



Snakes by Jacquie Gulliver

Sometime in my last couple of years at school, I was thrown from a horse out riding on the farm belonging to friends of my parents.

The follow day Dad took me for a routine tetanus shot to which I had an anaphylactic reaction. I came round to Dad's worried face and the doctor explaining that I was allergic to horse serum. 'Better not get bitten by a snake, my girl!' he said. 'They also use horse serum to make the antivenin.

This was alarming. A Fitzsimon's Complete Snake Bite Outfit went everywhere with us. 'Just be careful and don't think about it,' advised Dad. But from that day forth, it seemed venomous snakes rained upon me.

As a young woman I was paddling up a shallow stream in Malawi when a boomslang fell out of a tree, landed in front of me and sailed past on the current. As a young mother a sea snake shot past me when I was snorkelling on a coral reef off the Mozambique coast. On land a coiling green mamba so entranced my two-year-old daughter that I caused it to be murdered.

Then when I went to live on a farm in Zimbabwe. A black mamba, one of the most venomous snakes, lived in the culvert on the hairpin bend between the house and the staff quarters. One morning it reared up and struck at the, fortunately closed, window of my Renault 4.

I was really shaken but decided that I could spend the rest of my life worrying about being allergic to antivenin and afraid of being bitten or I could change my attitude. Attitudes to snakes were also changing. We no longer carried Snake Bite Outfits — very few snakes are venomous. Maybe that green mamba that had so fascinated my baby daughter had been a harmless Natal Green Snake?

The next time the birds alerted me to a cobra in a tree in the garden I told the gardeners to leave it alone. I stood and watched as an enormous python rippled its way across a newly ploughed land straight towards me. By the time I saw the biggest Egyptian cobra I had ever seen, playing dead by the side of the road, I was more interested than terrified. Until I remembered I was in an open safari vehicle...

This laid-back approach worked well until the black mamba came back. I would not believe this story if it had not happened to me:

Just before going to bed one hot evening on the farm I went out, naked, onto the balcony. I shone a powerful spotlight down to see what the dogs were barking at. They were keeping their distance from a large snake ranging, with incredible speed, the entire length and breadth of the top lawn. About nine feet long, the top third of its body was high up off the ground and it was moving so fast that I struggled to keep it in the beam. With us alerted the dogs vanished.

'It's a mamba.' I called softly to David, my husband.

The snake flew to the sound of my voice and shot straight up nearly eighteen feet of pillar and

concrete. It was stopped only by a deep, decorative parapet, which jutted out at least a foot, three feet below me. An impossible amount of its body hung in the air as it tried to clear this ledge while I shone the light straight down its black gullet.

It was doing the unthinkable, and it was doing it just below me.

'I'll get a gun!' said David. 'Keep it in the light it.' He disappeared to find gunroom keys leaving me feeling very naked.

I was so terrified that in that moment I believed every apocryphal story I had ever heard about black mambas. I knew it would fly at me, if I took my eyes off it for a second.

It lunged with such furious force that it fell and landed, a jumbled heap of looped muscle, writhing on the veranda steps below. But this was merely a recoil for its next launch, straight back up the pillar. Three times it did this. Its hellish black mouth agape, hell bent on attacking me.

My husband did not know about guns and returned with a .22 rifle with a telescopic sight. There is something uninspiring about a naked man arriving too late, with the wrong weapon. But I'm glad now that we did not shoot it.

The combination of a bright light, barking dogs and human voices were undoubtedly what had made it so aggressive. But why had it come in the first place? I worked it out over a long and sleepless night.

Our house was being used as a film location and as part of the tidying up I had asked Katikiti, the farm mechanic, to fix all the taps and any of the sixty-odd irrigation points in the garden that were leaking. The film people were also repainting the swimming pool. So I had cut off the snake's entire water supply, in October, the hottest and driest time of the year.

David left at first light, but I was too scared to go outside alone, so waited for the gardeners to arrive. After a detailed and dramatic rendition of what had happened I explained my theory. 'That snake was driven mad with thirst because I asked Katikiti to fix all the taps. And the swimming pool is empty!'

I led them outside the security fence to an unused waterpoint below the garden. I asked them to put an old millstone under the tap, which I filled, leaving the tap on a slow drip. 'Right gentlemen,' I said, when we had finished. 'This is the new drinking place for snakes and small animals. Anyone who switches that tap off is dead.'

As for those apocryphal stories about black mambas, I believe every one of them. They can stand on their tails, fly over long grass at the speed of a galloping horse and make themselves into a wheel, to spin down hills to launch themselves at people.

We'll Meet Again by Veronica Sims

'And about time too', I think, as I soar above the bed and realise at last, I am dead. It has been a long three months since that fall I had in the bathroom. I know Geraldine and Alice tried their best to sort me out; though I kept trying to tell them that was not what I wanted. I love my daughters, my grandchildren and even the great grandchildren (though recently I must admit to sometimes getting into a bit of a muddle over which one is which), but I've known for a while I was superfluous to life. Too weak to do anything for them, while they and the professional carers, had to do

everything for me. Difficult for me to put up with all that: I'm a doer... actually, better to insert 'was' before 'doer' ...

My doctor knew as soon as he saw me last week. He understood I had given up and just wanted the comfort of death. Bless him! He eased my pain at the end.

And now, as I look down on the wizened old corpse that was my body until a few moments ago, I realise I can now start to live my eternity. This is all a bit of a surprise to tell you the truth. Because as I lay down there, crawling with aches and pains and wishing I was dead, I wasn't at all convinced that there was a life after death. And I really didn't mind much either way. But now, unhampered by that decrepit, *past-sell-by-date* body, I can do anything I want... perhaps. It's a feeling of release: a cool shower on a hot day.

Hold on though! That can't be entirely true, some things will obviously be beyond me now: sex, food, the odd glass of sherry; but then, to be honest, they were all distant memories anyway... and, of course, I don't have much of a clue how eternity works yet...who knows?

Wait... someone is opening the door! It's one of the nurses; she's bringing something in. Flowers...that's nice. Dear me, poor thing, now she's realised I might have 'passed over'. She's feeling for a pulse and listening with her stethoscope for a heartbeat...shaking her head. Now she's leaving. Of course, she needs to let people know: the matron, my daughters and Oh Yes, of course, ...the doctor will have to certify me dead.

I don't think I want to hang around for when my girls come and stare at that shrunken cadaver: I won't feel any satisfaction from their grief and still less from their relief...for I am sure they will feel relief... relief, grief; perhaps no accident that the words rhyme.

I wonder what songs they will choose for my funeral. I hope I can be there. Is that allowed I wonder? Are there rules?

I am also starting to dare to hope I might encounter those dear ones who reached eternity before me: Gerald, Will...Mother. Is it possible that I might even meet my father? He was killed on the last day of the Great War: so never knew his baby daughter. Is that the way infinity works?

Well, I am here, at my funeral, as I had hoped. I shall hover over my daughters and try to impart my sense of peace to them. I don't want them to think I am haunting them though: that would be dreadful. I still need to get the hang of this state of being dead, but not completely out of things: being a ghost is what it amounts to. There I have said it: I've admitted to being something I never in my life believed in. It feels strange.

They are all shuffling around now, getting seated. Quite a few people: close family, relatives I haven't seen for years, old colleagues from the hospital (how nice that they have bothered, it's a long, long time since I retired, but some of us kept in touch). There is music playing: it's just the song I would have chosen myself to start the ball rolling:

*'There's a long, long trail a winding,
Into the Land of my Dreams
Where a nightingale is singing and a white moon beams.
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
'til the day when I'll be going down that long, long trail with you.*

Yes, I know it's a song from the First World War, but I've loved it all my life as it always felt as if it brought me close to the father I never knew; my father dying in Flanders as I was being born in London. If I had a body I would be able to cry, but now I am this thing of shadows and light and not of flesh and blood...now I'm on that '*long, long trail*'...

Shush, it's tribute time! My eldest daughter speaks first:

'Mum was a fighter, but only a fighter for good: against meanness and prejudice'...well, well, and I always thought they'd never noticed the things I'd tried to do outside of my role as wife and mother. Perhaps you must die to find out what people really think of you. Though, on second thoughts, I don't suppose you hear the whole truth at your funeral. In my experience people are usually polite at these occasions...but...after a few drinks at the wake I've known it to change...

Now one of my granddaughters, Lizzie, is standing up and walking over to the lectern. Poor thing, she is crying so much her tears are spattering down onto her notes. I will try to wash over

her with my love. I need to learn some new tricks; without substance how do you demonstrate your feelings?

Good, whatever I did it worked. She is now smiling and telling the congregation about the fun we'd had together when she was small and the earnest discussions that took place between us as she grew into an adult. What do you know? It seems she was listening to me; at least some of the time.

The final song starts. This one's from the Second World War, the war I helped to fight, albeit on the Home Front; the war in which I met Gerald. Perhaps they were not very original with this choice, I've heard it at countless funerals, but my daughters know I love it:

*'We'll meet again don't know where, don't know when,
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day.'*

They've even managed to get the version sung by Vera Lynn. I listen remembering my first meeting with Gerald. It was at a dance somewhere along the Tottenham Ct. Road.

'Will you dance with me?' he'd asked, seeming to expect I might say 'No'.

'Of course,' I replied. 'I might be a bit sleepy though. I've just come off duty.'

He grinned: 'That's OK it's a foxtrot not the jitterbug.' He pulled me onto the dance floor and we started to glide.

We were lovers for a month and then he was gone.

I look down on my eldest daughter: she has his blond hair and blue eyes. I was so glad to have her: my darling Geraldine. And I can sense the shade of Gerald standing behind her...so we will meet again.

My second daughter, named Alice after her grandmother: curly white hair (it used to be red), green eyes; devoted to her older half-sister, hasn't been able to hold back the tears either. But now, beside her I sense the spirit of Will, her father, my husband. He was eighty-nine when he died. Alice pulls a tissue from her pocket and is drying her eyes. Yes, Dear Will, my consolation; he came to see me after the peace in 1945 to pass on a message from Gerald; they'd been friends in a POW camp in Germany. I fell in love a second time. How very lucky I was to have another chance. We were together over fifty years.

And now I can also feel the presence of Mum and who is that with her? Good Lord! It must be my father. We are all together again: is this bliss, heaven? No choir of angels as yet, but it seems I'm to be united with my loved ones beyond the tribulations of life. What more can I ask?

Every other meeting we can, if we wish, write to a theme. Here are some pieces from our June meeting where the theme was *Overheard in the pub*.

The Swagman by Matthew Goodwin

A door. A cat-flap. A chimney, idle.

A family of crows, nesting between the spouts.

It was function over form – plaster and greyscale. A pebble dash of gothic.

The Gov lowered the lantern, toyed with the dial, softened the glow.

"If it isn't the Swagman," said the Gov.

Flat cap. Eyemask. Jailbird's stripes. The Monochrome Meddler.

"What's this?"

It was rolled up. Sticking out his back pocket.

The Gov took in the front page.

The Swagman – lawn shoes and motley – a torch in one hand, Swagbag in the other.

Smoothen the Cat – soft tread and almond eyes – halfway in, and halfway out the window. The crescent Moon almost swamping the beam of the Swagman’s torch.

It was as pale as a green-cheese – shining through the lifted sash, the night sky black as pitch. The perfect backcloth.

The Rich Man, sitting up in bed, shaking a fist. Words tumbling from his mouth like the captions on a woodblock.

If I ever...

The Swagman, his answer, one word.

If.

The Gov looked back and forth, from the man on the page, to the living waxwork beside him. “You know what they say about flattery...”

The Swagman took back the comic, frowned. Stared at the cover. The two-tone ink-work.

Black and yellow. On a pearly white page.

“He taught me everything I know.”

“You’d think he was God,” said the Gov. “Whatever happened to the Ten Commandments? To Religion? There’s a time for everything, you know?”

“A time to kill.

“A time to pray.

“Right now,” he said, “we’ve got a house to burgle.”

“A little bit of breaking and entering?” said the Swagman.

“You afraid?”

“Just so I know what I’m letting myself in for,” said the Swagman.

“I have the backdoor key. I used to feed the Old Boy’s Fish whenever him and Maggie took a weekend in Scunthorpe.

“Regular as clockwork they were. Every summer, every Easter.

“I was healthily remunerated,” said the Gov. “The Old Boy never forgot the packet of toffees.”

“What happened?”

“We’ve all got to die someday,” said the Gov. “I never found out what happened to the Fish. What’s the matter?”

“If he finds us...” the Swagman trailed off.

“No one’s seen the Old Boy for weeks,” said the Gov. “He’s snuffed it. They’ll have to make room for one more in Hell.”

“Says who?” said the Swagman.

“I have my sources.”

“Surely you didn’t?” said the Swagman.

“Didn’t what?” said the Gov.

“You heard it down the local.”

The Gov adjusted his balaclava. "I didn't come here to talk."

He spun the key in the lock, eased open the backdoor, and stepped inside the kitchen. Waved the Swagman on.

"Caught in a time warp," said the Gov to himself.

A wrought iron stove, sitting beneath the flue of an open fireplace.

The Swagman shut the door behind him. Froze. Raised a hand for silence.

Footsteps.

A door creaked.

Fingers. Scrabbling for a light switch.

"Swagman?"

The Old Boy. A look of terror in his eyes.

The Swagman took off his eyemask, shook his head. "It's me."

The Old Boy put a hand to his chest. Keeled over.

"Do you want him to know who did this?" said the Gov.

"He's dead isn't he?" said the Swagman.

"He is *now*," said the Gov.

"I killed him."

"The Old Boy had it coming."

"Was he walking in his sleep?" said the Swagman.

"Saving light-bulbs, more likely," said the Gov.

"I ought to hit the switch," said the Swagman.

"Leave it," said the Gov. "Just the Old Boy, pottering around. Stretching his legs. A little something to make it through to breakfast.

"Cup of Horlicks. Spot of Maltloaf."

"So much for your sources," said the Swagman. "Dead men don't make midnight snacks."

"Better late than never," said the Gov.

"Should we..." the Swagman hesitated.

"There'll be questions," said the Gov.

"What if..."

"Trust me. He's dead as a doornail. It was a matter of time. Right this moment, the Old Boy's tucking in to tea and bratwurst with the Fuhrer, the Kaiser, and the Red Baron himself..."

"Everyone knows the Old Boy didn't trust the banks," said the Gov. "The word was – he kept it all in cash. One day I took a look around. Felt down the back of the couch. Checked for loose floorboards. Looked inside the grandfather clock." The Gov stepped over the dead body, headed for the staircase. "It was almost too easy."

"Did you see the look in his eyes?" said the Swagman.

“That’s the Devil’s fork in his back. Nudging him on. Watch your step.”

They wound their way up the narrow flight, crossed the landing.

The Gov opened the door to the airing cupboard. Grinned.

“The immersion?” said the Swagman.

It looked like a man in a life jacket.

“The whole lot. Beneath the lagging. Not hundreds. Not thousands. Hundreds of thousands. Maybe millions.”

The Gov untied the lagging, heaped the cash inside an open gym bag.

“You’re laughing?” said the Swagman.

The smile cut the Gov’s rugged face in half. There were tears in his eyes. “Forget your Ferraris and your Porsches. The question is this...

“Rolls Royce.

“Or Bentley. You’re a Bristol fan aren’t you?”

The Swagman wasn’t listening.

“No need for a season ticket,” said the Gov. “A few wise investments...

“You could own them.

He stopped what he was doing. “Give me a hand won’t you?”

“A millionaire,” said the Swagman. “A *multi*-millionaire.”

“A miser. There’s only one way to waste money,” said the Gov.

“How?” said the Swagman.

“Keep it,” said the Gov. “As long as you spend it – *someone* is gaining. Now it’s us or the State. Not exactly a crime. Money’s for using.”

“The State will,” said the Swagman. “If they ever find it.”

“An attack of the conscience, my friend?” said the Gov. “You’re the Swagman aren’t you?”

“I’d almost forgot,” said the Swagman.

“You’re funny, you know that,” said the Gov. “For a second there, you almost had me.”

“Yeah,” said the Swagman. “Really funny.”

Be careful what you wish for by Rosemary Ostley

“There’s not many can get away with trousers like that.” “Yeah, right enough, and it looks like he’s ‘ad ‘is teeth done an’ all.”

The three men at the next table, baby boomers by the look of them, so about the age my dad would be, were hunched over one of their number’s mobile phone and from their reaction appeared to be watching a video with the sound turned off. Curious as to its subject, I craned my neck a little closer, but to no avail, I could see only the back of the phone.

“That train’s movin’,” one of them announced in a startled tone. “Can’t be, though, it’s a wreck.” “Idiot, the train’s not moving, the camera’s just making it look like it is,” pointed out a second. There were more guffaws and snide remarks before the phone was plonked down on the table with a “told you it were funny, didn’ I, but it takes yer back.”

While the jawing about lost youth continued, I started to concentrate on my own thoughts from the past. Monty had suggested I try this pub to see if anyone remembered my dad. Lacking any progress to date in tracing my birth father, I’d responded to a small ad in an online newspaper where Monty Braithwaite had trumpeted ‘If your relatives are from these parts, I can find them. No job too small or too tricky. Fees affordable. Astonishing success rate! Don’t delay – pick up that phone today!’ So I did, more out of frustration than good sense.

Monty, a fifty-something rapidly going to seed with the aid of a beer belly and disappearing hair, operated out of the back of his local pub. Misgivings notwithstanding, I’d responded to his ‘How do, lass, your round I think,’ opening line and furnished him with a pint of mild to join the impressive line of empties on the table in front of him. “Ta. Sit yerself down and let’s talk.” And we were off.

Monty’s idea of ‘talking’ was to ask a few pertinent questions before letting me just ramble so he could glean as much information as possible. Not that I had much. A search of one or two ancestry-type sites had thrown up nothing of use given I didn’t know my dad’s last name. What little my mum had told me mainly consisted of the odd detail of growing up in a dysfunctional household here in the north where her parents took little interest in her social life and threw her out when she became pregnant at the age of seventeen. She wasn’t completely sure which night of unalloyed bliss I was the product of, but she’d narrowed it down saying “you’ve got ‘is chin – I remember Bertie’s chin.” Mum went on to marry a farm worker, Stan, but after fending him off with a baseball bat one too many times when I became a teenager, I ended up in foster care.

I paused and regarded Monty who by now had drained his glass. “Right, lass, I’ll go and mull that over while I make room for another pint,” he said pointedly. With that he lumbered to his feet and farted his way to the gents. The regulars either didn’t notice or were weary of complaining. I escaped the fug by making for the bar to get Monty a refill and a soft drink for myself. The landlord served me this time taking rather too much of an interest in me for my liking. I supposed that everyone knew what Monty was about so he thought I must be looking for someone. I beat a hasty retreat and sat waiting for Monty. Five minutes turned into ten, but just as I was debating whether to run, here he came, by way of an apology explaining, “sorry, something unexpected in the bagging area, if you catch my drift,” winking broadly and chuckling to himself. I should have run.

Once I had the information I needed I left Monty to buy his own beer and holed up in the local Holiday Inn. The next day I fetched up here in the Cobblers Arms: ‘Happy hour is every hour, live music every day except Sunday’, horning in on the conversations around me. I had a mind to approach the three musketeers and start a conversation by asking about the video, but just then a roar began to build and my table neighbours shouted “Eh up, ‘ere ‘e comes, or should that be ‘she!” And out from the back room sashayed a large drag artist in full ‘Dame Edna’ mode, the band I’d noticed earlier striking up a vaguely recognisable tune as ‘Betty’ gave it some welly with vocals Tom Jones would have been proud of. But all I could do was to stare at his face, more particularly at his chin. ‘Oh God,’ I thought, ‘say it isn’t true’.

I slipped away unnoticed, to take refuge in my hotel room. Perhaps I’d go back tomorrow and try to find ‘Betty’, but then again maybe I wouldn’t. I’d sleep on it. But first I took a look at the daily paper on my phone, skipping the doom and gloom headlines and clicking on a story about some chap who’d written a book about the Bee Gees, favourites of the woman I now called mum. Half way down the page I opened a YouTube video to watch them sing ‘Staying Alive’, and there was Barry sporting the fabulous white trousers and leaving nothing to the imagination. I watched the song through, including the train footage. ‘Maybe it’s an omen’, I thought, perhaps I should go back to the Cobblers Arms.

Overheard in a pub by Joan Lightning

“But where did the cows go?”

Steven’s hands froze on his laptop as the voice reached his ears from the next table.

A woman’s voice.

A coincidence, surely, but still...

Carefully, not wanting to betray his interest, he moved his back and neck as though just stretching out casually. By chance (of course), the movement allowed him to look into the mirror behind the bar.

Two middle-aged women wearing hiking gear occupied the table behind him, one reading a menu while the other peered into the viewfinder of her camera, evidently examining recently taken photos.

“Cows?” said the one holding the menu.

“Yes, cows. The ones beside the lake when we got here,” the other – woman one – replied. “I took photos. They had three cute calves with them. Where did they go?”

“Wandered off, I suppose.” Woman two didn’t sound very interested, but Steven’s heart pounded.

“Yes, but where? They didn’t come past us, and they couldn’t have walked through the wall round the south of the field; it’s too high.”

“Maybe they crossed the river.”

The river?

“And went where?” woman one asked. “There was only about six feet of grass and then another wall. We’d still have been able to see them.”

The one with the menu looked up. “Then they must have followed the river and gone under the bridge. It was shallow enough. ‘When you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth,’ as Sherlock Holmes said.”

“Improbable? The water was shallow enough for the adults, maybe, but those calves would have struggled,” woman one insisted. “And anyway, I looked in the next field; there was nothing but sheep.”

Steven made a show of yawning and then shut down his laptop, folding it to slide into the bag.

Woman two snorted. “Well, it’s that or a time portal that sent them into the distant past or future like that TV show we used to watch – Timeslip.”

Steven froze in the act of standing up but stopped himself looking around.

“I hope they didn’t get eaten by a T-rex,” woman one laughed. “I suppose you’re right.”

Steven let his gaze flow over the two women as he walked past. How unfortunate that there had been people in the field. He should have waited for a better time for the first time-portal experiment, but he had needed something concrete to show his backers and the cows vanishing had certainly impressed them.

At least the cattle would have returned to the field by now; the rebound was built in. As long as the farmer hadn’t noticed anything...

He hesitated at the door, remembering the woman’s comment ‘eaten by a T-rex’.

Perhaps he’d just check that the cattle had returned intact.

And nothing else.

Seriously.

He’d better check that. He’d had to take a few shortcuts. If another animal – like a predator – had been in contact, or even had part of one in its stomach, when they rebounded...

Somewhere in the distance, something roared and then the screams began.