

Hidden Secrets, Hidden Snakes

By Autumn Prisk

It was four years ago when I made the giant mistake. It was not the kind of mistake where your mama scolds you and then walks away. No, it was a heart throbbing, tear jerking kind of mistake. The whole mess started in Louisiana. I had been sitting at the table in despair, wondering how life could be so cruel to a ten-year-old. Mama walked right in and plopped herself in a chair. "Young man," she demanded, "It's been an entire week since we left Georgia and moved to lovely Louisiana." She swatted a mosquito away. "Go outside right now and make some friends."

"Nope," I muttered and shook my head. Did she think friends grew on trees? In the fourth grade, to have friends you had to be a jock or sporty. Fact was, I was neither.

"Don't you give me any of that sass, Jake. Julia made friends and so can you." Mama tapped her fingers. I counted Mama's mistakes in my head. First, you should never compare a boy to his younger sister. Second, unless you love mosquitos, Louisiana is not lovely.

"Outside. Now." Mama was practically purple. Once Mama had her mind set on something, she was a steamroller. I dashed into the backyard.

It started drizzling as soon as I got outside. "I'm not mad at Mama," I said to the storm clouds and buzzing mosquitos, "Just wishin' we didn't move. Mama's a trooper, that's for sure." Against Mama's prayers, Dad's job went to Louisiana. That meant we had to move too. "But my homies are in Georgia, and ain't no one wants to be friends with me here!" I knelt on the damp ground, letting my head hit my knees. Crunch. I turned, and out

of the darkness of the woods came four angels: Steve, Tom, Mark, and Noah. They were the coolest kids this side of Louisiana.

“We’ll be your peeps.” Steve lifted his chin in Tom, Mark, and Noah’s direction. “Just one lil’ thing,” Steve paused for suspense. “12:00 p.m. y’all meet at my house. There’s an initiation sorta thing to be one of us. You in?” Steve, the biggest jock and coolest kid in Louisiana, inviting me to his house? Of course I was in! Mama had a rule about never, ever leaving the house without permission, but she wanted me to have friends, right? That was practically permission! “You’re one cool kid,” Steve whispered, “Be a shame if we couldn’t be your homies...” That was all it took.

“I’m in,” I nodded, hoping I did not look as guilty as I felt.

Twenty minutes of jogging through the mosquitoes’ home swamp got me to Steve’s mansion. A window squealed open, and Noah poked his spiky haired head out. “It’s go time, dude,” he whispered. My knees knocked together, but I climbed through the window. I was in the basement with Noah, Tom, and Mark. We laughed and punched each other until Steve came down.

"Alright, alright. Welcome to the group, Jake," Steve bellowed. I grinned like a monkey. Everyone hooted. “You’re the perfect addition! Just gotta’ prove your worth...” I flexed my muscles or inexistent ones. Who knew that making friends was as easy as pie? “Yes, the test,” Steve continued, “May I have your attention, lads? I present to you...” Suddenly, everything was spinning in slow motion. Noah swiveled a flash light in the direction of a glass box. I felt a cold chill. This was just an initiation, right? Steve said a test, though. What was the black rope in the... was it moving?! My palms were damp with sweat.

Uncoiling, uncoiling, uncoiling- the black rope appeared endless. The hair on my neck stood straight up. The boys' laughter bounced from the ceiling, telling the black rope and I that our fates were sealed. Before the cold, black eyes turned toward me and glittered from the tank, I knew. The black rope was a forty-inch rainbow snake that proceeded to lift its head and let out a long, menacing hiss. It had four bloodred stripes down its black-as-ink back, and its stomach was neon yellow with ugly black spots.

"You've gotta be kidden' me," I whispered.

"Oh yes!" Noah raced on, "And you have to-"

"Uh-hem." Steve raised his eyebrows and let the silence run long. "As I was saying, you must hide this snake in your house for three days. Then, and only then, can you be a part of my club." You could have heard a pin drop. Was he insane?! Mama would kill me if I hid a snake in the house, but the weight of the world rested on this decision. What was I thinking? I would not do this. First, I hid the fact that I was coming here from Mama; next I want to hide a snake?! Each of the boys' eyes were upon me. I opened my mouth then closed it. Should I have friends or be friendless for the rest of my fourth-grade existence? The answer was clear.

"Deal!" I yelled amidst great cheering, hoping this would not be the greatest mistake of my life.

Looking back now, I wonder at how I managed to bring that snake home. I had crept through the dark like Santa Clause, dragging a brown bag with the rainbow snake inside it. To say the least, the snake was not happy with the arrangement. It took all of my fourth-grade strength to heave the snake into the house. The house was as quiet as a cemetery,

with a wailing hiss coming from the snake. I felt like an intruder, like a thief breaking in with a snake as my accomplice. Here I was, sneaking in and out of the house at night, about to hide a snake under my dear mother's nose. Guilt was like a brick hanging around my neck.

"WhhhooOOSShhh." I jumped out of my skin. My eyes flew around the darkened living room. A clock's red letters screamed 1:21 a.m. "WWhhoooOOOSHh." Ghosts probably attacked little boys who were naughty. I dove under the kitchen table. Curled in a ball, I slowly peeped out. My ghost was just the 'whoosh' from the overhead fan. And there, on the floor, was the bag that held the snake; and the bag was wide open. "No stinkin' way," I whisper screamed, "No stinkin' way I left that bag open on the floor with a forty-inch snake in it when I ran under the kitchen table!" Was it not Mama who told me to never do stupid things I would regret? Was the snake in the bag or slithering around my feet? How had my life become so hidden to her these past two days? We could have been talking things over in the kitchen this morning, while she cooked oatmeal in her big pot- in that instant, I knew what to do. I ran over to the kitchen cabinets and grabbed the biggest cooking pot I could find. Turning the bag upside down, while praying that the snake was in it, I dumped the bag into the pot. I was greeted with a loud hiss. I then grabbed a lid and madly duct-taped the lid onto the pot. "Easy peasy lemon squeezy," I wheezed. "The snake was in the bag all along. It's now in a pot. I duct taped everything. The lid is slightly ajar; so, the snake can breathe. I am alive. I am so close to having friends. Only two more nights of this," I whispered as I trudged upstairs. "Two more nights." I grinned as I shoved the pot holding the snake into my closet. "Two more nights," I said as I got into bed. Why did adults always think they slept badly?

The next day was the day disaster hit. Consequently, my life was also flushed down the drain that day. The day began as most days do, with a few twists and turns. "Hissing is not polite, Jake. Stop it right now," Dad said when I came from my room.

"Where is my big pot?" Mama had called at lunch. I was somewhat disturbed that everyone thought I was hissing and stealing pots but pleased that hiding a forty-inch snake in my bedroom was not assumed. The end came sooner than I expected, though. Dad had left for work after lunch, and I had gone outside to soak up my victory. Almost twelve hours had gone by and the snake was still hidden! Out of the blue, screams rang from the house. I debated whether I had enough time to flee to Georgia. What if Mama or Julia was hurt by the snake? I could not leave them behind! I ran inside. Georgia could wait, since it was probably not the snake anyways. I was wrong. It was.

"Goodness gracious! I just hate snakes! Just hate em!" Mama cried, ringing her hands. "Kids, wait right here. And don't you move an inch, you hear me?" I stared wide eyed as she ran downstairs. The snake's big red eyes gleamed hate. What had I done?

"Wahhhhhh," Julia wailed. Honestly, Julia was too old to be wailing. The snake was only- attacking our gerbil! "MOM!" Julia began screaming. "Fuzzy, the gerbil, is being mutilated!" I broke out into a sweat. I was in big trouble.

"Julia, get behind me, just in case," I said. Just then, Mama came storming up the steps, fishing net poised for attack. Swipe. Before I could utter protest about clubs, Steve, initiations, or friends, Mama had flung the snake out the back door, fishing net and all.

I am sure you all know how the story ends. I was in a mess of trouble and grounded for two months. Since the snake escaped into the Louisianan wild, I had to buy another one

for Steve's older brother. Earning that money was not a walk in the park. I lost my family's trust. Yet, in the end, it was Steve who ensured I would never do anything like that again. Looking back now, I should have known. If I could, I would tell my fourth-grade self that it is better to do right than to do wrong, no matter the outcome. I would tell him that I have two great friends that support me, and neither of them are any of the 'club's boys.' I would tell him that it is better to walk with the wise and become wise, then to be with the "cool kids" and become a fool. Most importantly, I would tell him that if you are keeping something you did hidden, you should not have done it in the first place. Hidden mistakes and hidden snakes always lead to regret. Because when I went to apologize to Steve's brother for hiding and losing the snake, Steve whispered in my ear something I will never forget. He said, "Jake, I made that initiation thing up. We wouldn't have let you be our friend even if you had been able to keep that snake. It was a giant joke. See ya, 'dude." As much as I regret taking that snake, I learned a lot from it. Hopefully, this story will help you too.