

she was saying don't expect



: because you're not going to get it

## Serpent

There was a commotion in our house one morning. Daniele's 4-foot boa constrictor, named Crimson, was loose in her bedroom, and a search was underway to find her. Crimson (the serpent) eventually turned up underneath the bed, and it was quite an armful to persuade her to return to her glass case.

The idea of a large constricting snake loose in my teenage daughter's bedroom might ordinarily be cause for alarm. But Crimson had been ill, and this sudden interest in escaping (combined with eating her first rat in almost six months) was cause for jubilation. She was showing the will to live.

I did not personally take part in the snake search. I was afraid of Crimson. I have helped Daniele with minor snake chores, and each time I have felt how alien the snake seems compared to the dog -- how beyond warmth and wagging and monkeyshines she is.

And when she grips me around the neck and chest and

squeezes, as is her wont, I feel the air – and the life – going out of me. And a part of me just loses it.

It has to do with a summer job I had, in 1967. I was a high school senior working the summer at a mini-zoo in an amusement park, Jungle Larry's Safari Island at Cedar Point, in Sandusky, Ohio.

Jungle Larry was a kids' show Frank Buck – he said he actually knew Frank Buck, but he said a lot of things -- who amassed about a thousand animals, from lions and elephants to monkeys, at this roadside attraction. My job was to do whatever needed doing -- rake trails, tell visitors about the animals, clean out cages.

I had many odd adventures, but the most traumatic involved feeding our two large snakes, a rock python 20 foot in length and a reticulated python 27 foot in length. These snakes were so huge they spent their days collapsed in a pile of themselves in a glassed-in building we called the snakatorium. If one moved it was to lift a head and test the room temperature with its tongue,

its Jacobsen's organelle.

It understood that the snakes were severely depressed. Jungle Larry's zoo was a cross between an old-timey zoo with steel bars and slabs, and a fake jungle, with bamboo railings and tufts of Spanish moss from the Everglades transplanted just for the summer months to sycamores and buckeyes in Ohio. The visitors saw the foliage, but the animals were stuck behind bars. They -- the animals -- were functionally insane -- from boredom, alienation, ill health, or the scent of something nearby that they should either be eating or being eaten by. It was not natural.

Larry made matters worse by playing the theme song from the movie *Born Free* 16 hours a day on the PA system. That song embedded itself in the nucleotides of all our bodies' cells. Prester John, one of the other zookeepers I worked with, rewrote the first line: "Born free, and now they're in cages ..."

The snakes wouldn't eat. Two months would pass between meals, and as they represented a considerable investment -- perhaps \$100,000 in 1967 dollars? -- it was imperative that they

be fed. Involuntarily if need be.

One night, after the zoo shut down, Larry and his assistant B'wana Walt and myself and some other guy, undertook to feed two piglets to the two snakes. The pigs came in a crate, which rested on a wheelbarrow, and they were sensible enough to be alarmed, squealing and honking at the silent slithering presence in the room.

The plan was to cut the pigs' throats, pry open the snake's jaws, and coax the freshly killed bodies into the snakes' digestive channels.

It was my duty to hold the piggies while Walt cut their throats with a bread knife. The little pigs cried piteously as I held them. I will never, ever forget that sound, or the feeling of the warm blood washing over my hands and arms and onto my shirt, where it quickly cooled.

Walt did the dirty work, getting the snakes to unhinge their jaws, wiping the blood on their faces to arouse them, and

shoehorning the pigs' heads into their gullets.

What struck me was how out of kilter it was, these \$50,000 snakes who had no zest for life, being force-fed these \$3 creatures who wept desperately to live.

But we did it, and the snakes thrived, in the way that reptiles do. A week after eating, they pooped out the pigs' flesh. Several days later they pooped out their mashed skeletons. Every now and then, one of them would move, or just crane its neck languorously toward a vine, then think better of it and go back to sleep.

That was my story. So when Daniele acquired Crimson, I had no appetite for it. I discouraged her. We knew nothing about snake health, I told her, and it was quite a responsibility. And the expense, my word. A live rat once a month would cost, let's see, \$24 per year.

Chances are Crimson would grow to be 16-18 feet long, and we would have to reenact the pig feeding ritual once every six weeks. I dreaded re-feeling the feelings I felt in the snakatorium

34 years earlier.

But Daniele loved having the thing around her neck. Her fiends came over and took turns holding her. I guess they were impressed that her parents put up with it. I don't know. The snake was like smoking cigarettes, it was a nod in the direction of death, and stillness, and it just felt cool to them.

One time Crimson got loose and was somewhere in the house for an entire week. Rachel and I could not ease into our beds at night 100% certain we would wake up in the morning. Daniele mocked us for this, but she was unable to produce the snake. (It turned out to be in her underwear drawer, which she was opening far too seldom.)

We did not foresee the snake getting so sick. It grew a callus on its nose, a scab that covered its nostrils and infected its mouth and lips. It would not eat. Weeks went by like this, me denying it was in there, and Daniele sleeping in the same room as her, hearing it rasp through its strange mask, struggling to breathe.

We took her to a special vet, who did helpful things like excising the scab and force-feeding her with a tube. At one point I had to hold her while Rachel gave her shots. Lord, you should have felt her coiling away from that needle, attempting to strike us to prevent the mortal stab, and the stung, stiff feeling in her muscle when the needle went in.

Daniele moved out after four years, to get away from us, but also because she was nineteen and needed to take a shot at the world. But a snake, especially a sick snake, was too much. So caring for her fell to me. It was a painful task. I kept her watered, and I trained the heat lamp shone on her night and day. Crimson was failing, and my main objective was to keep her comfortable until death came for her.

One November day I came upon her and she had flipped onto her back, and her head hung upside down, open-jawed, and the creamy bands of her belly were exposed. I bundled her up in a plastic grocery bag and carried her out to the dumpster in the falling snow. Suddenly Crimson roared back to life, angry at the

temperature drop, and perhaps suspicious of my intentions. I carried her back inside and laid her back in the glass box.

Finally, in the spring, Crimson did die – you could tell by the smell – and I laid her into the earth beside the crocuses. I informed Daniele, but she was too disturbed to attend the burial.

This August Daniele died too, at age 24. At the funeral, friend after friend came up with Polaroids of Daniele with crimson draped around her shoulders. There was my beautiful daughter, with her sorrowful eyes and rosy cheeks. And there was Crimson, her silent, cold-blooded friend – the only one, I think now, who really understood her.