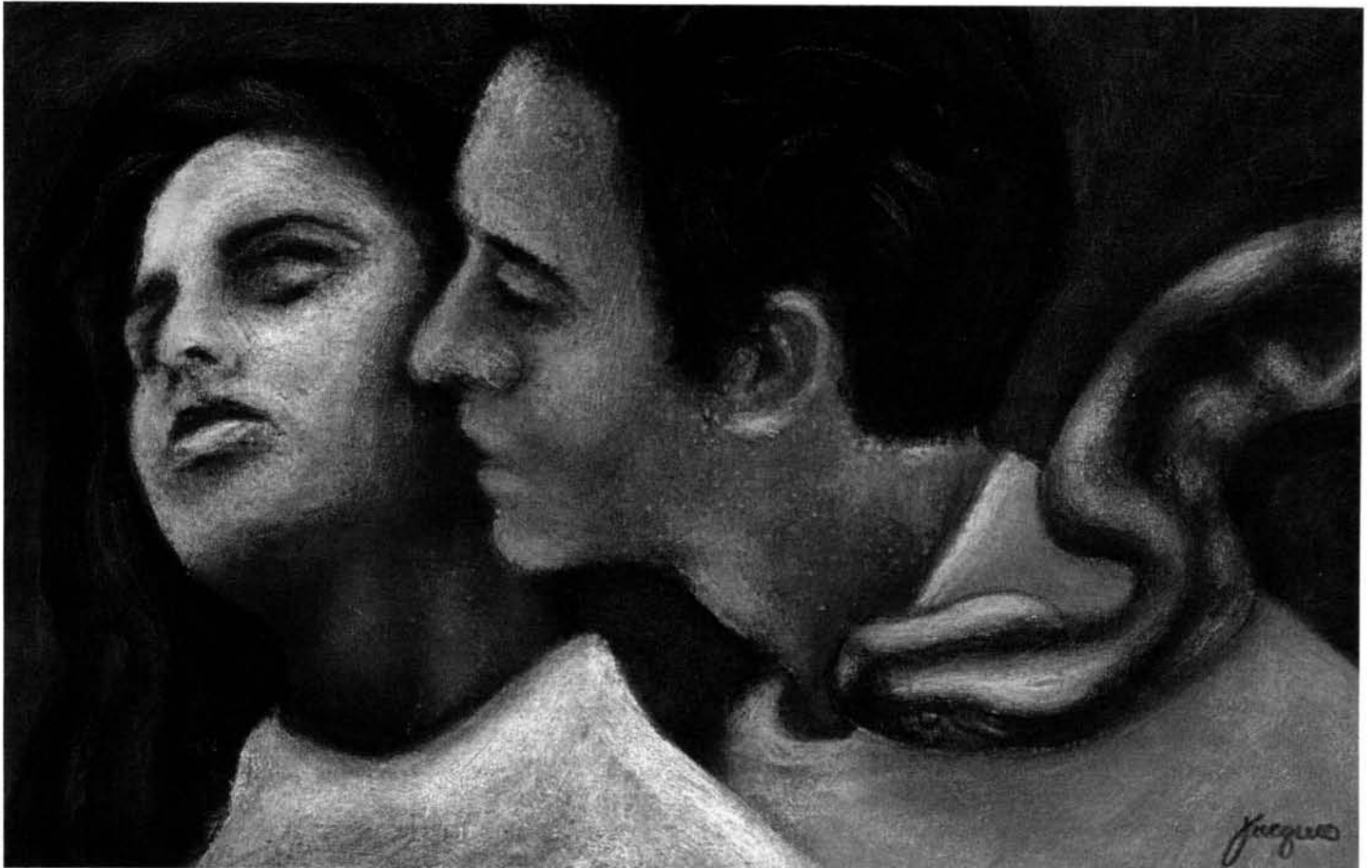


Moonstone Winner, 1992 Brookie and D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

# SNAKE MAN

By Angela Wood



I soon discovered this was his secret with the snakes. A few touches with those hands, and I knew why the snakes never gave him any trouble.

FIRST OF ALL, LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE MORMONS, whose church I belong to, and then I'll tell you about me and Barc, the non-Mormon man I live with. You see, we Mormons have a lot of rules about sex. Barc wonders why we're so worried about something so simple, but they're good rules, generally, I believe. Basically, the main one is that until you marry, you're not supposed to think, let alone do, anything sexual at all. I am willing to admit, even though no one else is, just how difficult this is.

I know the idea behind the rule is to not hurt anyone, which

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I certainly think is a more than good idea. It's just that the rules never seemed to work out too well for Barc and me, that's all. At least not the no-sex-before-marriage part. We have no problem with being faithful to each other. In all honesty I have to admit that I occasionally feel an impulse toward another member of the opposite sex, but mostly we go by an old Buddhist saying Barc told me. It says that the best way to keep your cow from running away is to put her in a really nice pasture.

For a long time, before I knew him at all, my friends and I just called him the Snake Man. He takes care of all the reptiles here at the Animal Park, but it's easy to see that snakes are his first love. He does a reptile show every day at one and five P.M.

where he tells you all about snakes. Snakes live almost everywhere on the earth. Only a few areas in the world have no snakes. He's absolutely thrilled about this and has no idea that most people would rather not know that the only place snakes can't survive is where the ground stays frozen the year around.

He lets them crawl all over him while he's talking, and you can see from the look on his face that he's as pleased as punch. He lets the other creatures have a little time, too, but mostly it's snakes, snakes, and more snakes. Later, but not until I'd moved in with him, I found out that he is the author of numerous "snake books," as I call them. Not the popular variety, but the kind only the scientists would read, and some general zoology textbooks, too. Not too long ago, he also taught zoology up at the University, but he had to quit because he felt that snakes were going unappreciated up there.

I drive boats here at the Park, to and fro across the lake. My friend Amanda Jane and I take people, their kids mostly, back and forth in the boats out to this little island, where there's some more stuff to see. It's a good job, although summers do get hot out on the pond all day.

That might be why every break and every lunch hour I seemed to end up at the Reptile House. The reptiles have it really good here. There's a courtyard in the center of the building that's teeming with trees and vines. It looks like a jungle. Nonpoisonous snakes that originate in the tropics roam around freely in there. It's walled in and after the show you can go on a little tour with the Snake Man and find them. It's very shady. The Snake Man's always prowling about among the trees, taking something to one of the snakes, who are more or less his babies. You see his skin glistening between the leaves and know it's him out there. My friends at the Park all said that's why I'd go there all the time.

"Allie's in love with the Snake Man," they'd chant, like a bunch of sixth graders.

I still maintain it was just the shade. I hadn't really even noticed Barc then.

Well, I guess the first love of my life at that time was still books, and I was never without at least one, even when I was driving the boats. If the park wasn't too busy, Amanda Jane and I would wait out by the island until the group we'd just dropped off was ready to come home, rather than run constantly back and forth like we did on the busy days. Then it was so nice to stretch out on the prow with a good book and read for a few minutes before they all came clamoring back.

One day I guess I fell asleep doing this, not that it was a boring book, far from it. I was halfway through *The Woman Warrior*, but I'd been out late and before long I was asleep on the prow. That's when Adam Kingfield dumped me and *The Woman Warrior* in. And it was a library book. He's eleven years old, that age when boys think that every obnoxious thing they can think of doing is hilariously funny. Amanda Jane just stood there and let him. She laughed even. My best friend and my boat ferrying partner laughs at this cheap prank, which has put me in debt to the county library system and left me covered with wet muck. I was madder at her than at Adam.

Well, this was all just about closing time, eleven P.M., and so

there I was waiting for the bus (my only form of transportation) soaking wet, feeling as miserable as a one-legged frog on an icy freeway. There's one last outbound bus at 11:16, and I was beginning to think I'd missed it and was not about to ask that traitor Amanda Jane for a ride. (She was given a Porsche by her daddy when she graduated from high school two years ago. Don't ask me why she even bothers with this job. Sometimes I can't believe she's my friend.)

Barc, the Snake Man himself, came by in his Jeep, a white one, the kind with no roof, at least in the summer. I didn't think he'd ever seen me before in his life, but he pulled over.

"You look like you could use a ride," he said.

"Got any snakes in there?" I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Probably a few crawling around somewhere. They have a way of following me."

I was cold and wet and tired and angry and a ride with him sounded a lot better than the bus.

"I know the snakes are crazy about you," I said. "I see your show every day at one while I eat my lunch."

"I know you do," he said. "I see you see my show every day at one while you eat your lunch."

So the Snake Man notices things that don't slither. I gave him my address, and he said he'd take me home.

On the freeway the wind whipped pretty hard and I couldn't stop shivering. I was doing my best to control it, not wanting to look like one of those helpless kinds of females, but it wasn't happening. He pulled over and took off his tee shirt and there was that golden skin I'd seen in the reptile jungle.

"Here," he said, and he started putting his warm, dry shirt over my head.

I made no protest.

"Hard day?" he said, and I nodded.

"Here," he said again, and he leaned my head against his bare shoulder, which was soft and hard at the same time, something I'd say is impossible. I just loved having my face touch his skin.

And then he leaned down and kissed my mouth, the softest, most tender kiss you could imagine and just at the last moment of it, licked my lips even softer with his tongue, just ever so gentle, not the way some guys gag you by sticking the whole thing in. Just the softest, smallest taste of him, like the touch of the lightest feather. And that's how Barc and me began.

Moving in with Barc just seemed like the smart thing to do since I was always over there anyway. I suppose I knew that what I was doing was against the Church. In fact, I'd have to say I knew it would be classified a sin. I did it anyway. It was wonderful to live together. We were partners. When I think of those days it's like there's a gold halo shining over them, and for the life of me I can't figure out why it was supposed to be a sin.

My favorite times were when we'd come home together at eleven P.M. and I'd take off my shoes and we'd eat Haagan-Dazs chocolate ice cream, our one high-fat luxury which neither of us could give up. Then we'd talk or watch Johnny Carson, and he'd rub my feet. I soon discovered this was his secret with the

snakes. A few touches with those hands, and I knew why the snakes never gave him any trouble.

I'd have to say that when Bishop Culver was the bishop, it was as near to living in paradise as I've ever come. I still can't quite make it jibe with Alma 41:10, "wickedness never was happiness," because we sure were happy. Maybe the unhappiness just came later.

Anyway, Bishop Culver lived right across the street from Barc's house, so he already knew Barc a little bit, the way you know a neighbor that you say hello to but that's about it. Still, when I started showing up at their ward, and he'd see me coming and going with Barc, I think it's safe to say he knew what our arrangements were. But it didn't seem to faze him either. And you know, he never once asked me, "So are you two married, or what?"

He and his wife, Sandy, made a big fuss of showing me all around the ward and introducing me and made sure I felt as comfortable as could be. He even called me to be the Cub Scout leader for the Wolf Pack. Now, this was a job! Eleven cub scouts ages eight and nine. I never would have made it without Barc. I have no idea where young males of this age get their energy, but it is truly inexhaustible. I am of the private opinion that we should discontinue all research in the fields of solar and nuclear power and study the Cub Scouts. Of course, they adored Barc. I was optional. They started calling him Snake Man, too, and they put up with me because I was the "Snake Man's wife."

I had more than a few qualms about letting that little misconception go on, but it seemed like the easiest thing to do. I felt that it would be more agreeable to their parents to let them think we were married than to have to explain otherwise, so I kept my mouth shut. I must confess it was a secret enjoyment, too, to hear them call me Barc's wife. Especially when he was around. We talked about marriage once, but neither of us could really see a reason for it at that point, and so that was that.

I loved those days. We'd work and read and eat and walk and hike and if I wasn't working I'd go alone to church on Sundays, which was just fine by me. I felt no compulsion to try and make Barc a Mormon. I just went for the things I loved about it. I didn't mind going alone, in fact I think I prefer it. When I was a little girl I used to ask my mother, the only other churchgoer in my family, to stay after all the meetings so I could sit in the chapel when no one else was there. I just loved being in that big quiet room on a Sunday afternoon. The sun would come through the windows and there I'd sit in the silence, just filling up with love and God and goodness. It was like my own private little worship service.

We were a normal couple though and we had our fights. Barc is a total slob and I tend to be somewhat compulsive when it comes to housecleaning, so there was always friction over the house. Our worst arguments were about snakes. Barc has this ability, when he's concentrating, at least when he's concentrating on snakes, to screen out all other stimuli. Including me. Sometimes I think I played second fiddle to the reptiles. It took some working out.

I'd have to say the trouble all began with Bishop Mills, or more accurately, Bishop Mills's wife, Shirleen. But that's not entirely fair either, since in her book the trouble all began the day I "seduced that nice man [Barc], who probably never had a bad [sexual] thought in his life." Mills got called to be the bishop after Bishop Culver. Their son Parley was in the Wolf Pack, and one day when he called me the Snake Man's wife, Barc made it clear to him and Jimmy Horn that we were not married. I do not to this day know what possessed him to so enlighten the boys. We hadn't ever talked about this little deception or made any sort of plans on it. We more or less just fell into it, which is more or less the way things go for Barc and me, and I just thought he thought it was for the best, too.

Well naturally Parley passed this little tidbit of information along at the Sunday dinner table, and Shirleen just about choked on her pot roast. Forgive me if the bitterness creeps into my voice here, but that woman just about wrecked the best thing I ever had. Of course, she was horrified. Terrifically, absolutely, totally horrified to think that her Parley was being taught the Scout Oath by a couple living in sin. Bishop Mills promised to look into it immediately, although I could swear if it weren't for Shirleen he would have been content to live and let live. A few days later I got the first call asking me to come meet with him, which I said I would be more than happy to do. A lie, I admit, since I had a sort of premonition of impending doom. Once Shirleen knew we weren't married, I pretty much figured we were in for it.

I DON'T know what kind of a Mormon to tell you that I am, although Bishop Mills told me. I'd always thought of the Church a little like English trifle. In a glass bowl. The kind where if you look, you can see all the different layers, strawberries, bananas, whipped cream, jello, cake. It looks so pretty. I always thought Mormons were like that: they come in different layers and all together, it's pretty great.

"You know, Allison," Bishop Mills said to me. No one had called me Allison since the first day of kindergarten, but I knew he was talking to me since no one else was in the room.

His skin had a reddish tone to it and he had this incredibly broad forehead. The fluorescent light in the ceiling gleamed on it and I kept staring at it. He sat behind a brown desk, which seemed immense. I could swear I've never seen a desk that big before.

"I can see from your records that you've been a member of the Lord's church your whole life."

"Yes, that's more or less true," I replied.

"Then I'm sure you already know that you can't sit on the fence in this church."

"The fence?"

"You're either for him or against him," he said, and he started to leaf through the big black triple combination that sat before him on his desk. He used one index finger, which had that same red tone and was fat. When he'd found what he was looking for he started to quote, and his voice changed. It took on the same tone that general authorities have in their voices when they talk at conference. I wondered how he'd learned it.

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve," he told me. Joshua 4:15.

Well, the gospel according to Bishop Mills was something you had to be all the way in or all the way out. You couldn't just live part of the rules and forget about the rest. You had to live them all, and that was Mormonism.

Talking to him, I could see that I was a fence-sitter. It was just such a comfortable fence, and it seemed to work so well for me.

Bishop Mills said I was hurting God and the Church by living with Barc without benefit of marriage. It was against the law of the land and the law of the Church. He quoted lots of scriptures, but I could not tell you one of them. I had a cold, hard rock in my stomach, and it got colder and harder while I listened. I guess I should have known this day was coming. I knew what the rules were.

He made it clear that there would be Church disciplinary action if Barc and I continued in our present arrangement. He said that if I came to him in full sorrow, fully repentant, and gave a full confession of my transgression, the Church would probably not be forced to take any actions which would affect my membership, but complete sorrow was necessary.

Then I made one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made in my entire life. I told him the truth.

"But I'm not sorry," I said. Just like that.

"I'm not sorry about living with Barc. I don't feel bad for it. It just doesn't seem to me that Heavenly Father minds my living with Barc." It was what I truly thought.

Needless to say, this did not sit well with Bishop Mills.

I tried to explain to him the way things seemed to me. I told this man about my deepest most sacred feelings that I'd never told anyone, not even the Snake Man. I told him how when I sang the hymns at church I felt an actual connection to everyone else in the congregation holding a hymn book. I told him how I loved the sacrament. I told him what the words "that we may have his spirit to be with us" meant to me. I told him how during the sacrament, reverence would flood all through me and burn in my chest.

"I can see you have a testimony," he said, "but you really should not be partaking of the sacrament when you are doing something so heinous in the Lord's eyes."

I had nothing else to confess. I'd said it all.

He said he'd be in touch. I believed him.

I GUESS you could say from there on out, it was all downhill. I honestly didn't think it would be all that big a deal, or maybe I just didn't let myself know it would. I knew I loved my church, but I didn't know how much a part of me it was.

I came home and told Barc, laughing all the way through the story. It was like I was electric; there was all this energy pouring off me, and it kept coming out in these fits of uncontrollable laughter. I especially couldn't hold it back when I told him about the light on Bishop Mills's big forehead and his big red finger.

I think all that energy ran right into Barc, because he became furious. I didn't really feel all that bad. I felt floaty, like

I was in a dream world. Barc swore a lot, which surprised me because usually it takes something like a snake injury to draw that out of him.

"It's none of their damn business. And who in the hell do they think they are telling us what to do?"

He went on for the whole evening, and after a while I just kept quiet and let him.

"We'll get married when we damn well please and if we damn well please, and not when some fat-ass bishop tells us to."

Here's another confession: his anger made me feel so good. I was positively elated. He was my knight in shining armor out to save my honor. He must care about me at least as much as the almost extinct Indian python. I just sat there and listened to him and didn't say much. I was having too good a time watching him be moved to such passion over something nonreptilian. Besides, what happened at the bishop's office hadn't sunk in yet. I think it was a weird form of shock.

Barc kept storming out of the room, out to the yard where he was pulling weeds. Then he'd come back in and hurl a few more lines at me, as if I was the priesthood holder in question.

"What does he know about us, or what's best for us?" Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

After he'd been in and out about six times, he came in with a big clump of morning glory in one hand.

"I'm not going to let him treat you like this. I'm going to go see him right now."

I found my tongue then.

"No. I don't want you to. There's no point. I'm just not going anymore, that's all. This is our life and I feel fine about it. They can do whatever they want about me and that's that."

From then on, if he brought it up again, I refused to talk about it.

"It's not an issue anymore. I'm just not going. If I'm not all right with them the way I am then I'm not going to be part of them." That's what I would tell Barc. I can see now that it was the only way I could handle the whole thing.

WITHIN the next few weeks we explained to the boys that we would have to quit the Scouts.

"We know," Parley told us. "My mom says you're about to be fired anyway."

They were sad, and the amazing thing was we were, too. I never thought I'd miss that pack. For a while they stopped by anyway just to talk or see the snakes or help me make cookies, but then that stopped, too, probably on parental orders.

I was okay or at least I told myself I was. Every now and then I'd get a sad empty feeling, but when it came I'd just pick up a book. I read a lot on Sundays, everything from Robert Ludlum to W. S. Merwin. I read and I walked and worked and Barc and I went on. At first I didn't really miss church. The only thing I noticed that was different and that gave me any sense of something wrong was Barc and me. We didn't talk. We'd be together, eat, work, play, make love, but we didn't talk about anything more than the grocery list. If he asked me how I was doing, or said anything about the Church, I made a joke

or started to kiss him so I didn't have to answer his questions. It was kind of like the Cold War but with sex. I found out it was possible to make love and have no connection at all to your partner.

That's when my crying jags began. It got so that every time we made love, I'd end up in tears, unable to explain myself. I still felt desire. I still wanted to do it, but more and more I was ending up in tears. I didn't even want to think about why.

"It's part of this whole church thing, isn't it?" Barc said one time. "That bishop's got you thinking you're being bad, and that's why you cry every time."

"You're a Snake Man, not Freud," I told him.

I guess I kind of began to shrivel. I spent more and more time in another world through books, and less and less time in my life. Amanda Jane would try to break through and get me to open up, but I insisted I was just fine. She said I looked gray. Gray and scrawny, which was true, because I was losing weight. It just seemed like so much trouble to chew and swallow. I slept a lot.

That winter still seems like a dream to me. Everything just seemed to have a mist floating all over it. It didn't seem strange to me that I looked gray. Wasn't the whole world gray?

Just after Christmas, my mother called me. This was a rare occasion. I always felt I had some connection to her, even though we had hardly even seen each other since I left home. When I'd turned eighteen, she told me I was now an adult and that it was time for *her* to go out in the world and seek her fortune. She meant it literally. She's a fortune teller for the circus. I'm pretty sure she's the only Mormon circus fortune teller in history. She finds a way to go to church now and then.

I found out later that Barc had asked her to call. He'd tracked her down somewhere in Nebraska and explained the situation. He said he couldn't reach me and would she please try.

"I'm coming in six days," she announced.

"Mom, no," I said. The last thing I wanted right then was to have to face my mother. I could never fake things in front of her. She'd see right through me even without her crystal ball.

"I've seen it in the crystal and in the cards," she said. "You need me, and I'm coming."

I tried to talk her out of it, but if you knew my mother you'd know how futile that was.

We never have to pick my mother up from the airport or the bus station or anything normal like that. She just sort of appears one way or the other. This time a man in a polka dot suit dropped her off. She lugged her mammoth suitcase inside.

She took one look at me and said, "It's worse than I thought."

At first she tried laughing me out of it. She knew I'd always thought her fortunes were ridiculous, so right after she got here, she made up these crazy fortunes for Amanda Jane, Barc, and me. I lay on the couch only half listening, and she pretended to look in the crystal ball. It actually did more for Barc's mood than mine. His future included an early demise but also a promise of reincarnation as some kind of pit viper, which to him was better than going to heaven.

A few days later I came down with the flu. Mother put me straight to bed and proceeded to hover over me for four days. She brought chicken soup and hot water bottles and every other thing she could think of, but had never done when I was little. On the fifth day, I felt much better and got out of bed. That evening after dinner, we were alone in the house. Barc was at the Animal Park.

She told me she was leaving. It was time for her to go.

"It's not worth it, Allie," she told me. "This isn't worth what you're doing to yourself. You've got to go on with your life."

"I'm fine," I told her. "It's just been a long winter, that's all."

"Look at you. You look half dead, and that's a nice way of putting it."

"Thanks, Mom."

"I just want you to think about yourself. It's not worth it."

I didn't say anything else. Mom had never understood my feeling for the Church. I guess I had never understood it either.

She left on a Saturday night and the next day I went to church for the first time in six months. I came just in time for sacrament meeting and took a seat in the back of the chapel. I tried not to look at Bishop Mills. I felt like everyone was staring at me.

When they passed around the bread, I didn't take any. I took the tray and handed it to the person next to me. I waited and waited to feel something. I was empty. I couldn't feel anything. My reverence was gone. I sat there through the rest of the meeting, but nothing seemed to mean anything. I said something to the Culvers, who seemed delighted to see me, and asked where I'd been. While I talked to them I had the strangest feeling. It was as if I was outside myself, listening to a tape recorder play out the words I was saying.

**S**PRING came, and things got worse. All winter I had stoically existed, steeling myself to go through the motions of my life. When feelings would well up in me, I'd push them away. But when the world came back to life, somehow I couldn't keep the feelings at bay any longer, and I was as sad as I had ever been.

At the park, I'd watch the leaves come out and the crocuses come up and I began to envy them all. Plant envy, no less. They got to be brand new, and I didn't.

Then I got the letter. It had the Church logo on the return address and my hands began to shake as soon as I opened it. It was to inform me, Sister Allison Marsh, that there would be a Church court, held for the purpose of determining my status in the Church in one week's time.

I put it in my pocket and went out the door. I headed for the bus stop. Barc was at work with his snakes, but right now I needed him more.

I was crying all through the bus ride, and I didn't even care if anyone was staring at me. Everything that I had submerged all winter long was surfacing in huge chunks inside of me. At the park, they told me Barc was out in the jungle. One of the snakes from his show had gotten loose; a new assistant hadn't properly secured the cage. They thought it was somewhere in the trees, and Barc was looking for it. They'd closed the reptile

house off to visitors, since it was a poisonous one, but they knew me and let me in. I sat down on the concrete floor that smelled like animals and cried and waited for Barc. I read my letter and cried some more and waited alone in the hall.

He didn't come and didn't come, and I finally decided to go in after him. I went into the jungle. I stayed on the path and started to sweat. What I didn't know was that the missing snake was the African Gabon viper. The viper that was tame for Barc and no one else. We met each other in the southeast corner of the courtyard, and he sunk his fangs in the white flesh of my right forearm. I guess he couldn't tell I was the Snake Man's lover.

I screamed. It hurt, but scared me more, and then Barc was there. He saw what had happened right away, and I was in an ambulance on the way to the hospital pretty quick. But I'll never forget what Barc did before it got there. After doing what he could for me, he got the snake. He took the machete he had been using to search with, and he chopped that snake's head off right then and there. He cut and he cut and he cut until that viper, that was like his best friend, was in one-inch pieces. I couldn't believe my eyes. After he'd finished being mad at the snake, he started getting mad at himself. He was the one that had insisted the snake's fangs be left alone. He never liked snakes to be devenomed. He thought nature was best left as nature.

I was never really in any danger of dying. Barc had gotten first aid for me quickly enough, but it was very painful. I lay there in the hospital bed, my arm so swollen that I thought my skin would burst, and my heart as heavy and sad as my arm was big. Barc found the letter from the Church when the nurses gave him my clothing.

The day I came home from the hospital was the day my court was to be held. I wondered if any of them knew what had happened to me. I got up early that morning and locked myself in our bathroom. Several hours later Barc came to see if I was all right.

"Allie? C'mon out."

I didn't say anything.

"C'mon out Allie. We have to talk."

"I don't want to."

"Why are you doing this? Why are you in there?"

"I like it in here. It's safe," I told him.

"Well, there aren't any snakes out here either," he said.

"That's not what I mean. I'm not afraid of your lousy old snakes."

He went away for a while and then came back to try again. He could hear my crying now.

"Aw, Allie, just let me in, all right?"

I didn't answer.

"At least tell me what's the matter. At least talk to me, at least give me that much."

I guess I began to pity him. He'd lost his best friend, the viper, and his girlfriend, or whatever I was, had been crazy on him for months. I unlocked the door. I went to him.

"I am so alone," I sobbed. "I am so alone."

He held me with those magic hands, and I let it all out.

"I miss my church," I told him. "I miss the hymns, I miss the meetings, I miss my feelings."

He let me go on and on.

"I miss the sacrament," I got out, between hiccups. "I want to take the sacrament again."

He stroked my hurt arm and let me talk. I told him all about my religion. Not its doctrine or how it got started, but what it meant to me. I told him everything I had told old big forehead Mills and much, much more, and he listened and listened and stroked my sore arm.

AND so that's how I ended up marrying the Snake Man. I told him he didn't have to do it, that I'd be all right, but he wouldn't have anything to do with that and said he was marrying me with or without my consent. The other thing that happened just then (Mom says she'd foreseen this in the crystal ball) was that Bishop Culver got made the stake president. He married us in Barc's garden out back. I don't know what he told Bishop Mills, but I guess whatever contrition I had was enough. They never officially kicked me out and so they didn't have to officially let me back in. But I could tell when I was back. Ten days after our wedding I went to church and took the sacrament. My reverence was back and so was I. ☞



## HOME

Our house is clean and quiet; silence spreads to every part of every new-cleaned room. Except, that is, the peaceful sound of soap and rinsing water over breakfast plates. My sleeping roommate's inhale-exhale drifts into the kitchen from the frontroom couch.

The August wind and sun sift through the leaves outside the open window—lazy waves of shade that dance through curtains of white gauze and bring the city's rhythm: traffic's hum, a barking dog, the neighbor's ringing phone, a child's laugh, his mother's distant call.

I neatly stack our morning coffee cups with dishes packed inside a cardboard box. Disturbed by dreams, my roommate ends her nap, and asks the time. We pack the truck, then search and wander through the silent rooms. At times, we pause and look for things we've left behind.

—MARK JENSEN