

# RATTLESNAKES AND MEN

Michael Bishop

**Michael Bishop's many novels include *Ancient of Days*, *Brittle Innings*, *Who Made Stevie Cry?*, and *Count Geiger's Blues*, all lately rereleased in new editions by Patrick Swenson's Fairwood Press, the latter two under Mike's exclusive imprint, Kudzu Planet Productions. All four are now available as e-books, with more of his titles, both new and previously published, forthcoming. In his latest story for us, this Nebula-Award-winning author takes a sharp look at the price of living in a very strange society.**

Several Aprils ago, a tornado blew Reed, our daughter Celeste, and me out of our house in northern Arkansas. Three friends in our hill town died. A dozen others suffered injuries or property losses that funneled havoc into their lives too. Even though Reed and I worked—Reed as an auto mechanic, I as an aide in the county library—we had no money to rebuild and no reason to stick around once we sorted out the scramble the twister had made of our belongings and minds.

Dusty Shallowpit, an army friend who had kept in touch since his and Reed's final tour in Australia, called us every other day through June. At last, his voice twanging through our cell-phone speaker, Dusty offered us a low-cost rental house in Wriggly, his hometown in Georgia's southern pine flats, along with jobs that he swore would stand us Godfreys up on our feet again.

"Soon enough, Reed, you'll make manager at Shallowpit Feed & Seed, but you got to *start* in equipment repair."

"What about Wylene?" Reed asked, glancing at me.

"She can feed her artsy side by grooming dogs and her outdoorsyness doing guide stuff at the wildlife refuge." And Celeste, who'd just finished first grade, would do just fine, he predicted, because "kids her age are so danged adoptable."

"A-dapt-able," I said at Reed's ear, clearly irritated.

"Right," Dusty said. "Your kid's already got a family. Anyways, you all should come. You'll like it here."

I doubted that—at least he hadn't said we'd "love" it—but three days later we rented a trailer, ball-clamped it to our pickup, crammed it full, and drove to Wriggly, way down in Nokuse County, in grueling Dixieland-in-July heat.

I knew right off we'd really goofed, but our two-bedroom brick tract house had its charms, namely, a red-cedar privacy fence, a rock garden that the last tenants had kept up nicely, and a slat-framed glider under a sprawling fig tree. I would have

liked some grass, fescue or such, but Nokuse County has sandy soil and, blessedly, we wouldn't have to do a lot of yard work harassed by gnats.

How I learned our move was a mistake, maybe even crazy, happened our fourth day in Wriggly when Dusty Shallowpit and his father, Jasper, knocked at the door after Reed's first ten-hour shift at the Feed & Seed and I discovered Shallowpit père on the front stoop holding a long hole-filled box by a leather hand strap. Celeste ducked under my crossed arms to peer through the screen at our visitors, while I gaped at them in dimwitted wonder.

"What's in the box?" Celeste pushed open the screen to reach for it.

Before I could pull her back, Dusty seized the box from his dad and retreated to the sidewalk. Jasper Shallowpit was caught between pique at his son and concern for his three new tenants. He flushed purple and wiped his palms on his khaki trousers.

I laid my hand on Celeste's collar bone.

From the tiny kitchen, Reed hollered, "*Who is it?*" And when I'd told him: "*Let 'em in, Wylene! Let 'em in!*"

Soon all five of us—three Godfreys and two representatives of the hamlet's second largest employer—stood in the outflow of our window-lodged AC unit with sweat drying on our brows and napes.

Reed dabbed his lips with a limp paper napkin, while my arms locked our squirming daughter in place before me.

"What's in the box?" Celeste insisted.

Mr. Shallowpit snatched the box back from his son, bowed his bald head to her, and spoke directly to Celeste, though he meant his speech for all of us:

"First, let me formally welcome you all to Nokuse County and to Wriggly, its county seat. I should've stopped by earlier. Second, as your landlord and the current chairperson of the Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance, I've come—we've come—to give you"—he lifted the box a few inches—"this young *Crotalus adamanteus*, a variety we call the 'lozenge-spot': a pretty little tutelary starter serpent."

I couldn't speak. Then I laughed. Then I blurted, "That's really funny, sir. Thanks for the giggle." What else could I have said? The doofus was our landlord—Reed's plenty potent new boss.

"He ain't joking," Dusty said. "It's a BioQuirked watch-snake, a baby rattler, your all-for-free, native-to-the-Greater-Southeast threshold sentry."

I pulled Celeste closer. "But we don't want it."

"Thank you, Mr. Shallowpit," Reed said, reaching for the leather strap to accept the snake-carry. "We truly appreciate your generous gift."

"Reed, we've got a child. Where would we put it? How would we feed it?"

A pit viper, I thought: *A pit viper?*

"You don't get it, Wye," Dusty said, clearly peeved at me.

The elder Shallowpit inclined his head to me as he had to Celeste, this time focusing on my face. "The Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance has a long, illustrious history, Mrs. Godfrey. Every year for fifty years, we've hosted Nokuse County's Rattlesnake Rodeo and Roundup here in Wriggly. *Crotalus adamanteus* has played an enormous role in both the economy of our region and the shaping of our identity as Nokuseans."

"Forgive me, sir, but so what?"

"Wylene," Reed said.

Mr. Shallowpit's naked face made a fist.

"Sir," I said, "what does all that have to do with giving us a poisonous *snake*?"

"It's been a county law down here nearlybout forever, Wye," Dusty said.

I shot question marks back and forth between both Shallowpits.

Daddy Jasper's face unclenched. He opened his slippery hands in what he must have figured was a kindly appeal. "Everybody in the county has *got* to own a rat-

tlesnake,” he said. “It’s a ordinance every city council in every town in our county, however little or big, signed on to on a well-remembered day back some sixty years ago, Mrs. Godfrey.”

Reed said, “Sir, you can call her Wylene.”

I gave Reed the stink-eye but simmered my tongue to silence.

Mister Jasper heeded Reed: “Wylene, our whole pine-flats society just wouldn’t exist without rattlesnakes and what they do for us.”

“Or turpentine,” Dusty said. “Don’t forget turpentine.”

Irked, Dusty’s father flat-out ignored his son: “Our forerunners decreed that every home, business, and every guvment building, except the town hall and county courthouse, must make space for their own *Crotalus adamanteus*. In fact, to flout that ordinance is to spit in the all-seeing eye of Lady Justice herself.”

“She’s blindfolded,” I told Jasper Shallowpit.

“What?” he said. “*What?*”

“You *can’t* spit in a blindfolded person’s eye, not so it really matters.”

“Listen, Wylene, Nokuse County is a very special place. We love our crotalids here. They protect us. They contribute to our economy. They amuse us. They validate us as folks in tune with our reptilian as well as our human natures. Terden BioQuirked Creations is our biggest employer. We brought you this baby”—nodding toward the snake-carry—“as a sign of our concern for your family’s welfare and as a down-home welcome to our ways.”

Although I crossed my arms over her scrawny chest, Celeste slipped free and dashed into her bedroom.

For several reasons, I had not asked our visitors to sit. The curtain-free living room boasted only two chairs, each with a cardboard box in it stuffed full of winter clothes or pre-owned car-repair manuals. We’d unboxed and stowed almost everything else, but the house, inside, resembled a barracks for elves, and we Godfreys squatters. Reed lifted the holey box to remind me again of our housewarming gift.

“Where am I going to put a rattlesnake?” I asked all three men.

“In here,” Celeste called. “There’s a place for it beside my bed.”

The Shallowpits guffawed—a trombone and a kazoo, respectively—but Reed raised his eyebrows at me half in plea, half in warning.

“Over my dead body,” I called back to Celeste.

“Easy.” Dusty sniggered. “You just might get your wish.”

I stormed into the bedroom, the men all following, and found Celeste kneeling by an empty aquarium I’d all but forgotten. Maybe I’d thought for forty seconds about cleaning it up and dropping a few minnows and angelfish into it, but those forty seconds I’d lost amid a host of more urgent settling-in matters and never recalled until now.

“See there,” Shallowpit *père* said. “Your problem solved.”

And for the men, even Reed, it was. In Reed’s thinking, the Shallowpits had saved us the expense of buying a snake to comply with a hallowed county ordinance. All we need do was accept their gifts—of the rattler, the aquarium, and an injection-molded plastic hide-box (still in the snake-carry) that we would set in the aquarium for its brand-new tenant to slither into to conceal itself from our basilisk human gazes. And all would be well, all would be well, all would be mystically and moronically well.

Well, to *hell* with that shit.

“Put the tank outside,” I said. “Celeste and that ugly critter”—which, to that point, I hadn’t even glimpsed—“are *not* sleeping in the same room.”

Celeste began to wail.

“Hold on, Wye,” Dusty said. “You’ll’ve got to keep your threshold sentry beside your place of residence’s main entrance.”

“Right,” Reed said. “We’ll put it by the front door.”

I was fuming, but Dusty toted the aquarium from Celeste's room and set it down in the living room near the front door. Then he lifted our gift-snake from its box, squeezed it behind its spade-like head, and held its lozenge-spotted rust-brown body over the aquarium floor. By a wrist twist and a bit of luck, he let go of it without getting bit, for it seemed intent on striking his freckled forearm or a smudged pane of glass in the fish tank. Kneeling beside that tank, Dusty drew hypnotic fingertip circles before the watch-snake. As he did, a soft moleskin pouch under his arm poked out to one side and then the other in gently random bulges. I glanced at the elder Shallowpit to detect if he wore a similar pouch, but if he did, his sports jacket hid it. Even so, I suspected—felt sure, in fact—that both men were carrying herpetological heat.

Then Dusty began talking about our snake and how we all must feed it once, soon, to set its imprinting “biostats” for each person living in our house. That would make it our “special protector.” Terden BioQuirked Creations, Inc., had used gene quirked and amino-acid infusions to augment the vomeronasal organ on the roof of our crotalid's mouth and hence to allow it to bond with all the “souls” in our house by our specific body temps and odors. With this imprinting and a like sensitivity to the telltale anxiety of strangers come for evil purposes (based on *their* body temps, reeks, and dicey mannerisms), these rattlesnakes—whether you called them “security paladins” or “threshold sentries”—would almost always bite and fatally slay any unwanted intruder.

“The best defense against a crook with a carry-snake,” Dusty told us, “is a household with a certified and imprinted TBQC rattler.” He noted that each such snake rattled its rattle only for its household's residents. By genetic design, it *avoided* rattling its rattle for intruders, the more reliably to strike and to kill the evil sons of bitches.

Although Dusty explained a lot more about these BioQuirked “creations,” Celeste came howling into the living room as he spoke. She howled when I shushed her and howled when I took her back to her room. I told her to hush and stay in her bed. She stayed in her bed (so long as I sat on it beside her), but did not quiet until, at long last, she drifted into a whimper-punctuated sleep.

By that time, the Shallowpits had blessedly taken their leave.

Heading to our bedroom, to which Reed had already retired, I saw that Dusty or his dad had put a lid on our slithery protector's tank, securing it with clamps and bungee cords. So we were all safe for the night, if home invaders didn't burst in, rape, torture, and behead us all between now and sunup. I didn't care. The Shallowpits worried me more than did our young viper. But I *did* care that Reed lay facing away from me, rigidly mute, as if I had shamed him before his new bosses-cum-landlords.

I draped an arm over Reed's back and ran my finger over the scar of the arrowhead wound he'd suffered under his heart in Operation Outback in southwestern Queensland. He caught my hand, roughly, and held it. After a while, though, he raised it to his lips and kissed it. Such a blessing: he didn't hate me.

“We can't live day to day with a snake in our house,” I whispered.

“The people here do.”

“All of them?”

“It's the law, Wylene.”

“Is it a law for them to tote rattlers around with them in little moleskin bags?”

“I don't think so.”

“Maybe you should find out.”

“If it were mandatory, Wye, Dusty would have told me my first day at work. He's got too much invested in me—in *us*—to let me get arrested and locked up.”

“Yeah, well, I think he and his daddy carry *personal* security paladins.”

Reed sighed heavily and let his higher shoulder slump. “Of course they do.”

“Do they tote them even at work?”

“Most Nokuse Countians do, I’m afraid.”

“Most? Do you mean everybody?”

“Nearly every man does. It’s like wearing a beard is to a grown Muslim male. I don’t think many women carry them, even as gewgaws for their outfits.”

I couldn’t help it: I laughed derisively. “It sounds as if the dudes around Wriggly are all in little-cock compensatory mode.”

“Don’t go all multisyllabic and shrink-minded on me. I wouldn’t know.”

I got mad. “Toting a snake everywhere a person goes puts the wearer and everybody else around *him*—I use the pronoun on purpose—at great risk. It all stinks to heaven of fear and fetishism.”

“Wye, give me a break.”

I crawled over his distractingly sexy shoulder, nibbled a while on his eyebrow, and stared him right in the eye.

“It’s crazy. We’ve got a poisonous serpent in our house, and these yokels pack them around like warlocks with their creepy familiars, tutelary totem creatures.”

“Wye, I’m beat. You’re making my brain ache.”

“How many people in this loony burg die every year of snakebites?”

“Only bad guys and dumb asses—felons and fools.”

“Hey, even beat, you alliterated. But I don’t believe it. Accidents happen. Nasty acts of greed and sad ones of self-aggression occur.”

“You heard Dusty. TBC augments its snakes with biostats, or something like that, to make ’em safe to be around if you’re their owners.”

“Good old Dusty—he’s taught you a lot.”

“Yeah, good old Dusty. Still, forgive me for saying so, Wye, but if assholes came any bigger than Dusty’s daddy, the most profitable businesses on planet Earth would make toilet paper. Now please let me get some sleep.”

Reluctantly, I did.

As things turned out, we didn’t have to worry about what to feed our new “pet.” Shallowpit Feed & Seed had a reptile-chow enterprise in Nokuse County consisting of imported white lab rats and home-grown rice rats, bobwhite quails, and marsh rabbits. Dusty made sure that a part of Reed’s monthly pay went to feed our new adder, the amount depending on the fare that Reed toted home for Vype.

Vype was the name Celeste called the critter after Reed said that she could *not* baptize it Wriggly because too many other threshold sentries in town surely bore that name already. I, however, suggested the witty gothic spelling for her *next* favorite choice.

As per Dusty’s advice, Reed and I fed Vype first, to make sure it quickly imprinted on us as its family. Then Reed focused on getting Celeste to take a turn, so that we could uncover our tank and benefit from the security and peace of mind that a free and functional watch-snake would provide our household.

But I feared that tenderhearted Celeste would find feeding Vype its live dinners too upsetting. I never thought she’d volunteer for the job, and I told Reed that, even in Wriggly, only a piss-poor parent would let a second-grader feed a poisonous snake.

Reed begged to differ

He lectured me that Celeste completely got the naturalness of engorging and being engorged. Feeding Vype would teach her more than just the “input-and-outgo rhythms” of all earthbound life cycles. It would also teach her caring—“Not for its terrified prey!” I put in quickly—as well as adult responsibility. “She’s a kid,” I argued. “And we’re supposed to guarantee her safety.”

“Too much guaranteeing her safety will turn her into a *permanent* child. She’s got to face the world as it is.”

"Not yet, she doesn't."

"We're not guaranteeing her safety if we don't allow Vype to imprint on her as one of his household wards."

So, initially, Reed fed Vype its scared-shitless rats and its run-amok quail chicks. But he let Celeste watch, and Celeste *did* watch, and although she was taken aback at first by this transfixing drama (sometimes picking up a white rat and stroking it to calm it), soon she had evolved into a rational observer with a scientific sympathy for both eater and eaten.

Within days, she asked for permission to lower a prey animal or bird into the tank, using a miniature dumbwaiter in a harness of strings. Like a puppet master, Celeste did this skillfully, with no fear at all and, afterward, no gross victory whoops. Then, finally, we took the lid off Vype's tank so that, now, our BioQuirked serpent could properly carry out its role as our security paladin.

Dusty had sworn I could satisfy my "artsy side" and my "outdoorsyness" by grooming dogs or by serving as a wildlife guide in the swamp forty miles south of Wriggley. But most of our hamlet's canines were redbone or blue-tick hounds that needed grooming no more than did Jasper Shallowpit's razor-nicked noggin. And because I didn't want to commute eighty miles every day in our about-to-die pickup, I stayed in town decorating our boxy house and fitfully looking for work.

I found rugs for our scratched pine floors, thrift-shop chairs for the living room, and items among our own belongings for wall hangings. I nailed three of Reed's machine-turned army crossbows in an arrangement above our TV.

On another wall, I hung a big photo display of the 23rd Bowmen's Brigade helping to defend Brisbane, Queensland. It pleased him, I think. He invited Dusty over to see my handiwork and ignored his favorite TV shows, *Aussie Archer* and *Knife Music*, as they guzzled beer, pointed out slain or surviving comrades in the photos, and reminisced with hale-fellow-well-whiffled sloppiness.

Meantime, even though Vype had coiled up in his utility hide, Celeste read a fairy-tale to Vype, and I perused help-wanted ads in the *Nokuse County Sentinel*. One ad said, "*Archery instructor for adults & children at RV camp: experience a must. Ditto: having good teaching skills & own equipment.*" The ad listed two telephone numbers, one for daytime calls and one for evenings up until ten.

In Reed's and my bedroom, I called the second number. Reed had often taken me bow hunting, and some of our happiest outings in Arkansas had involved energy-bar picnics and archery expeditions in secluded Ozark glens. I explained all this to the owner of the RV camp, a guy named Newall Alpo, who asked me to come out for a face-to-face interview the following morning.

I had never known anybody with the surname of a brand of dog food, and when I met Newall Alpo in person, I didn't know how to take him. He had a well-oiled 1930s-style pompadour, an ugly snakeskin vest, oddly wide hips, and a brusque, smug manner. Further, he wore a snake on his person, an adult *Crotalus adamanteus*, hanging about his ample waist in the belt loops of his trousers. The snake appeared drugged. Its triangular head stuck out just where a belt buckle would have gleamed, had Mr. Alpo worn a belt instead of a rattlesnake. And although I tried not to let this weird sartorial accessory distract or discomfit me, I didn't fully succeed.

But Mr. Alpo liked my replies to his questions and what I showed him of my archery skills, and when I left his RV camp, I had a job I could walk to and his assurance that I'd get off early enough every day to take care of my daughter after school. Landing this job seemed to me the most hopeful thing that had occurred to us since our arrival in Georgia. It not only pleased Reed: it delighted him. As for Celeste, she begged me to let her come to one of my practices later in the week.

This she did back out at the camp's archery range, standing safely behind me. Each time I emptied a quiver, she scampered to the bales to wrench my arrows out and fetch them back. "You're just like William Tell!" she cried. "Shoot an apple off my head!"

I threw down my bow and shook the goulash out of her. "Maybe I can and maybe I can't, but I'll never even *try* to do that! Don't ever ask me again!" I pushed her away so that she staggered back a few steps and fell.

Immediately, Mr. Alpo waddled up and asked what the hell was going on. (Had I just tossed my first piece of Wriggly good luck onto its funeral pyre?)

Celeste stood and brushed off her dress. "I back talked to Mama, sir. She's told me not to, lots of times, but I . . . I . . . I did it again."

Sizzles of shame shot from my cheekbones and brow.

Mr. Alpo scowled at Celeste. "Always mind your parents. Always."

"Yes sir."

He swung his scowl toward me. "None of that shit with my campers, Mrs. Godfrey. You got that?"

I pulled Celeste to me. "Yes sir, I do."

"It's good nobody else hereabouts saw what I saw." Then Mr. Alpo stalked away, gripping his snakeskin vest by its lapels while his watch-snake writhed in his belt loops like a baleful hula hoop.

Still, I loved the job, especially in the early fall when the RV camp had *beau coups* of campers clamoring for archery lessons. Fairly frequently, Newall Alpo loaned me out to other tourist concerns in Wriggly, a canoeing outfitter, or a special event in the wildlife refuge, but never so late in the day that I could not catch a ride home before Celeste got out of school. That and my new income made the arrangement seem a perfect helping of grace.

But Nokuse County wasn't perfect. I'd missed the annual Rattlesnake Roundup & Rodeo held in March, an event that featured prizes for those wranglers who caught the most native un-BioQuirked diamondbacks and later killed them with hatchet chops behind their heads. As sidelights to the annual roundup, there were also rattlesnake races, training in how to treat rattler bites, and venom-milking shows.

Some of the events to which Newall Alpo "sub-let" me focused on these secondary activities. They occurred throughout the year at city schools or in outdoor venues set aside by civic groups, often on weekends so that Celeste and Reed could see me in action. I was always a diversion from the foregrounded snakiness of everything else going on: the sale of snakeskin vests, wallets, and slippers; of rattler-related videos, coiled-snake ashtrays, and fake plastic, plush, or rubber crotalids; and even of food items consisting of fried, fricasseed, or grilled rattlesnake—*et cetera, ad nauseam*.

A hot Friday night, mid September: Dusty Shallowpit asked us to a football game against Brunswick High in which his son Doug would play. By coincidence, Mr. Alpo had arranged with Doug's head coach for me to work at this game during halftime showing our cheerleaders how to use bows and arrows to burst big Mylar balloons representing the four best players on the Brunswick Pirates. We'd shoot in the eastern end zone where our novice archers could not endanger anyone else attending. Earlier, of course, I'd assumed that our arrows would stand for the metaphorical fangs of our Nokuse County *Diamondbacks*. Or our Nokuse County *Rattlers*. But I was wrong.

As a halftime performer and a guest of the Shallowpits, I got into the stadium free, as did Reed. We perched not quite halfway up the poured-concrete tiers, near the fifty-yard line, awaiting kickoff in the steamy dusk. Celeste was going to a movie with a friend from school, and Reed and I were enjoying, sort of, our first real date in Wriggly.

To our right, someone in a furry black bear costume cavorted in front of both the

band and the student sections. Talking with our hosts, I paid little heed. Eventually, though, I began to wonder why this cavorter had dressed up like a bear. When I asked this question aloud, Hallie Shallowpit said, "A bear's the official mascot of Nokuse County High School."

"Not a rattlesnake?"

Dusty said, "Wye, how could a kid dress like a rattlesnake? You'd have to stuff three students in a long hoop-braced tube and then they'd all have to grab one another's shoes and wriggle at this way and that on the ground."

Reed laughed heartily at this picture . . . or at me.

My dander rose. "One kid could be a rattlesnake if you used a sliver of imagination and a nickel's worth of design sense," I said. "It wouldn't even be that hard."

"Wye, our mascot's a black bear," Hallie said again.

"Yeah, but everyone here's so rattlesnake crazy it seems a no-brainer."

Dusty explained that *Nokuse* was a Muscogee-Creek word for "bear," specifically the black bear, which had thriven hereabouts back in the 1800s. Most of these bears, he told us, had long since retreated northward to more heavily treed regions. I said I bet they'd done it because diamondbacks were a damn sight tougher than the absconding bears.

"Even so," Dusty said, "bears still got them a stake in our tradition too."

Squeezing my knee, Reed whispered, "You've just defended the diamondback. You always surprise me, kiddo."

I shoved his hand off my knee.

Doug Shallowpit, a chunky boy who didn't much favor either of his folks, played guard on the Bears' offensive line, but he kept getting hammered by the Pirates' hefty but fleet-afoot pass rushers. The game proceeded sloppily, and, about six minutes into the second quarter, Doug got slammed again. He crumpled to the turf and just lay there.

Dusty yelled, "Oh my God!" and he and Hallie stood. The Bears' coach and a student trainer hurried out to tend to Doug, who still did not uncoil. Then an olive-skinned woman in designer jeans and a white peasant blouse trotted across the field, a brown-and-ocher scarf streaming silkily behind her. She stooped beside Doug.

"Who's that?" Reed asked.

"Lakshmi Chakraborti," Dusty huffed. "*Doctor* Lakshmi Chakraborti."

Understandably, he and Hallie left us to descend to the field and to hurry across it to their son. Eventually, a motorized cart removed Doug and his folks to the eastern end zone, and the Shallowpits did not return. Reed and I wondered whether to look for them or to stay in our places until they came back.

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A minute or so later, a man from a lower row of our concrete tier stopped us on a nearby stairway. A wide-faced man of fifty-five or so, he introduced himself as D. V. Purina and said that Dusty and Hallie were going with their son to a hospital in Waycross because Wriggly, a town with a population of a thousand or fewer, did not have one. I had already known that, so it had pleased me to learn that the woman seeing to Doug was in fact a bona fide doctor.

D. V. Purina—a second local surname echoing that of a popular pet food!—added that Doug had suffered an ankle break and that his folks hoped we would stay to see the rest of the game. If we liked, he'd drive us home afterward. I didn't like that idea much because he had a live crotalid coiled in one of his jacket pockets. In fact, it had propped its head on the pocket's upper edge. To Reed's chagrin, I asked D. V. Purina what his initials stood for.

"Viper Disciple," he said.

"Mr. Purina," I said, quasi-coquettishly, "that would make your initials V. D. instead of D. V., so please tell me the truth."

Grinning, he said he'd flip-flopped his first two initials to avoid having them suggest "venereal disease"—wouldn't I have done the same?—and returned to his seat over by the band's clarinet section. We returned to our seats on the Shallowpits' favorite tier.

At halftime, Brunswick's band played well. The Wriggly band followed. It marched out of sync while badly reprising vaguely familiar ancient rock tunes, but the band members' parents and pals stomped and cheered like madmen anyway.

Then I went out to direct four giggling cheerleaders in a bow-and-arrow shoot of the Mylar-balloon Pirates bobbing in the end zone like buoys on a hurricane swell. It took ten minutes, and the pops these Pirates made when they burst were fewer and harder to hear, even from where I stood, than the hits that the human Pirates inflicted on our boys in either of the first two quarters.

We would have gladly walked home, but D. V. Purina found us, led us to his snazzy SUV, which boasted snakeskin seats, and dropped us off at our house. Before we told him goodbye, I commented that perhaps our squad would have played better as Diamondbacks than as Bears, better as Rattlers than as Bruins.

"I've always thought that." He handed each of us a business card:

***D. V. Purina***  
*Attorney at Law & Coroner*  
*Pastor, Take-Up-Serpents House*  
*Nokuse County, Georgia*

Later we learned that, as a student, he'd been a star running back on the Bears and, a few years later, a wrangler with three consecutive victories in the annual county Rattlesnake Roundup.

As for Doug Shallowpit, he had surgery in Waycross on Saturday. Two days later, he came home to Wriggly sporting a newfangled style of ankle cast. He and Dusty mourned the fact that his season had ended, but Hallie confessed to me her secret relief.

A few days later, Celeste awoke with stomach pains. I sent her to school anyway. When she came home still complaining, I made her an appointment at the Wriggly medical clinic with Dr. Chakraborti.

In its split waiting area, which only a few decades ago had seated whites on one side and blacks on the other, we peered at the art on the walls: reproductions of work by Henri Rousseau, Norman Rockwell, and a startling one of a nude young woman charming a cobra. We also glanced at the people waiting alongside us, and I realized

that most blacks, however many had once resided in Nokuse County, had long since left it. Dr. Chakraborti might now be the darkest-skinned person in town. I'd suspected as much, just as I'd known that Wriggly lacked a real hospital, but, filling out a patient-information form for Celeste, a cold adder of apprehension snaked down my spine.

"*Celeste Godfrey*," the receptionist called.

Dr. Chakraborti did not keep us waiting forever in the examination room, and, upon entering, shook Celeste's hand as well as mine. Good: she had her priorities straight. She also had a no-nonsense demeanor and a dry humor that softened her directness when she asked Celeste, not me, about her problem.

When she got down to business, she brushed Celeste's hair back, checked her throat using a tongue depressor, and palpated her stomach and flanks. After this examination, she told Celeste to get dressed again and led me into the hall by my elbow.

Alone with Dr. Chakraborti, I asked, "What's wrong with her?"

"How do you mean, Mrs. Godfrey—as your daughter or as a scared young person?"

Her question took me aback, but did not put me off.

"The second of course, but the first too . . . if you know."

"Beyond my medical training, I don't know much. But I discover a great deal."

"What have you discovered about Celeste?"

"She could have a virus or early intestinal cramps, but I *sense* that she's suffering from anxiety, possibly a school phobia."

"Why do you sense that?"

"Other children in town have psychosomatic pains akin to Celeste's."

This was news to me, but hardly a dumbfounding surprise.

"Do you have a rattlesnake in your home, Mrs. Godfrey?"

"It's a law here. So, yes—yes, we do." My defensiveness alarmed me, but I couldn't shut up: "Celeste calls it Vype. She reads aloud to Vype. She feeds Vype. She's totally okay with Vype, I assure you."

"I'm sure she *thinks* she is, just as I'm sure she'd very much *like* to be."

"I'd like to be okay with Vype, too."

"But you're not?"

"Of course I'm not. How could I be? How could anyone?"

"I've been in Nokuse County a bit over a month, and three children under twelve have *died* of rattlesnake bites, one here in town just a day or so ago."

"I've heard nothing of this."

"At the behest of the rattlesnake alliance, local authorities conceal the information from the general public. Moreover, a county law mandates the suppression of death notices for anybody killed by snakebites."

"Whatever happened to the First Amendment?"

"We're in Nokuse County, the Realm of the Raving Rattlesnake Wranglers. Surely, you saw the Paul Desiré Trouillebert in our waiting room."

"I'm sorry—*what*?"

"I'm talking about a painting, of a woman and a serpent."

"Oh, right. The woman in it's nude, right?"

"Yes, that's the painting."

"I actually like it, doctor, but it seems shockingly *naked* . . . in many disturbing ways, especially in a doctor's office."

"Mrs. Enots, my receptionist, tells me that a year ago a member of the alliance came in and hung it where you saw it. Then he insisted that it stay there."

"But it's an Oriental scene, and the serpent in it's a cobra, *not* a rattler."

"It's still a snake-loving male's ultimate wet dream."

“Yeah,” I glumly conceded. “You’re probably right.”

“I’ve taken it down and shut it up in a closet at least four times since my arrival, but Jessica—Mrs. Enots—always finds it again and puts it back up. She says we’re safer with it on the wall.”

“I can believe that, too.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Godfrey. I’ve taken us pretty far afield, haven’t I?”

“No problem—but how did a woman of your background wind up in a godforsaken little backwater like Wriggley?”

She told me that a program in India and a similar one in the U.S. had supported her move to our under-served county. They gave her a scholarship for additional training at the medical school in Augusta and loan-repayment aid if she practiced two years in a rural area. But they’d provided few clues about what lay in store for her.

At that point, Celeste emerged from the examination room, dressed.

“Doctor,” I said, “I saw you at Friday’s game helping an injured player.”

“Oh yes, young Mr. Shallowpit. I discovered his problem and sent him to Waycross for surgery—not a very satisfactory use of my hard-earned skills.”

“But helpful: *essential* for anybody who happens to live here.”

“*I’m here now.*” Celeste held out her arms to prove it.

Dr. Chakraborti leaned over and kissed her sweetly on the forehead.

“Why, yes, so you are. I’m prescribing something for your stomach pain and maybe something else as well.”

“What ‘something else?’” I asked.

“I thought a tranquilizer, but she’s far too young, and I don’t want to hurt her. Nor do I wish to incur a malpractice suit.”

I winced at this pronouncement.

“Steady.” Dr. Chakraborti turned back to Celeste. “If you’d care for a lollipop, go see Mrs. Enots. She’ll bestow one on you—like a medal, no doubt.”

Celeste ambled down the corridor, her fingertips brushing the wall. Dr. Chakraborti gazed after her with undisguised fondness.

“Doctors have their peculiar wild-hair notions, too,” she said. “Good ones—and I’m a good one—don’t act on them.” She added that Celeste had sensed my anxiety and adopted it as her own: a secret act of filial concern for whatever was now troubling me. “Would you like me to prescribe *you* a tranquilizer?” she asked.

One of the kids who had died of a rattler bite had gone to school with Celeste. At a parent-teacher meeting three days after we saw Dr. Chakraborti, I got this word from the mothers of two of Celeste’s classmates.

These women claimed that the tutelary rattler of the boy’s family had bitten him as he slept. But his daddy, a member of Take-Up-Serpents House and the Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance, denied this assertion and did not take him for an antivenin treatment. Both dad and mom claimed that a fever had seized the boy and that they’d thought aspirin and cold compresses would banish it. When this did not happen, they drove him to Waycross for a definitive diagnosis, but on the way he died. This story had big holes in it, but the boy was irretrievably gone, and Celeste slid more deeply into her upsetting funk.

You can’t easily hide the death of a school-aged child, and this family did not manage to. Publicly, his parents said the boy had died of a rare and virulent form of meningitis. His memorial service, a few days after news of his death ran through town like a flashflood, drew many mourners, young and old. Celeste asked Reed and me if she could go. Bleakly cheered by her interest, we accompanied her to the event, which wrapped everyone there in a cosmic despondency.

The next day, a skinny young stranger walked all around Wriggly handing out flyers or sticking them under the wipers of parked cars. The flyers said that at least three children had fallen victim to rattlesnake bites over the past month and that several adults in the pine flats north of town had suffered bites that had made them deathly ill or, in the case of one victim, killed her—though her husband refused to admit that their threshold sentry had so much as flicked its tongue at her.

Mr. Alpo caught the skinny stranger slipping a flyer into the door handle of an RV in his camp, braced him against it, and read the flyer. It ended by urging every citizen to turn in their tutelary rattlesnakes to a state veterinarian who would come to town shortly to examine and possibly even defang them.

Because Mr. Alpo had thrust a dropped flyer into my hands, I knew their common message. Further, I knew that each one bore this signature: *Lakshmi Chakraborti, MD, GP, RCG (Rural Care Giver)*.

And our skinny flyer supplier, given dire warning, wisely hightailed it.

Uh-oh, I thought: Uh-oh indeed.

Two days later, I returned to Dr. Chakraborti with Celeste to see about her lingering apathy and depression. We sat in the waiting room paging through old magazines, sneaking glances at the naked snake charmer as I tried to fathom my reluctance to take Vype out back and decapitate him.

The clinic door opened, and Jasper Shallowpit stuck his head in and whistled shrilly. Mrs. Enots whistled back in a less shrill tone, apparently acknowledging that he and his pals had arrived just when expected—by Mrs. Enots, if by nobody else.

The door then banged entirely open, and, along with Jasper and Dusty Shallowpit, three more mostly ugly men burst in: D. V. Purina, Newall Alpo, and Tug Terden, a grizzled country-western rocker who allegedly owned more rattlesnakes in Nokuse County than any other native-born citizen.

In his shaggy mid-sixties, Terden was also the heir to and the figurehead CEO of Terden BioQuirked Creations and hence a major source of funding to institutions, festivals, associations, and alliances dependent on both native rattlers and the Bio-Quirked kinds. I had heard of Tug Terden years ago, for a record called “Snake-Bit Klooxer” and for several well-publicized arrests for indecent exposure at various undersold concerts. But, until moving to Georgia, I had never known that he hailed from Wriggly or that he derived such clout from its most notorious “bio product.”

All five men burst in shouting, “Lakshmi! Lakshmi! *Lakshmi!*” Celeste screamed, and two or three other patients also stood, I among them, as they toppled end tables and yanked cheap reproductions by Rousseau, Rockwell, and Warhol from the walls, but left *The Nude Snake Charmer* hanging. But, even as distraught as I was, I figured that Terden had taught his fellow marauders all he knew about staging disruptive chaos.

“*Mr. Terden!*” I shouted. And: “*Mr. Alpo! Mr. Purina! Mr. Shallowpit! Dusty!*”

All five men paused in their wilding to gawk at me.

“Wylene,” Dusty’s father said, “take Celeste and get the hell out of here.”

“No sir, I will not.”

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"You better," Mr. Alpo said. "You all could get hurt damned nastily." The snake in his belt loops did its signature peristaltic horizontal dance.

"Go ahead and fire me," I said. "We're staying."

"Why?" demanded Mr. Shallowpit, or possibly, "Wye!"

"To witness and testify to your vile punk vandalism!"

Dusty looked nonplussed, sheepish even, but Tug Terden sidled over and stuck his drug-drawn mug so near to mine that I could smell the whiskey in his pores.

"Look," he said. "I'd never hurt this little chicky of yours—not here, anyways—but, you buttinski Ozark hoor, *you're* fair game."

Lakshmi Chakraborti stepped into the waiting room. "Mrs. Godfrey is not your prey, Mr. Terden. Or, I shouldn't have to remind you, anybody else's."

Dusty pulled Terden aside to menace me: "Wye, if you throw in with her to make us put down or defang our rattlers, you'll pay!"

"Tell me how, Dusty: You gonna sic your trouser-snake Wriggly on me?"

Now a cayenne-pepper red, he lifted a white-knuckled fist.

Dr. Chakraborti said, "You have no credible reason to pay this clinic such an unruly visit. Get out, all of you. And don't leave without Mrs. Enots. She's fired."

"What?" Mrs. Enots said. "Why?"

"Because you're Newall Alpo's sister, Jessica, and you never told me."

"What difference does that make?" Mrs. Enots asked.

"That nude over there belongs to Mr. Alpo, and from day one you've colluded with him to keep that inappropriate image on our clinic's walls."

"Hang on a sec," D. V. Purina said. "Stop passing out flyers threatening our rights to own and handle serpents. Stop asking your patients intrusive questions about their threshold sentries. And what the hell's 'inappropriate' about a snake?"

I held up my cell phone. "Should I call the police, ma'am?"

Before Doctor Lakshmi could respond, Terden eased over to her, grabbed her throat with one raw hand, and banged her head against the door behind her. I hit the number for the police department in my cell listings just as he took a rattler from the thigh-pocket on his camo pants and thrust its wicked head into the doctor's face.

Queasily, I thought, he could've done that to *me*.

"You'll soon be one badly snake-bit quack," he told Doctor Lakshmi.

D. V. Purina grabbed Terden and flipped the rattler free of his grip. "You're abusing that snake, Tug." It had now begun to coil about on the linoleum as if either stunned or galvanized. "We've made our point," Mr. Purina said. "Let's haul our grits out of here." He seized the twisting rattler, folded it back into his pocket, and dragged Terden away from the doctor. He and his pals led Jessica Enots, their spy, toward the office door, Dusty glaring back at me venomously. As they left, Mr. Alpo stopped, lifted *The Nude Snake Charmer* from its brackets, and carried it out with him.

The door slammed shut, and all I could think was that we had survived a potentially deadly assault of rattlesnakes and men. Two patients who'd endured it with us broke down, one in tears, the other in discreet gibbering.

Dr. Chakraborti did not back off, and because she didn't, the Nokuse Rattlesnake Alliance invoked its assets all the harder: zealous supporters, deeply ingrained rattlesnake fetishism, well-established local law, a culture of machismo entitlement, abiding economic interests and incentives—*et cetera, ad nauseam*.

Doctor Lakshmi continued to preach to local mothers, appealing to the instincts of life-preservation that the rattlesnake alliance had also staked out, albeit differently. She and her followers stressed nurturing and sustaining life, the alliance its lordship over natural and BioQuirked creation and also its members' right to proactive self-defense.

Doctor Lakshmi's approach appealed more strongly to me, but many women sided with their men because they disliked being labeled ultra-fems. Others had livelihoods based on raising and selling either rattlesnakes or their prey, on making rattlesnake novelties and clothing; or on hawking security systems dependent on Tug Terden's BioQuirked threshold sentries.

Very few men sided with Doctor Lakshmi.

I worked on Reed. "Do you know what your friends the Shallowpits and their crew want local law to do now?"

Unhappily, Reed shook his head.

"To mandate two rattlers for every three human beings in a household! To authorize living pit vipers even in the public schools!"

"Shit." Reed looked down in palpable chagrin.

"Doctor Lakshmi says a baby that recently supposedly died of SIDS has—"

"Died of what?"

"SIDS: sudden infant death syndrome; crib death. Some say it happens from infants sleeping on their stomachs. Some say it's—"

"Okay, okay. Hasn't that SIDS crap been passé almost forever?"

"I guess, but some Nokuseans use it as a cover for babies that die of crotalid bites. Our coroner, Mr. Purina, regularly reports snakebite deaths as SIDS-related. If an adult dies of a snake bite, he blames either a heart attack or a stroke. *You'd* be stricken by the number of *women* who die of these two 'causes,' especially in homes cited for domestic disturbances and likely abuse."

"Who told you all this crap?" Reed asked.

"Doctor Lakshmi."

"Jesus, she's overstepping herself—that's all private info."

"I don't believe that, and if it *is* legally private, it shouldn't be. We're talking public health here, mister."

"Bullshit," Reed murmured.

"Right back at you. Think on this: Your friends the Shallowpits would rather lie than admit that one of their precious pit vipers has murdered a baby."

"*Murdered?* Snakes lack consciences. They don't murder—they kill."

"Dead is dead if it's your child. The *Shallowpits* have consciences, don't they? How can they swallow all the Alliance's cynical and transparent lies?"

"They grew up here. It's their livelihood, partly—also their culture."

"To watch their kids and other family members die? And to think they're addressing the issue by asking every citizen to harbor even more venomous snakes?"

Reed pursed his lips. "Wylene, they're *BioQuirked*."

"You know, if it took a normal adult human male nine months to have an orgasm, maybe he'd finally get it."

Reed's eyes widened in horror. "*What?*"

"What do guys invest in creating a kid—two minutes of drool-accompanied pelvic thrusts? If it took you three quarters of a year to get your ashes hauled, maybe you'd feel a tad more committed to the resulting kid and wouldn't start so many damned wars or shrug off your own and other people's kids' premature deaths as if they had no more significance than a swatted housefly's."

After several beats, Reed said, "I sort of resent that, Wye."

"Adults who can't handle life's fatal realities have no right to resent the truth." Those words spoken, I stomped away fearing they'd had no effect whatsoever.

War broke out, raged or sputtered, and whelped its casualties.

At an official meeting in Take-Up-Serpents House, the rattlesnake alliance and our Wiggly city councilpersons—most of whom were *members* of the former group—

approved a resolution requiring that households of more than three persons adopt two pit vipers as guardians, with another serpent for every three additional persons. It also insisted that every classroom in the city's public schools purchase a "pedagogical security paladin" from Terden BioQuirked Creations, Inc.

After this in-your-face local victory, the alliance took these proposals to every town council in Nokuse and petitioned for their adoption. Despite some organized opposition, every council voted to do as asked. Two town councils stipulated that the snakes fulfilling a protective function must be "poisonous native, i.e., North American, pit vipers." This clause permitted households to catch or buy copperheads and cottonmouth water moccasins, not merely native or bioengineered American rattlesnakes, as threshold sentries and living pocket protectors. It did so even if their lack of BioQuirking made them more unpredictable and thus more dangerous than TBQC crotalids—which rattled politely for their owners' benefits but for nearly everyone else maintained a deadly dead-eye-dick silence.

Tug Terden opposed this clause, but by this point the extremists among these outlier alliance members had the upper hand and prevailed. (*Extremists?* How does an extremist define "extremist"? I saw them as self-righteous lunatics or psychopaths.) Still, BioQuirked sales teams began going door to door with young rattler specimens as starter or pedagogical serpents. They had warrants to search each house to ascertain if they had the needed number of security paladins for all their human residents.

Doctor Lakshmi and I, along with many women and a few men (although not yet Reed), protested these mandates, picketing TBQC, Shallowpit Feed & Seed, the businesses of those making snake-related novelties, and even the homes of non-alliance city councilors who had cravenly or corruptly yielded to every damned alliance demand.

We were heckled, harassed, beaten, and snake-bit, even as two of our persecutors were lethally poisoned by their own carry-snakes in two separate assaults on us. Our foes' rattlers, despite BioQuirking, often struck randomly in such melees, just as a sane person would expect. I read the deaths and injuries to our enemies as poetic justice (God forgive me), but in most of *their* cases, access to antivenin prevented deaths.

By contrast, we were *denied* antivenin treatments. Hence, we always donned high-topped leather boots and thick clothing for our protests. Of course, I felt sorry for the wives and children of the men who had fallen victim to what I couldn't help calling "benevolent viperity," but it served the jerks right.

Didn't it?

Life dragged on, like an engorged serpent seeking a spot to digest a big meal. Our protests occurred less frequently. Newall Alpo had long since fired me, and when I applied for the receptionist job at the Wiggly clinic, an anonymous committee nixed my application and gave the post to Hallie Shallowpit. In addition, Mr. Alpo, D. V. Purina, the Shallowpits, and a host of others continued to revile Dr. Chakraborti and her allies, me included, as outlaws, traitors, and saboteurs of Nokuse County culture.

**VIPERS SAVE LIVES**, Morrison LePieu, the lobotomized chairman of the board of Terden BioQuirked Creations, liked to say, and anyone disagreeing was an alarmist idiot. To me, that motto made about as much sense as Orwell's fictitious slogans **WAR IS PEACE**, **SLAVERY IS FREEDOM**, and **IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH**. When a rumor began circulating that Tug Terden had approached the Irish government about supplying it with BioQuirked rattlers as stealth defenses against some militant separatists (because, after all, **VIPERS SAVE LIVES**), Reed clutched his head in histrionic agony and cried in his worst Irish accent, "*Has the whole damned world gone buckfuck then?*"

Unfortunately, Celeste did not improve, and because her classmates had targeted her as the spawn of both troublemakers and traitors, I pulled her out of school and taught her at home. Further, Dusty told Reed that if I did not stop agitating for Doctor Lakshmi's agenda, he'd fire Reed, as painful as he, Dusty, would find doing so.

Reed, either manning up or losing his grip (if not both together), replied, "Fire me, Dusty," and when Dusty did, we Godfreys found ourselves incomeless in a house that Jasper Shallowpit said we must vacate in two weeks.

That evening I shot arrows into as many sun-bleached planks in our privacy fence as I could. Drenched in sweat and so blurry-eyed that the whole bonkers world looked watery, I said to myself, "*What do we do now? Where do we go?*"

That night Celeste overheard Reed and me talking—about Wriggly, its inhabitants, and our current dilemma. I found her outside our door and walked her back to her room. Again cynically channeling Julian of Norwich, I told her that everything, every single thing, would be well, yes, all would be well, yada yada yada.

The next morning, looking zombie-like over her cream of sawdust, Celeste let her spoon fall and slumped sidelong before Reed or I could catch her. Reed scooped her up and carried her back to her bed. A thorough examination revealed that she'd neither bumped her head nor bruised any part of her lower body. We checked her out for Vype's bite marks and found nothing worrisome. We rarely let Vype out of his tank anymore, but Celeste still doted on him, and we could *not* watch her every moment. But because we'd inspected her for bites, we now had not a clue what had prompted her swoon.

I called Doctor Lakshmi at the clinic, and Hallie told me, coldly, that she had not yet come in. I more or less believed her, but maybe Hallie didn't give a keratin rattle what befell *any* of us backstabbing Godfreys nowadays.

Then Hallie said, "I'll tell her you called, Wye, as soon as she gets in." She sounded no warmer speaking these words, but she did what she said she'd do, for in less than an hour Doctor Lakshmi made a house call on us.

"It's more of the same," she told Reed and me.

"Meaning what?" Reed asked.

"Suppressed immune system, extreme depression, and total withdrawal as a form of subconscious escape and self-protection."

I asked, "What should we do?"

"Get her out of here. Take her back to Arkansas. Relocate to Alaska."

"Are those our only options?"

"Import a gazillion king snakes or mongooses and let them wipe out every rattler in the region." She shook her shiny but unkempt tresses as if to dislodge a sleeping asp within them. Then, knowing that she had *not* encouraged us, she referred us to a child psychologist in Waycross. This sad concession to our hopelessness broke my heart.

"Oh, Doctor Lakshmi!"

She grimaced in apology, and we hugged like long-lost sisters reuniting. Reed stood to one side fidgeting, like the father of a terminally ill child . . . as maybe he was. Well, no—no, he wasn't.

Doctor Lakshmi returned later that day to give us a prescription that she'd filled in town: pills for Celeste's stomach, others to buffer her depression. She and I sat for a while in the glider on our stone patio out back, staring at the fletched ends of the arrows protruding from plank after plank in our privacy fence.

"How do you plan to get all those out?" Doctor Lakshmi asked me.

"Maybe," I said, "I'll just let Dusty snatch them out with his teeth."

The next day, Doctor Lakshmi told us, she'd take a leave of absence—with a PA, or

physician's assistant, from Brunswick as a fill-in—and drive to Atlanta to ask officials at the Centers for Disease Control for help in halting the preventable epidemic of snakebite injuries and deaths in Nokuse County:

“It’s criminal and the state should intervene,” she would tell them. Us she would tell, “In my absence, Godfreys, you must hold your heads up, take care of Celeste, and, yes, *keep the faith.*”

Somehow or other, Dr. Lakshmi Chakraborti took her concerns not only to the CDC, which rebuffed her (owing to the discovery in Iowa of a veteran of the Australian war infected by a bacteria with global-epidemic potential), but also to representatives of the *Atlanta Constitution* and three of the city’s local TV news teams. None of these organizations—apparently—had rattlesnake alliance sympathizers in their executive hierarchies, and so Doctor Lakshmi was able to speak to both print and broadcast reporters. She conferred with them about falsified medical reports from Nokuse County and about the snakebite deaths that its well-established coroner, D. V. Purina, had attributed, questionably, to other causes.

Segments of these interviews aired on TV in Atlanta and environs and, amazingly, in Wriggly via a satellite service that we subscribed to. I say “amazingly” because censors at the Atlanta-based stations generally redacted from the feeds to our area any and all commentary critical of the crotalid-related industries in South Georgia.

“What do you want to happen?” one reporter asked Doctor Lakshmi.

“Real improvement in the lives of the citizens of the county in which I’ve worked these past few months.”

“Are *you* a citizen of that county?”

“Only in a technical sense—I’m fulfilling an obligation I incurred while earning my medical degrees in Augusta.”

“You’ve raised serious concerns about the integrity of a county official.”

“I’ve told the truth. Clearly, this coroner is protecting Terden BioQuirked Creations, the culture of herpetological excess that reigns there, and also people making tons of money from these interests’ dangerous activities.”

“Uh-oh,” I said sidelong to Reed.

“No shit,” he replied.

Later, when everything was over, we learned that somebody in Nokuse County had contacted Governor Bixby Wheeler, a smoothly corrupt South Georgia boy, to tell him that a “buttinski foreign hoor” had gone on TV to besmirch the proud names and the economy-driving livelihoods of thousands of law-abiding Nokuse Countians. And she was doing so—*Irresponsibly!*—at the expense of those very citizens.

When Dr. Chakraborti returned to Wriggly three days after these interview snippets aired, she found a group of vigilantes boarding up her clinic. Several patients had queued up outside to watch, as had many other people, all initially unbelieving. This time, the vigilantes did not include even one of the five alliance big shots who had disapproved of the flyers she had paid an “out-of-town mercenary” to pass out.

No, this group consisted of four or five younger males who looked as if they denned every night with rattlers. All had face-only smiles you’d expect to find on Halloween masks, and their carry-snakes had come along as hatbands, epaulets, belts, or slippery pocket riders. Their activities in front of the clinic pissed off rather than scared Doctor Lakshmi.

“Stop!” she ordered them. “Tear down those boards.”

Instead, said my informant, they seized her, duct-taped her mouth shut, laid her on the sidewalk atop a big sheet of plywood, bungee-corded her to it, and poured blackstrap molasses over her from tins they had brought along with their clinic-clos-

ing tools. Doctor Lakshmi fought this indignity, lurching futilely from side to side and struggling to scream through her duct-tape gag.

She had no help, though, and the vigilantes had their sick premeditated way.

"If I'd been there with quiver and bow," I told my informant, "I'd've shot each of those douche bags straight through an eye—*thwap! thwap! thwap!*"

"No, the layout of the buildings wouldn't have let you. Even if you'd been shooting from a rooftop across the street, all the spectators would've posed problems. If you'd been on a street or a sidewalk, you might've hit one, maybe two, of her attackers, but those guys pack throwing stars as well as snakes, and they'd've hit you with a *shuriken*, or closed on you and pulled you down before you could hit more than one of them. Only a fool would have tried it, Miss Wylene."

"You're giving those damned sons of incest too damned much credit."

"No, ma'am, you're giving them too little. They're fanatics. They practice all the time. They're fallible, but they're also good enough to bean you with a *shuriken* and slap a snake on you to deliver the *coup de grace*."

My informant went on to say that the alliance vigilantes then broke open five or six goose-down pillows and shook their feathers all over Dr. Chakraborti—a modified tar-and-feathering that led even ordinarily decent people in the mob to laugh, point gleefully at the victim, and generally revel in the high-and-mighty doctor's humiliation. I just could not get this behavior, but my informant said there had been plenty of other witnesses and that it all had "gone down" just as he was describing it.

Next, he went on, the triumphant clinic closers had lifted Doctor Lakshmi's plywood bier and carried it above their heads through the streets like a shoddy float in a two-bit Mardi Gras procession. My informant knew where they were taking it, but he, unfortunately, could not follow them there—at least not yet.

"Where?" I demanded. "Where did they take her?"

To one of the warehouses of Shallowpit's Feed & Seed, my informant replied. When they arrived, they put her plywood pallet atop a bank of plastic-wrapped hay bales. Helpless in her bonds, sweltering in oozy syrup, she lay beneath a swaying electric lantern in a vaulted niche of the warehouse. Then they left, locked the building, and scattered. Their strategy was for Doctor Lakshmi to suffer. And she did.

Insects—mosquitoes, horseflies, and blurry-winged millers—tormented her.

Then the rats came out to taste the molasses and maybe her flesh, and, after the rats, the warehouse's security paladins, rattlesnakes all, emerged to eat the bloated rats and poison the poor brutalized woman.

"That last stuff never happened," I said by way of protest.

"No—no, ma'am, it didn't."

It didn't happen because, later, my informant crept up to the warehouse, made a way in, and with a Swedish army knife, kitchen tongs, olive oil, and many other small serviceable items, freed Doctor Lakshmi from her bonds.

He then guided her to a shower stall in the old structure, gave her soap and a curry brush, privacy for her ablutions, and, later still, a T-shirt, a pair of jeans, and some tennis shoes to replace her own spoiled clothing. He also handed her keys to a doubtfully reliable pickup on the premises and advised her to use it to carry her out of town. And she used it for just that purpose while my informant limped home and crawled into his bed as if he had never, at least on that night, stirred from it.

"You're talking about Doug," Reed said as we drove *our* pickup away from Nokuse County as fast as possible—with a trailer attached and the freight of all our problems heavy on our minds, but weightless on the truck's spavined frame.

"I am. He swore me to secrecy, Reed, until we were out of town, but he couldn't let me go without easing my mind about Doctor Lakshmi."

“My God, the nerve of the boy.”

“He’s a really good kid.”

“I guess so, but Dusty would shit a brick.”

“Hallie wouldn’t. She must’ve done something right or Doug would have turned out just as sadly adder-pated as his daddy.”

In fact, Doug’s actions that night, and also later, enabled Doctor Lakshmi to travel to Washington, D.C., to confer with a female senator from Georgia who sent U.S. Marshals to Wriggly. They arrested D. V. Purina and each of the five vigilantes in the feather-boarding of Doctor Lakshmi.

Cell-phone videos of their assault not only easily identified the culprits, but also ran on national and state newscasts, with simultaneous Internet showings, many of which went viral. The videos created a tsunami of outrage that further embarrassed local officials and the furious leaders of the rattlesnake alliance. They could not condone what their young thugs had done, but neither did they wish to condemn their actions. And, by denial and demurral, they scoffed and did not condemn them.

Reed glanced sidelong. “I’m sorry I ever brought you down here, Wye.”

“One way or the other, we all pass through this territory eventually.”

We rode listening to the hum of our threadbare tires. Celeste snoozed on the bench seat between us. Her health, mental and physical, had measurably improved just in the past week, and she had not fallen prey to any apparent separation anxiety from leaving our rental house, Wriggly, or our snaky companion, Vype. In fact, I had set Vype free in the exhausted turpentine flats behind our fence, and he had quickly slithered away.

Shallowpit Feed & Seed, Terden BioQuirked Creations, and the rattlesnake alliance all remained in business, and Bixby Wheeler was reelected in the gubernatorial race that fall. But a spotlight had shone on all Nokuse County and its bizarre mores, and it continued to shine upon them.

Doctor Lakshmi had not yet returned to town—many people wiser than I knew that it was unsafe for her to return—but she now had friends in higher places than our gold-domed Capitol. Also, I had her cell number and her email addresses, as she had mine, and the world seemed far less venom-filled than it had mere days ago.

As we cruised away from Wriggly, Reed said, “I can’t get over Dusty’s kid.”

“The boy knows a real human being when he meets one. Doctor Lakshmi qualifies.” After a moment, I added, “So does his mother.”

“*Sunuvagun*,” Reed said. “*Sunuvagun*.”

I had never heard that expression before, but the way Reed inflected it, it had an affectionate, even upbeat lilt that kindled in me a scrappy hope. I asked him where he had heard it and what it meant.

“It’s old Koorie army slang. Dusty once said he thought it meant something like—you know, like ‘*Will miracles never cease?*’”

The next day we entered Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee—for we had traveled north—and took time to drive through Cades Cove. Celeste jerked upright on our pickup’s bench seat to peer through our bug-spattered windshield into a glen carpeted with grass and studded with oaks. In this glen, a black bear and two cubs immediately caught our attention. One cub sat on a limb high above their watchful mother, but the other romped all around her through lush spears of emerald green.

And for the first time that year, I felt almost as if I’d come home, even as I also knew that one day we would return to Nokuse County to meet with Doctor Lakshmi again and to atone for our failures there—not with its BioQuirked rattlers, but with the men whom those snakes had so easily and thoroughly beguiled. ○