pig. Swallowed it whole, still alive. I heard that pig scream -- I can hear it scream still. You could see its whole outline writhing inside the snake. I watched it all. When we got home, my father told me how proud he was.”

She passed her fingertips across her eyelids, as if smoothing makeup. Al wanted to touch her, to place his hands upon her shoulders, rub her back. He didn’t, certain she would flinch and jerk away. Anything foreign that touched her now would feel too much like snake to her.

She sat up straight and resumed brushing her hair. He watched the brush catch the wet hair, pull it straight, let it drop onto her shoulders. Her skin shone hard as glass. He thought how even at the movies, when a snake appeared she turned not to him but away.

He imagined moving closer until she leaned back against him, feeling his sturdiness, his reliability. His hands circled in front to cup her breasts and her head leaned farther back, turning to one side as her lips brushed his bare arm, her teeth nipped at his flesh. He helped her stand and turned her, she making shuffling motions, until they faced each other and his fingertips undid the belt of her robe. It opened and the robe parted, as the hairbrush dropped from her hand, a muffled thud against the carpet.

She would climb into his burly arms, her legs open and scissoring around his waist, clasping him like a snake as he cupped her buttocks and carried her to the bed.

Clothing would be torn, scratches dug, sweat mixing with the sweet taste of blood. In the end, she -- who always remained silent -- would cry out in submission and joy.

He caught her watching him in the mirror. She looked surprised, as if she thought he'd gone, or should have.

"I'll take apart those steps," he said.

In the garage he retrieved the shovel, then grabbed an axe. It felt too substantial, as if he should be attacking a tree, not steps, not a snake. His arm straining against the weight at the opposite end left him feeling unbalanced. He set it and the shovel against the wall, then added a crowbar and a hammer. He took off his shirt. It would be cold in just his tee-shirt, but that felt right somehow.

The shadows along the front of the house had grown darker, but all the clouds had vanished, leaving an unbroken blue sky as soft as a lake on a windless day. The bright sunlight lay like a blanket across the fields leading out to the road, and then up Christian Hill. The colors were at once so bright -- blues and yellows and greens -- and so serene that it was like looking at a painting of the French countryside. It felt as separate from where he stood as a painting would have been, existing in another plane, another world. And yet he'd have sworn he could simply step forward and disappear into it.

He set down the tools on the grass, then rubbed his arms for warmth. When the museum director had said there probably was a nest of snakes, he'd pictured a bird's nest of twigs and leaves with snakes curled up inside. The image was ridiculous, but what did a snake's nest look like?

Carrying the shovel like a spear, he made one last inspection of the strip of garden on either side of the steps, unwilling to give up hope that there really was only

one stray snake and he'd spot it if only he looked hard enough. But of course he saw nothing.

Earlier, he'd pictured himself dismantling these steps like a surgeon, prying off the two large sidepieces he could later suture back together, after removing the offending mass inside. Now, he didn't know where to begin. He found no grooves into which he could fit the end of a crowbar, or even the prongs of the hammer. No nails jutted out, asking to be yanked; no warped boards billowed or sagged to provide an obvious weak point. He felt as clueless as the time he'd stood beside their car on the side of a deserted road and peered beneath its raised hood at the unfathomable maze of hoses, wires, and belts that should be working but weren't while his red-faced silent wife remained in the passenger seat, thinking no doubt of her father, with his long, feminine fingers and his intuitive understanding of all things mechanical.

He gazed at the front door and thought -- incredibly, for the first time -- that it wasn't really the front door at all, but the back door, opening to the kitchen. The real front door was on the opposite side of the house, looking out over the lawn sloping to the edge of the woods. On the other hand, this door faced the road, and aligned with the garage door and the driveway. There wasn't even a walkway connecting this to that other door. Was this the front, then? Or had the house been set down backwards at the top of this little flat tuft of a hill?

Of course the house had not been lowered down from a helicopter, but staring at it now, backing up past the shadows and holding his hand above his eyes to shield them from the fading sunlight, he couldn't shake the feeling that it really sat backwards. Eleanor hadn't noticed it yet but she would, and then what would they do? Would she

expect him to turn their house around? He was having enough trouble simply finding and killing one snake.

“Nothing to worry about.” The museum director’s voice replayed in his mind, its sing-songy Down East accent seeming to mock him now, although he hadn’t felt so then. “They’re harmless. Helpful, actually, very good for gardens.”

Very good for gardens? What kind of world did that man live in?

He carried the axe to the steps and swung it gently, side to side, trying to balance his own weight with the weight of the axe’s head. He developed a rhythm, almost a dance, and then, still in rhythm, he swung the axe behind his head, bent his knees, and propelled the axe up and over and then down, as his body sprang forward. A cry escaped him as the axe struck the top step. He’d expected the axe to bounce, but the wood proved soft enough that the blade dug in and held. Al let go and stepped back, his hands and arms trembling, and even after the motion subsided he felt the aftershock, like the memory of a bolt of lightning.

For a moment he felt afraid. But the force of the axe meeting the wood had been satisfying, and he twisted the axe free and swung it once again. This time a chip of wood shot into the air, as two of the boards across the top platform broke, the pieces folding in like a trap door collapsing. Blood pounding in his temples, he swung the axe again and again. Unleashed, he exploded with motion, bringing the axe down, his swinging wilder now, not caring what he hit so long as he hit something. One plywood sideboard tumbled of its own accord, and he flung it out of the way. He drove the axe down again, long-freed of any notion of a surgical dismantling, not even thinking about snakes anymore, really. He was all force and movement and rage, his nose and mouth bubbling with snot and saliva, exploding with his own power. He felt he could have gone from

these steps to the whole house, tearing it apart with just this axe and his own brutal strength.

The blade hit something tender, wedged in and stuck. Letting go, Al stumbled, nearly falling as he backed away. There were no steps anymore, only rubble, and a rich black glimmering bed of earth where they used to be.

The bed moved. Snakes. He shouted, more in surprise than fear, and struggled to tug the axe free. He slammed it into the earth, yanked it loose, drove it down again. The earth shimmered, seeming alive, and yet he saw nothing he could identify as a snake, nothing curling up ready to strike, nothing slithering away. Was it all a trick of the eye?

He dropped to his knees and pawed at the dirt, soft and moist, merged with decomposed leaves. Perfect soil for a garden, he thought, and for a crazy moment he wondered if that could be what the museum director meant: snakes were helpful for gardens because they fertilized the soil. His mind flashed to a picture of himself outside with Eleanor, walking along her garden where a snake curled up around the base of every plant, his impossible task to convince her they really were good for her.

He rubbed his grimy hands on the front of his sweat-soaked tee shirt, then wiped the drops from his forehead with the back of his wrist. He peered up and down the strip of garden. No snakes lurked there, no pieces of snake chopped up by his axe. Had they all escaped while he'd blindly pummeled the steps? Had they ever been there at all?

He noticed something near his hand. A salamander, he thought, or an earthworm, but as he peered closer, he realized it was a baby snake. Its body moved frenetically, but it covered so little ground it seemed to move in slow motion. Al reached down and scooped it up in his palm. It froze, but as soon as he raised it near his face and

opened his palm, it started wriggling. It was not as long as an earthworm, but thicker, sturdier. Did snakes have bones?

It had eyes, and the shape of a head. It had a will to move, and somewhere to go.

And it had a family, no doubt. A family now scattered that had been living beneath these steps. That would probably return, once the steps were rebuilt.

“And if you rebuilt them with concrete?”

He recognized the voice in his head. It was the voice that made promises to Eleanor, even those he knew he couldn't keep.

“Concrete might work,” he thought, or muttered, he wasn't sure which. He could talk to the guys at work. He imagined that other voice assuring Eleanor: “There won't be any snakes living under those steps anymore. Those steps are solid concrete.”

She'd believe him, and feel better, kiss him perhaps, let him hold her, although a part of her would remain tense and removed, a part of her would always remain tense and removed. But everything would be fine, for a while. Until she reached for the next stick.

A tickling on the underside of his wrist reminded him he still held the baby snake. He laid the back of his hand on the ground and coaxed it into the dirt. Sighing, he closed his eyes for a moment, and when he next looked, the baby snake was gone.

He sat down hard and laid his hands in his lap. The sweet smell of the earth mixed with the sawdust smell of the shattered wood. Despite the chill, he welcomed the breeze that cooled his hot brow. In the sky the clouds had returned, and even the distant field that had been bathed in French-painting sunlight darkened now with a greenish hue.

Hearing a sound, he looked up. Eleanor peered down at him from the open doorway suspended four feet above the ground.