

The Snake

Finalist for the 2017 Fiction Prize

I

The story begins with the clumsiest of metaphors: a snake appears in the garden.

Lenore is thinning out the vegetables, squatting carefully between the rows of beans, balancing the weight of her third-trimester belly. She can feel the baby moving inside her, elbowing its way around, making space for itself.

The boys play with sticks and dirt under the maple tree. The city has already worn off them in the ten months they've been on the farm, and they look healthier, calmer, and something else, too: rawer, more sincere. More innocent.

"A worm!" says Kale in a rising note of wonder, at least three syllables long. Lenore looks up, and sees Aaron holding something stripy and very straight by one end. A stick. But then the stick flips around on itself, the head pulling itself up, making a "J," moving towards Aaron's hand. Lenore screams.

"Put it down! Throw it down! It's a snake!"

Aaron turns and at the sight of his mother's face, immediately begins to cry. He flings the thing away and it whips itself back to horizontal and rick-racks away through the grass. Both boys are crying now.

Lenore pulls them towards her.

"It was just a snake. Just a little garter snake. Won't hurt us."

She shuffles them onto the porch and runs quickly up the stairs behind them.

"Just a garter snake, no big deal," she repeats while the boys eat their grilled cheese sandwiches. She stands at the kitchen sink, staring out at the garden, keeping watch. Her trowel and gardening gloves lie where she threw them, between the rows of beans.

After lunch she calls her best friend Katia, in the city.

"A snake! But you hate snakes!"

Katia's outrage is clear across the ninety miles between the city and Lenore's farmhouse. Lenore phoned her because she needs talking down, but this is clearly not going to happen.

"You can't have a snake in your garden! This will ruin everything!"

Lenore can hear city all around Kat, can hear the thump of her breath as she walks and talks, clutching her fat pink phone as she stomps along King Street. She can hear streetcar, and other languages, and arguing, and crowd. Lenore closes her eyes as she sits on the bottom stair, the only place she really gets reception in the kitchen.

"Oh my god. I just got the craziest looks after I said that," Katia whispers into the phone. "Listen, you know who I saw yesterday?" And she rattles off the names of three of the women from their Yoga Moms group; they all went for drinks last night on Queen Street. Katia and Lenore gossip about the other moms for a while: about which one is still breastfeeding, about who can't control their son, about who thinks Disney stuff is okay. "Can you believe I'm still waiting for a streetcar? I'm going to be so late for the dentist," Katia complains, at the end of a long diatribe about finding daycare, and Lenore, ninety miles away in the farmhouse kitchen, smiles in relief. Lunch dishes glitter in the dishrack, stalks of rhubarb wait in the sink for tonight's pie, and the boys sit at the table, drawing and murmuring to one another. Paper garlands hang above the cold woodstove, and under the window, Lenore's sewing basket is full of fabric ready to be made into clothes for the new baby. Lenore sips her tea and thinks, *I have all afternoon. I have all day. I have—* and her heart swells with the abundance of their life here.

A year ago, she would have been eating lunch with Katia in the food court, then rushing back to the office, then rushing to the daycare, then rushing home. A year ago, she would have been the one waiting for the crowded streetcar, throwing dirty looks at the woman having the loud conversation. A year ago, before they moved out to the farm, just before Aaron was supposed to start kindergarten, right after Kale's second birthday.

They had talked about it for years: it had started with conversations about vaccinations, and antibiotics, and organic baby food. It grew in a community of like-minded parents who felted their own diaper bags and met at the farmers' market every Thursday to bake pizza communally. It elaborated over dinner parties where other parents shared stories of visiting their friends who lived in a beautiful farmhouse in Picton or Fergus, and it solidified over photos on Facebook of prayer flags framing old Ontario porches, baskets of strawberries, happy, longhaired children.

Neither Lenore nor Jim was from the country, but they weren't from Toronto either, and so the city had always just seemed like a phase. When Lenore's contract ended and Jim was offered a severance package from his P.R. job, it only made sense to sell their house, whose value had skyrocketed in the three years they had lived there, even though they'd barely made a dent in the mortgage, and god knows they hadn't

renovated anything. Jim could work freelance, they would homeschool the boys, and they could live a better life, the life they really wanted.

It was surprisingly easy to dismantle their Toronto life, to take themselves off the hopeless waiting lists for toddler daycare and school-age daycare and French Immersion and swimming lessons. "Delete reservation," Lenore punched on the websites late at night, as packing boxes surrounded her and her brand-new sewing machine waited in its box. The last daycare check went through, the last paycheck went through, they drove north in their new used Volvo station wagon, and they moved themselves into the old house in the valley almost before they'd had time to question what a mad and delightful idea it was.

"Are we really doing this?" Jim said to Lenore, grinning like an idiot, as they drove down the lane Labour Day weekend. The sun was setting and the line of pines to the west of their property was blackly wet against the sunset, but the windows of the little house were bathed in gold.

"I can't believe our luck," said Jim, and Lenore, holding a sleeping Kale in her arms, started to giggle with love and good fortune.

And now Katia is in the city, and Lenore is in her beautiful farmhouse kitchen, basking in the June afternoon, until Katia brings up the snake again and everything is ruined.

"Lenore, you just need to befriend the snake, okay? Relish the snake, enjoy the snake. Don't stay inside avoiding it!"

But after Lenore and Katia make plans for a visit in July, Lenore puts the boys down for their nap, takes out her yoga mat and stretches it out in front of the woodstove. She is doing a modified practice these days, but she loves the feel of her strange body, the globe of her belly resting against her leg in pigeon pose. She starts seated and tries to clear her mind. Inhale strength, exhale anger. Inhale peace, exhale fear. Lenore quiets her mind and makes herself happy, but then, unbidden, the image of the snake returns, swinging around towards Aaron's wrist. The snake arching as Aaron drops it to the ground. The snake ruining the peace of the lawn, disrupting the grass. Ruining the garden.

When the boys wake up, they want to go outside, but Lenore sets them up with paper and paint at the kitchen table while she chops onions for the soup.

"Mama has to cook, sweetie. Paint me a beautiful picture, instead. Paint a picture for the baby."

Once the soup is simmering, Kale asks again: "Now, Mama?" Lenore looks at the clock—5:05. Jim won't be home for at least twenty minutes. She holds out a hand to Kale.

"I need you to help me make biscuits! Wash your hands and put on an apron."

5:10—this pre-dinner time was something they never had in the city. They were always rushing from work to daycare to home at this hour.

When Aaron was two and a half, he would have been strapped into the jogging stroller, holding the bag of pre-washed spinach Lenore had picked up at the supermarket by the daycare, her computer bag heavy in the stroller's storage compartment. But Kale at two and a half stands barefoot on a kitchen stool, his darling face covered in flour, his pudgy hands helping to make the biscuits.

"What did you do this afternoon?" Jim asks the boys as they sit at the table on the porch, eating the delicious soup.

"We had a snake!" says Kale, "A nasty, nasty snake."

"Don't say that," says Jim. "Snakes are beautiful; they are beautiful living creatures."

"It was stripy," says Aaron.

"It won't hurt you," says Jim, methodically chewing the fresh-baked bread. They are trying a thing where you chew each bite forty times.

But it will ruin everything, Lenore is about to say, but Kale knocks over his juice, and anyway she feels embarrassed. It's a dumb problem. A city-girl problem. She knew there would be snakes, right?

(Not snakes, she reminds herself. One snake. A lone snake.)

"It'll be miles away by now," says Jim and smiles at Lenore.

(Why? wonders Lenore. Where would he go?)

After dinner Jim gathers the boys into the hammock with him to read *Charlotte's Web*, but Lenore sits on the top step to watch the sunset. Her gaze rolls tentatively across the lawn, knowing she cannot see the snake from here, but watchful nevertheless.

If she can just make the property inhospitable to the snake, perhaps he will leave. She looks around: rock pile, wood pile, stone wall, all potential refuges. A rock pile seems like an idiotic thing to have if you don't want snakes hanging around your place. But how do you get rid of a rock pile? You can't just throw rocks out. No matter what do, you still have a pile of rocks. Snake paradise.

Lenore feels overwhelmed by it all: the rocks, the weeds, the vegetables. There is so much weeding, and watering, and what if an animal eats everything anyway? What if they have to buy most of their vegetables again this year? What if Jim's contract with the county doesn't get renewed and he can't find other work? What if the baby isn't healthy? What if they need a proper hospital, a city hospital? As the sun drops and the fields before her cool, worries eddy around her like trash blowing about on the subway stairs. What if they have made a terrible mistake?

A terrible mistake, a terrible mistake. The words slither into her mind, all-knowing. The peace of the garden evaporates. The boys snuggled up in the hammock seem foolhardy in the face of this awful doubt: why had they moved out here? How would they ever get back to the city? They must have been crazy, quitting their jobs and disentangling themselves

from city life; now if they moved back, they would have to find a new apartment, and it would have to be close to a good school, and a good day care, and they would both need jobs but not until they had daycare. And anyway, Lenore has thrown out most of her Toronto work clothes; she couldn't go back to work in all these tunics and leggings and hand-knit things. This is their life; there is no way back into the city. Not now, not with the kids. Not without their jobs. Not without daycare.

The snake has ruined everything. Lenore assumes that metaphors are meant to protect you, to keep you at arm's length from danger. They are supposed to be *meta*, for God's sake. But this snake is literally (*literally*) threatening her paradise. What's a meta for, if not to give you a little distance from reality?

Be our friend, she says to the garter snake, wherever he's lurking. *Protect us from—from whatever.*

♦ ♦ ♦

The next day, the snake answers. Lenore is sitting on the top step of the porch shelling peas, the bowl one step down, her legs open around her big belly. She doesn't see him arrive, she just hears the voice:

"I can't protect you, lady."

Lenore looks around and there he is, right next to her on the porch steps, curled up like a cute little rope. The bowl of peas flies down the steps, but Lenore can't get up.

"Here's the thing," continues the snake. "You asked me to protect you, but I can't really do that. It's not really my line of work. Not really my... bailiwick." (Lenore will learn later that the snake avoids words like "speciality" because he is self-conscious of his hiss. Or, as he would say, mortified about his accent.) "Not really my thing."

Lenore says, because she feels he expects it, "What is your thing?"

"I'm a messenger, obviously. I bring messages."

Again Lenore knows it would be rude not to ask, "Like what?"

"You kind of have to figure it out for yourssself," says the snake, and blushes under his stripes at the sibilation.

"You're not much of a messenger, then, are you? Just sort of a warning that there will be a message?"

The snake stares at her, blinks once.

"You're not a messenger, you're an omen!"

"Your words, not mine," says the snake.

♦ ♦ ♦

That night, Lenore lies in bed sleepless. The clock says 2:15. Jim ebbs heavily next to her, the room close and silent. The night is hot for

June, more like July, and Lenore's belly prevents her from finding a comfortable position. She has not told Jim that the snake has spoken to her. Obviously.

And then, just as a cool breeze lifts through the window and she finally feels her body sink into sleep, a sound. Something. A knock on the door? The room lies silently around her and Jim, but Lenore can feel the echo of the sound.

She stills her body, strains to hear. She could get up and go to the window five feet away, but the blind is furled high to allow the breeze into their room, and she imagines a figure in the driveway, imagines herself clearly visible at the window. But if she pretends she heard nothing, will the knock come again?

Lenore lies in bed like a mouse cornered, waiting for the knock that she dreads, and eventually falls asleep before the footsteps do or don't move away, along the length of the driveway and out to the road, back towards town.

II

The next day, Jim is working around the farm, cleaning up the shed and doing some planting, so Lenore packs the kids into the car and drives into town. They run a few errands and then make it to the library for Thursday Music Time. While the children sit on the leg-scratchy rug and sing about jolly fishermen and a moose with a front tooth loose, Lenore smiles at the other mothers. She is circling around a few women she's met since they moved, other homesteaders recently arrived from the city, women she can talk canning and indie bands with: a woman with five kids who moved out here several years ago; the former actor who is now a potter and has a boy about Kale's age; the woman who teaches yoga in the church basement. These outsider women bump into each other at the farmer's market and they talk about getting the kids together for playdates, but they are all so busy with home schooling and bee-keeping and refinishing furniture that these interactions are rarer than Lenore would like. The woman with five kids is having a Summer Solstice party next week, though, and Lenore is really looking forward to that.

After Music Time, Lenore sits in an armchair by a sunny window while the kids pick out books. With each book, Kale asks if he can take it out, and is delighted when Lenore says yes, the munificence of the library all hers in her little boy's eyes.

"This one, too, Mama?"

"Of course my love," laughs Lenore, and leans back into the boxy chair. She is exhausted from lying awake last night, but the sunlight and the joys of the library are erasing her worries about the imaginary

knock on the door, about the snake. Obviously no one had been there. Obviously the snake hadn't spoken to her. She had imagined the whole thing. Lenore watches Kale stockpiling Eric Carle books, while Aaron sits cross-legged in the dinosaur section, looking for books for a homeschool project. Lenore closes her eyes. At home, the laundry is drying on the line, Jim is planting new fruit trees, and this afternoon he has promised to take the boys to the town beach. Craft supplies from the general store sit in Lenore's bag, ready for the boys to make a solstice banner.

It's everything she wanted. It's going to be okay.

At home, something is different. Lenore sees it from the road, before she has to turn down the long driveway. As she comes over the crest of the hill, there is a view of their little house in the valley below, and although she should be watching the road, Lenore always pauses for a moment here and looks to the left, searches for the flash of blue-gray tin roof among the trees.

But today, she knows it even from up here: something is different. Something just-missed, a flicker at the corner of the frame. She turns down their driveway and as she nears the house she sees two of the press-back armchairs from the kitchen pulled out on the grass by the pond. Who would put chairs there? No one is sitting in them; they wait with an odd festivity. As the boys bound up the porch stairs, their canvas bag full of the crinkle of plastic-sheathed library books, Lenore bends at the knees to get the groceries out of the trunk and waddles up the stairs after them.

Jim is sitting on the kitchen counter. It is somewhere he and Lenore have never sat before, but now he perches next to the sink, his wool-socked feet bumping against the cupboard door. Across from him, at the kitchen table, is his brother Mark, with Kale on one knee, his arm around Aaron. The boys look up at Lenore as if it's Christmas.

"It's our uncle!" Aaron says, although the boys have never met him before. As if Lenore doesn't know who he is.

Lenore looks at Mark, at the ruined reflection of Jim's face in his, like a cautionary tale. It's been three years at least.

"Lenore!" he says and holds out his arms, as if big pregnant Lenore is supposed to come and sit on his lap, too. "You look beautiful. This place is beautiful."

He can't stay, thinks Lenore.

Mark has always meant trouble; drinking, then too much drinking, affairs even when he was living with someone, then cocaine, then a spell living in his car, a move out west, then silence. Heroin, the last Jim heard, but that was a few years ago. When Lenore first met the brothers they had been close, but as Mark got wilder Jim kept his distance, especially after Aaron was born. "Can we have him in our home? Can we trust him?" said Lenore, and Jim met his brother on the front porch instead, sent him on his way with a "loan." "You're welcome," Lenore thought,

watching them from the bedroom window with Aaron held tight to her, watching Mark count out the bills as he walked up the middle of the street, like he was in a frontier town, not downtown Toronto.

Also, Lenore had to be honest about this: it was Mark she liked first. When she moved to Toronto from Chicago after college she met Mark at her first job, at the coffee shop in Kensington, and it was Mark who she instantly recognized as her type: rangy, sarcastic, with an accent she didn't realize for at least a week was Canadian. "That Scottish guy, or Irish," she said to her coworkers, and they looked at her funny and cracked up when they realized she meant Mark.

"Mark! He'd kill you! He's from Nova Scotia."

But it never amounted to anything, and within a month Mark had introduced her to Jim. By then Mark was dating an eighteen-year-old and doing coke every weekend, and Jim, who was less sarcastic but equally handsome, kissed Lenore one night on the traffic island in the middle of Spadina Avenue, and Lenore noticed how much more fun and nice he was than his spiky brother. And then Mark disappeared for a few years, and the next time Lenore saw him he was so wrecked from drugs and time on the street that she looked at her grown-up, substantial now-husband and his weedy brother and thought, *What was I ever thinking?*

"That was delicious," says Mark, who it turns out is now called Marcus, leaning back from the plate of brown rice salad he's barely touched. "I don't eat that much anymore," he says. "You have to be so careful what you put in your body," explains the ex-heroin addict to his vegetarian brother, and as they talk about Mark's philosophies of grains and fats, Lenore watches Jim and sees how much he has missed his brother.

As the brothers sit over tea (no beer for Mark—sorry, Marcus—now), Lenore goes out to the garden for some mint to throw on the strawberries she bought at the farmer's market—they would have their own strawberries next year—and tries to figure out how Mark/Marcus has changed. He looks better, healthier certainly, although he has also aged a great deal, but he doesn't look older, as such. He just looks—olden. Like he's from the olden days. From days of yore.

"Yore," says Lenore, trying the absurd word out on her tongue. "Yore."

"My what?" says the snake, peeking out between the trees of mint. Lenore jumps, but she is surprised to find that she's glad to see him.

"Who's the prophet?" asks the snake, and Lenore laughs, because that is exactly what Marcus looks like: full of solemnity, full of a performative (as Katia would say) importance and piousness. He is dressed in ridiculously unfashionable clothes: corduroy pants he must have had to search through an entire Goodwill for, a collarless shirt that is just a bit too flowy. He walks about with his head bowed and slightly cocked to one side, in a show of humility.

"He walks," Lenore tells the snake, crouching down close to the mint so that it looks like she is weeding, "like he is being followed. Like he has followers, like people are waiting to hear what he has to say."

The snake nods. "I know the type."

"But that's the thing," says Lenore. "It's like he's arrived to help us, or to tell us something. Like he thinks we asked him to come here. Like we want his advice."

"Well, do you?" asks the snake.

"No. No." But all through dinner, Jim had nodded as Marcus explained things about rotational grazing, and solar panels, and eggs. When she came outside they were drawing up plans for a goat-shelter or something; Marcus had built one just like it in the Yukon. "How long were you in the Yukon?" asked Lenore, but no one answered her.

"Jim hasn't talked to him in years, but now he's hanging on his every word. It's weird."

"Well, beware of false prophets," says the snake. "I'm just ssssayin'." He blushes a bit at the sound, before disappearing back into the mint.

♦ ♦ ♦

"How long can you stay?" asks Jim—*Can?* thinks Lenore—and Marcus says he has to move on but the little boys plead with him.

"It's the solstice festival this weekend! You have to stay for the solstice festival! We're going to a party, and there will be lanterns, and a maypole, and we'll stay up until it gets DARK!" says Aaron.

Marcus smiles and winks at Lenore.

"All right then."

III

It's the middle of July, and Marcus is still here. His dark blue pickup with the Yukon plates slides in next to the Volvo station wagon under the willow, and his tent sits around the back of the house on the patch of lawn where Lenore and the boys were going to make a butterfly garden. Every morning while she makes breakfast, Lenore watches him through the kitchen window as he does his yoga practice. His back is to her so he can face east, to the sun now well-risen over the neighbour's fields, but she thinks he knows she is watching, anyway. Later, when the family is sitting around the table, Lenore watches him come up onto the porch, straight-backed and ballerina-footed, and pause for a moment at the screen door until the boys look up at him and call out "Uncle Marcus!" and he sits down to benevolently eat some porridge with them. Lenore gets up to serve another bowl.

But if she's honest, it's a good thing he's here. It turns out Jim and Lenore don't know as much as they thought about farming, but Marcus does, and he jumpstarts their plans to have chickens: on the July long weekend he and Jim build a coop, and the next week Marcus arrives one morning with three hens. Marcus is even trying to persuade them to get a goat.

The snake is more skeptical ("doubtful" is the word he uses) about the farm. "Farms come, farms go," he says as he watches Lenore picking beans. "Over there—" He waggles his head to point out where their property meets the road. "—there used to be an orchard."

"Well, there still is," says Lenore, although there are only three or four apple trees.

"You call that an orchard? Well, anyway," says the snake, "the family that built this farm planted those trees, and built your house, and removed all the rocks from the field to make the barn and the wall."

"I know," says Lenore.

"And now look at the place."

"But we're farming it," says Lenore. "We're continuing it."

"Yeah, great," says the snake. "You're farming it. Marvellous."

But Lenore can't be mad. She talks to the snake nearly every day now, sometimes more. When she is weeding (and she does a lot of weeding), he'll weave in and out of the rows of tomato plants. Or he'll be curled decoratively around the tap of the rain barrel when she refills the watering can. He doesn't come into the house (the floor is too planky, he explains) but he often waits for her by the door, his little stripy head peeking out from between the rocks of the foundation.

"Nice day," he'll say, hopefully, and Lenore wonders who he talked to before she got here.

It's weird that she's not afraid of the snake anymore. But every pregnancy has brought its idiosyncrasies; with Aaron she was haunted every night by dreams of all the people she had known growing up, and with Kale she couldn't stop baking. Is this another haunting? Lenore thinks that no, the snake is too real and also too banal to be anything less than literal.

And over the summer, things progress: the hens begin to lay, the goat arrives, plans for a hoop house are spread across the dining room table after dinner. The original plan was for Jim to work until the farm could support them, but Marcus claims that won't take long. In fact, he and Jim have started working three days a week for a dairy farmer in the next town. Jim hardly does any of his contract work anymore: he's too tired when he gets home. Lenore says she can start back on some freelance work, in the fall after the baby is born, if the boys start school.

Marcus answers before Jim can.

"No need," he says. "Everything we need is here. This can sustain us."

"We?" says the snake, "Us?" when Lenore tells him.



Lenore is about to start canning beans one morning when Katia calls. She immediately launches into a complicated story about a woman they both know and dislike which has Lenore in hysterics. She turns off the burner under the pot full of rattling jars and sits at the kitchen table.

"Stop! I can't laugh that hard! I'm so pregnant!" The boys tug at her shirt, ask if they still have to help if she's going to talk all day on the phone, and Lenore waves them outside.

"Still pregnant, eh?" asks Katia, and Lenore laughs again. "Did your snake ever come back? How are things on the farm?"

"Oh, you know, Little House on the Prairie," she jokes, but she leaves out the snake. She tells Katia about Mark/Marcus instead. Katia has never met him, but she's heard Lenore complain about him for years, and Lenore imagines all sorts of things into the pause when she tells her he has moved in.

"For good?"

Lenore looks out the kitchen window. Marcus is in the yard next to the shed. His shirt is off and he is chopping wood. Jim's shirt is off, too, but it takes Lenore a moment to realize it is him. His back is completely different, now.

"The men are so manly, these days," she says, and Katia laughs and says, "Oh dear," and then she has to go into a meeting. They don't talk about their plans for a visit this time.



A funny thing: Jim has changed his name to James. He never mentioned it to Lenore, never warned her he would do it. She only found out because when they were in town one weekend, the man at the hardware store said, "Good morning, James, how are those chickens behaving for you," and Lenore looked at her husband and saw him nod importantly and say, "Not too bad, Ed, not too bad." She was going to tease him about it, laughingly call him "James" herself, but then at the health food store they ran into a woman Lenore knew from the music class at the library, and before she could introduce them Jim held out his hand to the woman and said, "I'm James" and then looked away, bored, while the two women talked about Lenore's pregnancy.

And then she couldn't say anything, and instead grew used to hearing him become this other man, this James when they were in town. People she'd just met would say, "It's so cute that you call him Jim. He sounds like a whole different person when you call him that—not James at all!"

♦ ♦ ♦

All of a sudden, they are going to build a barn.

"Before the baby comes?" asks Lenore and Marcus walks over to her. He places both hands on her belly.

"This. This is your miracle. These wonderful children, this wonderful new life." Marcus smiles at the boys, as if he invented them. "You must allow us our miracle. Men can make miracles, too."

Lenore removes his hands from her belly, but Marcus continues to gaze at her benevolently.

Lenore dekes to the side and addresses Jim/James again.

"Before the baby?" she asks, and James nods yes.

♦ ♦ ♦

Lenore is sitting on the porch darning socks one evening after dinner, watching Jim/James and Mark/Marcus as they pace around the field across from the house, staking out where the barn will go. They measure, and survey, and now they stand importantly, talking.

Their chests are like furnaces, stately expanses that puff out, require suspenders. Lenore looks at James. Where did he find those pants? She doesn't understand it, they weren't buying new clothes out here; it was one of the things they had decided on before they moved. She's darning socks, for heaven's sake. They weren't new pants, not by any description. They were old pants, but not old pants she had ever seen before.

I am married to an old man, thinks Lenore. An old man with high pants and a terrible beard, and I am darning socks. When did I learn how to darn socks?

"You have to watch these things," says the snake, appearing out of nowhere.

Hooray! Lenore would ruffle his hair, if he had hair. What would she do without the snake these days? Everyone else around here seems to have lost their sense of humor; dinner has become a pious affair of farm talk and admonitions to the boys. Maybe it's that the boys are getting to an age when they really need to have some manners, but Jim (James!) and Mark (Marcus!) seem to be newly proper at meal times. Earlier tonight Aaron was made to sit on the stairs, just because he started singing "On Top of Spaghetti" in a bad Italian accent.

"But we were having spaghetti," Lenore explains to the snake.

"You said butt," says Snake, without missing a beat, and the two of them have a good laugh there, over the mending and the darning.

♦ ♦ ♦

The day of the barn-raising, Lenore wakes at six and goes straight to the curtain-less window, as she always does, to catch the field, the woods, the hill, to check that it is all still there: her dream. This morning she pulls on a sundress first; it is too late in August, and she is too pregnant, for pyjamas.

There is no one in the garden to see her, but it is spoiled all the same: pickup trucks, a station wagon, and a van litter the grass across the drive from the house. The vehicles are lined up, orderly, but they are ratty and old. Stacks of lumber block the path to the pond; the low flat triangles of the roof trusses stand in a neat pile. Past the pond is the ugly flat rectangle of gravel James and Marcus have been working on all week, posts encircling it, reaching up like the ruin of some temple.

The people are all in the kitchen, a silent massing around the old table. They hold hands, their heads lowered: men and women Lenore has never seen before, a dozen children. Aaron, Kale, James. Marcus. Several people look up as Lenore calls out "Good morning?" but no one speaks.

There is an urn of coffee, like something from a church basement, but Lenore, angry like a hungover teenager, ignores it and clomps over to the sink. She fills the kettle with cold water, spoons good coffee into the French press drying on the rack. Two of the women watch her, exchange glances. "Amen!" says a tall man, and the circle breaks up, and the kitchen is full of conversation again as people move outside. A few of the women stay in the kitchen, organizing and bossing around the children, who bring in bags of food from the porch: cabbages, bulk bags of macaroni, giant bricks of orange cheese. One woman starts chopping cabbage; another fills an enormous pot with water and hefts it onto the stove. The kettle whistles and Lenore pours the boiling water over the coffee, pushes down the press so quickly that it burns her hand, and takes her coffee out to the porch.

Her big wicker chair has been pushed right up to the wall, and Lenore has to clamber over a pile of diaper bags and picnic baskets to get to it. She settles in to watch these strangers, cradling her coffee. Something doesn't add up: four unfamiliar vehicles are parked on the grass, but there must be thirty strangers running around the property.

The women are dressed in long skirts and shapeless T-shirts, many of them with kerchiefs or more elaborate head coverings. They are littered with children: scrawny infants and fat older babies in slings, toddlers sucking dirty thumbs, clinging like fleas to the women's dingy skirts. Older children play close by, while the women shoot terse commands: "Sharing and caring, Nathaniel! Sharing and caring, Jedediah!" Three women sit on the edge of the verandah, braiding the hair of three older girls who stand barefoot on the grass.

Then Lenore sees Aaron and Kale, running in a pointless circle with the other boys. Kale pushes his brother, and one of the strange women glides over to him and grabs him by the wrist, lurching him away from the group. The woman raises one hand, and Lenore realizes almost too late that she is about to spank him.

"Hey! No!" Lenore yells, hobbling over to collect Kale, and the woman lowers her hand, looking at Lenore with disdain.

"Kale! You have to be kind to your brother," Lenore says, tottering into a squat so she can look him in the eye. Kale, who has never been spanked, doesn't realize what almost happened and squirms out of Lenore's hug, back to join the boys.



All day, Lenore looks for the snake, but he is nowhere. Tucked safely into a crack in the foundation, no doubt, with one double-blinking eye on the proceedings. Lenore would love to know what he makes of all this.

But Lenore is busy. There are so many children, and someone always needs water, or a diaper change, or to be kept away from the chickens. She tries to help out in the kitchen, but it is so hot in there. She can't imagine why anyone would want a hot lunch on a day like this, but at noon she helps the older children set up the folding tables by the house, watches as they come out of her shed with crates and planks to make benches. Lenore didn't even know they had crates in there. At lunch, Marcus sits at the head of the table, the men and older boys filling the benches on either side.

"Another miracle!" he says as the women carry out the trays of macaroni and cheese, the industrial-sized bowls of coleslaw.

And it is almost miraculous, how the barn is materialising. The posts are now laddered with two-by-fours, and after lunch the men lift the trusses up to the roof. All afternoon they work to install the roof, and by evening (more macaroni and cheese, corn, potatoes) the barn has a roof, a gravel floor, and the framework of the walls. Lenore wanders over to the structure. Without the walls, it is beautiful, the low sun angling in to pool on the gravel. Lenore wishes they could keep it like this, maybe use it as a bandstand.

Marcus crosses the floor of crushed gravel silently, and is suddenly standing next to her, his hands in some kind of prayer position. He opens them wide, reaching to the roof.

"The miracles of men!" He smiles nastily at Lenore, and strides back over to the table.

"Geez," exhales Lenore when he's out of earshot, and the snake appears for the first time all day. His head pops out from behind the nearest post.

"Ten thousand years of patriarchy can't be wrong!" he teases, but slithers off before Lenore can throw a rock at him.

IV

Lenore visits the doctor. Fourteen weeks ago, she and James decided not to find out the baby's sex, but now it's August and things have changed. She asks the doctor if he can still tell her, and he smiles at her indulgently, like she's some sort of a fool. He writes the answer down on a piece of paper, and Lenore reaches her hand out for it, but he says, "Wait—you'll want to share this with your husband." He folds the piece of paper once, then again, smiling coyly at Lenore as he places it in an envelope, his eyes twinkling as he licks and seals it closed, his tongue flattened out like a dog's.

"No peeking!" he singsongs. "Not till hubby gets home!"

Lenore leaves the car in the clinic parking lot and crosses the street to the café that doubles as the bus station. There is a fancier café around the corner, but Lenore likes this one: the thickness of the coffee cups, the red linoleum, the bang of the screen door. And they have butter tarts. She sits at a booth by the window and sips her coffee, thick with cream. Outside, a Penetang-Midland bus pulls up and a skinny teenager jumps off to steal a smoke. People in the café gather their bags and make their way out the door, climbing up the stairs of the bus going to the city.

Lenore licks the butter tart goo off her fingers and picks up the envelope sitting on the table. She gets tart filling all over the envelope. She unwraps the paper and reads.

It's a girl!!!

And after the three exclamation marks, a smiley face.



After dinner, Lenore sits at the table, the bolus of paper sitting like a stone in her pocket. A daughter. She looks at the boys, building a city of blocks. James and Marcus sit on the low futon-couch by the unlit woodstove, their feet looking important and ludicrous in their work socks. They talk about seeds, and yields, and things of vital importance.

A daughter.

"Excuse me," says Lenore and hefts herself up from the wooden chair and waddles into the bathroom. The snake is at the window, twirling though the crank. Lenore takes the piece of paper out of her pocket, unfolds it so that she can read the words and see the smiley face again. Then she rolls it up once more, even tighter this time, and holds her hand out to the snake.

"Here," she says, and the snake's tongue comes out—*flicka*—and grabs the paper and it is gone.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sometimes, when Lenore can't sleep, she plays a game she calls Happy. She has played this game since she was in college, maybe even earlier, but she has never told anyone about it, not even James.

In the game, every negative thing becomes a positive, every worry a boon. In Happy, Lenore pictures herself affluent, oblivious, clean. In Happy, she is a housewife in some mythical suburb in the American South; she has the kind of home that is profiled in unambitious design magazines. She has four or five beautiful children, a husband who is a hedge fund manager. Her hair is straight and her clothes are all from J. Crew. They have seasonal wreaths for the front door: Christmas! Harvest! Easter! Summer! Back to School! The wreaths wait in special plastic tubs in the garage until they are needed.

This woman does not agonize over peak petroleum; she does not torture herself schlepping gritty vegetables and children around in a plywood box attached to her bicycle, but sails through her days in a fat black SUV. She buys diapers and wipes and she throws them straight into the garbage. She buys cheap new clothes from the mall and bleaches them every time she washes them. She doesn't worry about big agriculture, or big pharma, or net neutrality. She loves monopolies. She loves success. (Who wouldn't?)

Progress! Shouts the woman as she applauds the new pipeline running across the prairies. *Tradition!* Anthems the woman as she embraces her clean-shaven husband beneath the flag on their front porch. Like some stone frieze on a 1930s post office, she gazes forward and back, with no misgivings.

So happy. So easy. Lenore wonders as she lies on the futon in the drafty, century-old farmhouse, why she makes everything so difficult for herself, why every day must have such a to-do list of dissatisfaction and reinvention.

Lenore dreams this beautiful treason and falls into sleep.

♦ ♦ ♦

When it comes, it comes with a thunderstorm.

All day it looms. The air thickens, electricity gathering. Lenore loves the suspense before a storm: it reminds her of a teenaged Friday afternoon, waiting for a party. It reminds her of being at the airport, waiting for a plane.

"What's a plane?" asks the snake. "What's an airport?" But those things seem so far away from Lenore's current life that she can't explain them.

"Something to do with...with..."

But the snake is skittish with the approaching storm and has slithered under the wide leaves of the pumpkin vine.

Flight, she thinks at last. *That's the word.*

Lenore runs out to get the laundry before the rain comes. The sheets snap furiously in the wind, and she must obey them, wait for them to acquiesce before she can reach up and unpeg them, throw them into the basket. The wind is too high, she'll fold them inside.

But she doesn't go inside. She leaves the basket on the back steps and stands looking at the sky, hands in the small of her back, smelling the ozone. Her daughter kicks joyously inside her. Lenore picks up a metal bucket and walks out to the vegetable garden. She should get the tomatoes in before the storm comes: if it's a rough one, they'll bruise and fall and that'll be a huge waste.

The snake slithers in and out of the tomato plants as she chooses and plucks, placing them carefully into the pail.

"Hiss, hiss," says the snake.

The sky collects, the light gathers and brightens and darkens all at once.

Lenore watches from the vegetable garden as the clouds roil and part, and a giant awesome hand appears in the sky, the index finger pointed down at the small farmhouse ninety miles out of the city. The giant index finger points right at her, Lenore, standing there in her sprigged cotton dress, her enormous belly pulling the hem up in front, stretching the pattern of roses. The bucket of tomatoes lies forgotten on the ground. The giant voice cracks the air, fills Lenore from inside her head. It is terrifying and huge and Lenore listens.

"Get out," says the voice. "Get. Out. Now. Scram."

Lenore listens.

"I'm only telling you once," says the voice, and then the arm retracts into the clouds and the clouds settle down and the air is empty and cold and the rain starts to fan across the fields, heading for the farmhouse.

Lenore goes inside, as quickly as her belly will allow, pulls a backpack out of the cedar chest, and fills it with just what she will need. She walks out of the farmhouse without anyone noticing and hugs the line of trees down the drive to the county road. She is less afraid of lightning than of someone seeing her. Coming after her, bringing her back. No.

Lenore hitches a lift on the county road, an elderly woman who doesn't pick up hitchhikers but had to stop for the pregnant woman in the rain. She drives her into town, where Lenore buys a coffee, and a bus ticket back into the city.