

## Snake Story

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Character of MOM: Young, has on makeup but looks chronically tired and pushed around. Works in an office, but doesn't have her own cubicle. Wears cheap business clothes.

Character of SON: Looks around fourteen years old. Should bring to mind those kids in middle school who wanted to be engineers. If his family had more money, he would have a 3-D printer.

*[Stage is mostly a boy's jungle-inspired bedroom with a door that can close to the audience, but there is also a small living room area with some of MOM's clothes lying around. On the other side of the stage is a small kitchen with a fridge stocked with mice. We open in SON's bedroom, an open, empty cage in the corner, cleaning supplies on side table nearby.]*

SON:

*[lazily playing with legos]*

Mom, remember to feed Cricket extra tonight. He's not used to sleeping in the carrying cage.

MOM

He's not hungry.

SON

Is he feeling better?

MOM

*[carefully]*

Baby, he's not sick, exactly. Hand me the cleaning supplies. This cage is rank.

SON

*[hands it over]*

Well, why is he acting sad?

MOM

*[tired, squatting down to clean]*

I think he may be too much for me to handle right now.

SON

*[poking the bear]*

Once he costs us a trip to the vet you wanna throw him out?

MOM

*[cleaning cage rhythmically]*

It's not like that. *[beat]* Hey, tell me, why does a snake stop eating? Why does it save its energy?

SON

*[insistent]*

He needs his mice. Feed him his mice.

*[To the audience]*

Sometimes I have to get like this for her to feed *me*. Sometimes I stare at the mice and wonder how they taste. A boy can get tired of frozen pizza rolls, and even mice start to look good. Once, I watched Cricket eat one, and I collected its little bones. They're in an Altoids box under my bed. I assemble them, try to make a full body. Like a puzzle. Sometimes I want to eat the bones, crunch them up and sprinkle them on my Coco Puffs. I want to be like him, I want to know what it's like to spit up bone. She *[motions to MOM]* doesn't get that. She spits up people in my face all the time.

MOM

*[challenging him, cleaning cage faster]*

Hey! Why was he stretching out alongside you in bed like that? You have all those books on snakes. Tell me why.

SON

We're friends. He likes me enough to show his belly to me.

MOM

You need a goldfish, maybe a kitten. Not something with fangs.

SON

I like fangs. Cricket doesn't bite me. Cricket actually likes me, too.

MOM

*[stops and starts cleaning]*

Baby, I like you. I'll get you a dog, if you want. A small one.

*[beat]*

The vet thought it might be healthier for him to go somewhere else.

SON

Where else? We're great snake parents. *Where else*, mom?

MOM

I don't know, a serpentarium. Or that zoo downtown. Or a house with large adults.

SON

Why is being large an issue? Cricket couldn't wrap around a large man.

*[beat]*

You don't even like large men. You said that yourself.

MOM

That's completely different. I was talking on the phone with a friend. You shouldn't have been listening.

SON

*[wry]*

There's only two of us in this house, mom. There's not a lot else I can listen to.

MOM

*{To the audience}*

My friends say I should put myself out there. I'm young, I chew with my mouth closed, I have a bubble butt. The last man didn't turn out so hot. He was wild, he wanted to swallow me whole. When he made a move on me his eyes would glaze over, all animal. When his eyes bulged too far, he'd kill small animals. Like squirrels in traps and stuff. Neighborhood cats, that sort of

thing. Then he'd bring back "gifts" from some backyard exotics dealer. Once, a green monkey in a bamboo cage. If I've learned anything from CSI, these were the makings of a psychopath. These dating app men aren't much better. Their eyes glaze over, too. But at least no gifts.

MOM

*[hastily changing the subject]*

How can you sleep in the same room as this cage? It stinks as all hell.

SON

He doesn't even spend time in there. He sleeps with me every night, you know that.

MOM

That's not good.

*[beat where she remembers what the vet told her]*

No no no you can't do that anymore. A boy shouldn't sleep with his snake. It's weird. You're being weird.

SON

What? Mom, this is coming out of nowhere. I hate when you call anything weird.

*[quieter]*

I'm not weird. Nothing I do is weird.

MOM

*[not listening]*

I can't tiptoe around it. I can't. You're a big kid, I can tell you.

*[beat where she weighs whether or not she wants to tell]*

Your "pet" was getting ready to eat you. The way he stopped eating? That was to save ROOM. The way he stopped doing much? That was to save ENERGY. The way he stretched out next to you? That was to see how much ROOM you'd take up. In his BELLY. In his BELLY, baby.

SON

That's ridiculous. No, that's crazy. I've GROWN UP with Cricket. Why didn't he eat me when I was three, then? Why now? No no no we have an emotional attachment. He licks my tears, I make sure he gets the fattest mice. No no no. You're wrong.

MOM

You read those snake books ALL DAY. And a veterinarian, a trained doctor, told me this. She wanted to take the snake right away, but I said no. I said you had to say goodbye. I said this was a family issue.

SON

Well, Cricket is my friend. My best friend, my only true friend, maybe my only friend. Or, or a brother. Or a father or...something else rare. A family member. Cricket isn't wild like the snakes in those books, he lives here. With us. He's part of our family.

MOM

*[quietly]*

A snake like this is not your friend. He was taken OUT of the wild, but that doesn't mean he's safe. He wanted to eat you, baby. He wanted to hurt you. HURT you. I'm trying to be the best mother I can be, okay. I'm trying to protect you. Let me protect you, okay?

*[beat]*

You wanna know what it would be like, in the pit of a snake's stomach? It would be DARK and you would be DEAD. I don't wanna be in this house all alone. I need you here with me.

SON

I don't want to be here with you! I don't want to hear you complain on the phone about big men and small men and medium men and I don't wanna pretend that I don't listen. I don't have anyone to leave with, I'm TRAPPED here with you and Cricket and I never put Cricket in his cage because that's CRUEL and here, right here, this is worse than Cricket's cage, with that stupid bedspread you made me get and all those science books I read at recess alone. Because I'm ALONE at recess, mom, yes. And I don't really mind it. At least it's better than those boys grunting on the field all day.

MOM

*[as though she hadn't listened to him just now]*

You didn't want me to sign you up for soccer, you would've met other kids there. You would've made friends there.

SON

I DON'T WANT TO PLAY SOCCER. GIVE ME CRICKET, I WANT CRICKET.

MOM

*[deflecting]*

I get what it's like to be alone. When you're at school I sit here on the couch alone sometimes. Sometimes I open the fridge to look at Cricket's dead mice.

*[beat]*

They look so peaceful in there. You know, each in their alone little way?

*[beat]*

I just worry about you, okay? I don't want you to grow up stunted. So many adult men are stunted.

*[to audience]*

I know the makings of stunted men, trust me, I know. Extreme attachment to animals is one sign. Every stunted man likes animals. Because they can't talk! You can drag them by their pinky toe and they can't scream or call the cops or anything. A pet is your bitch, is your toy. No friends is another sign of stuntedness. Having tan soccer boys with lean muscle laugh at you hardens you up, and then you stop there. Stunted! Forever emotionally fourteen! What else? Magic tricks, cartoons, sucking your thumb? My son is growing up stunted, yes, he is not growing is the problem.

SON

*[angrily breaking legos into box]*

You show your dating app men my snake. You always teeter a bit, you always seem ready to fall down. Like a...cut-out doll or something. They see my bedroom, you know. They see me. They don't just stare at the cage. It's like showing the dating app men my diary. Or my dick. Or our old Christmas cards, before dad was...

*[beat]*

Cricket is supposed to be mine, and you know that and you show that toothy smile where all I can do is sit on that stupid jungle bedspread and watch the men watch me. Oh, they look at the snake, all right. They jostle it and poke it and prod it and Cricket hates it.

*[beat]*

I know because Cricket and I, we talk. Not through words but we have our methods. A nuzzle, a tongue flick, a widening of the eye. The dating app men are skewered in our language. We are very witty, Cricket and I. We talk about Cricket swallowing them whole. We laugh about it, about the swallowing and spitting. Cricket would never eat me because I am not those men. We talk about those men, about spitting out their bones. Not my bones, their bones.

MOM

Baby, I want you to be happy. I want you to be good. I want you whole, not eaten by some ridiculous cobra your dad bought.

SON

Is this all about him? Still? Is this about “finding complete closure” or whatever stupid headline Cosmopolitan put out this week? Do you just want to get rid of him entirely? What, is it going to be the snake and then me? So you can fuck your dating app men in peace? Are you seriously so-

MOM

*[slamming down empty cage]*

NO! This animal was about to EAT you, KILL you. You are the child here, you can't bully me like this. I'm sick of it, I'm sick I'm sick I'm sick.

*[turns to look at SON, who looks very frightened]*

*[Mom hisses through teeth]*

Fine. Fine! You win you win I am a bad mother I just want the best for you. Some soccer practice friends, a hobby that gets you out of the house. So bad, such a waste of time.

*[beat]*

I deserve time, too, you know. I deserve good things too.

*[beat, vindictive]*

You get ONE last night with that stupid fucking snake. Then it's GONE and we are never talking about it again. And I need an apology from you.

*[beat, a bit sorrowful]*

I'll get you a hamster or something.

SON

You can get out of my room now. And leave Cricket by my door.

MOM

*[Gets up to leave. You get the impression she has much more to say]*

You can feed him the mice in the fridge yourself.

*[MOM leaves bedroom, closes door. Drops snake in cage in front of door. Leaves. SON opens door a crack.]*

SON

*[to audience]*

When this door is closed, my room rustles, grows over itself. First, my jungle bedspread grows vines. The lights darken, turn green.

*[We can see lights behind his bedroom door glow green, and we hear sounds from nature inside]*

I shrink into my hair, I ball up into a fist. This is to make Cricket feel at home. Of course he's wild, of course the mice are never enough. I like to dangle myself as an option. I know he'd never bite. When he presses into me I feel so warm, like arms are wrapped around me, hugging me, keeping me. So many arms, wrapped around and around...

*[Lovingly lifts snake out of cage, wraps it around his torso, carries it into his bedroom. Closes door on us.]*

*[Gurgling sound from SON's bedroom. The inside of SON's room glows green. Some reaction from MOM occurs, but a dampered one, a stunned one.]*

MOM

It's not that I didn't think it would happen. It's not that I thought it would. Just sometimes I go blank and find myself staring at the mice in the fridge. The dead mice, the food-mice.

*[opens fridge on stage, filled with frozen mice]*

And look, he didn't even remember to feed the snake its mice last night. They're all still here.

*[beat, turns away from fridge]*

I like having those mice there, part of our family. Brothers and sisters laid beside each other, one compartment away from the lettuce. One more night. Of course, one too many. I just tried to be a good mother and it all became so hard. First, the father. A gift, sure. A cobra to wrap around a baby. And I stayed past that.

*[beat]*

And then I used the snake to charm men on those dating apps. It made me a cool mom, it made the son easier to swallow. They all were so stunted and I was using a big snake as a reason to stop by. *Come see our big snake.* I got a lot of dirty replies to that. But that's what I was looking for. I knew the boy was alone in his room. He had his snake, I had company. I was a good mom.

*[beat]*

I will have to cancel my date for tonight. No, no it's too late. I've already gone on three with him, he's a real possibility. High on the roster. I should get ready. It's just dinner.

*[We see MOM get dressed in a sexy black dress, put on lipstick. She spends a lot of time fussing over small details, smelling tights in hamper, spraying her hair with product, smelling her armpit.]*

*[She waits on the sofa, anxiously checking her phone. She looks back at the SON's bedroom, which is still glowing green. She looks back at her phone.]*

He's not coming.

*[turns to audience, frantic]*

He's not coming, is he?

*[She takes off her shoes and lies on the couch, defeated. Then gets up to go to SON's door. Stares at the door, contemplating whether to open it or close it. You can see her deciding whether or not to look in.]*

I will have to freshen up his room again tonight. I will have to alert his school that he won't be coming in today. I will have to tell my men *Here is my big snake, and my son is the one making it big. I mean, bloated. I mean, full.* I will have to see all those soccer boys come to the casket showing together, those boys who never would've become friends with him. I will have to buy a nice motherly black dress, not this one, not my sexy one. Fuck, maybe my sexy one. I will have to get rid of the stink. In the room, in the fridge. I will have to throw out the mice, the families of mice, the baby mice, the baby son mice.

*[Black fade out of MOM picking out the mice from the fridge and throwing them in the trash. They seem endless.]*