

Pseudechis australis by Melissa Beit

In the night I dream of Cat. Her shapely white hands snaking their way down my chest, her body sliding head-first down mine to lie hot and sinuous over my groin in a way that is at first exquisite, then heavy, then uncomfortable. On the blurred cusp between sleep and waking I know she is still there, and that she must go, quickly.

She is still there. She must be. There is a heavy, hot-water bottle weight on my stomach that is neither a full bladder nor the world's biggest morning glory.

If I sit up I will see the cliffs of Ellery Gorge rising above me, rust brown against the dawn sky. In less than two hours the sun will rise over those cliffs and knife the valley with hard light, but not where I'm lying. Last night I dumped my swag under a canopy of river red gums, ignoring Pete's warnings about widow-makers. He sensibly rolled out his swag well away from the tree-line, in the middle of the dry river-bed. Brett was banished and is just visible as a khaki lump some hundred metres downstream, but he's noisy even in sleep and his snores growl around the valley floor. Pete is close enough for me to hit with a handful of pebbles, if I wasn't too terrified to move.

I experiment with raising my head to confirm my predicament, but cease when the lump vibrates with what I interpret as irritation. Turning my head doesn't perceptibly move any part of my body below my collarbones. It takes me at least five minutes to wake Pete. I try whispering his name over and over, but in the end have to raise my voice far louder than I and the creature sharing my sleeping bag are happy about. The snake twitches.

'What,' says Pete, wearing the bland, blank look of the recently awakened.

I nearly cry with relief. Pete, in spite of his many short-comings, is a herpetologist.

'Not that that guarantees competence in anything other than shoeing whip snakes out of the laundry,' Cat said recently, with offhand affection.

Pete, hair standing out stiffly from his bald spot like Crusty the Clown, takes an inordinate amount of time to sit up, pull on a shirt and crunch over the sand to my swag.

'There's a snake on my stomach,' I say, in my new don't-scare-the-fairies voice.

Pete has no sense of humour whatsoever. Brett would have tackled that comment and run for the hills with it, but Pete merely scratches his head and rubs sleep from his eyes, rolling a ball of crust between thumb and forefinger, eyeing it speculatively for a while before pinging it into the sand.

What does Cat see in you, I wonder.

Pete turns and calls Brett's name in a loud falsetto.

'Are you insane?' I breathe. He sounds like Dame Edna Everidge.

'Snakes don't have external ears,' says Pete in his normal voice. 'I'd be more likely to aggravate it if I stomped over to get him.'

I turn my head back to look at the snarl of dead limbs over my head and listen to the exchange between the soprano herpetologist and chain-smoking geologist. Brett predictably collapses into hilarity, his barking laugh slapping around the gorge and against my eardrums.

'Shouldn't he be quiet?' I hiss.

'Yes, and you should too,' says Pete. 'Look, it just moved.'

I know it just moved. I am very aware that it just moved.

Pete instructs Brett to walk softly over to us, which is like asking an elephant to tiptoe over to the waterhole and back. His hairy face appears upside down above mine, an unlit rollie protruding from his cracked lips. 'You're fucked, mate,' he says in a stage whisper.

My bladder is hot and swollen, a sensation not at all helped by the weight of a large reptile pressing down on it. I'm reminded of the afternoon I met Cat at a gathering for CSIRO employees not long after I arrived in town. Cat and I found ourselves side by side on an old vinyl couch that someone had dragged outside, making a game of guessing what kind of Ologist each of the guests were.

'Archaeologist,' I said, pointing my beer bottle at the elderly man in the socks and sandals and thigh-length shorts. We were both snorting by this time, and Cat kept spilling her drink onto her dress.

'Meteorologist,' said Cat, angling her chin at the grey-headed woman wearing an outsized hat. It took us a long time to recover from that one.

'Herpetologist,' I said, looking at Pete. There is nothing reptilian about Pete. If anything he resembles a baby crane, fluffy-headed and angular. But I was showing off and couldn't bring the word ornithologist to mind. Throughout the whole exchange my bladder had been uncomfortably full and I kept thinking that I should go and find a toilet or a bush somewhere, but was reluctant to leave the bright-headed woman I'd just met.

'How did you know?' she said, serious all of a sudden. When she told me Pete was her husband I went and emptied my bladder onto the host's thriving collection of eremophilas.

Once Brett has chuckled and sniggered and made a few sotto voce jokes at my expense he settles down on my other side and goes to light up his fag.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' says Pete. 'Snakes have an excellent sense of smell.'

'I read a story about something like this once,' whispers Brett from my periphery.

Spare me, I think. Cat and I pegged Brett as a seismologist that night, and we weren't far off. He is the loudest, most verbose man I have ever met. I've taken to wearing noise-excluding head-phones on field trips, to little effect.

'No, seriously,' hisses Brett. 'It was at primary school, one of those classroom readers, but it was really good, no bullshit.' He starts off speaking in a whisper but each sentence crescendos into normal speech by the time he's finished it. Pete keeps shushing him.

'So there's this group of blokes, in the Amazon or some shit, and they wake up and one bloke's got a

snake in his sleeping bag, just like Hodo here.' There's a click of a lighter, a frenzied arm movement by Pete, and a mumbled apology from Brett. 'They smoked it out, that's all I'm saying. One of his mates cut a slit in the bottom of the sleeping bag and they blew smoke into it until the snake got the shits and came out. Happy ending.'

'I have to piss,' I mouth at Pete.

Pete shakes his head, frowning, but then stops. 'Maybe,' he murmurs. 'Maybe that would have the same effect? Create an undesirable environment so the snake wants to leave?'

'Just drop a bum bomb, Hodo,' says Brett, forgetting to whisper.

Pete waves his thin arms like Kali. 'My guess is that it's one of two species,' he says. 'I'd say we're dealing with either an olive python, or a mulga snake. Judging by the size of that lump.' There's a repetitive ticking sound, which I come to realise is Brett holding in more helpless laughter. It slowly dawns on me that the other name for a mulga snake is a king brown. 'Naturally, the former would be no trouble to deal with, but the latter has been known to bite unprovoked, even people who were asleep and immobile at the time.'

Brett rubs his head vigorously. 'Pull the dictionary out of your arse, Pete, how are we going to get the fucker out?'

I'm not sure if the fucker he's referring to is me or the snake. 'I really need to piss,' I whisper, looking straight up at the ribcage of branches. The rising sun has lightened the riverbed everywhere except here.

'Go ahead,' says Pete, as though bestowing a great kindness. 'It might not be a bad thing.'

I cannot piss.

We're camped about three hundred kilometres east of the community we've just been working at, and six hundred kilometres from Alice Springs. In the troop-carrier we have a basic first aid kit, which includes several snake bandages, which we all know how to apply to the extremities in the event that one of us is bitten on the hand or foot, the most common sites for snake-bite. Nowhere in our compulsory first aid training did it mention what to do if a snake bites you on the torso or head, other than seek medical help immediately. We were scheduled to arrive in Alice late this afternoon, if we had started driving at dawn. Cat is expecting Pete by seven, and nobody is expecting me or Brett.

If the snake sharing my sleeping bag is *Pseudechis australis* and if it delivers a bite that breaks the skin, I can expect to experience local pain, swelling and bruising, dry oral mucosa, headache, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, dizziness, collapse, convulsions and, in sixty percent of untreated cases, rapid death.

Pete imparts these facts in his dry, unexcitable voice. The gravity of the situation has dawned on Brett at last, and he sits up straight like an admonished schoolboy.

'If you were in the sun it might get hot enough to leave of its own accord,' Pete says. 'But I don't like our chances of moving you without disturbing the snake.'

'How long could it stay in there for?' asks Brett.

Pete ponders. 'It depends on when it last ate. If it fed last night it could conceivably be happy to stay in there for up to a week.'

My bladder releases at this news and I cringe, imagining the snake baring its fangs in a snarl of disapproval. The hot urine pools and cools around my thighs.

'And what kind of Ologist are you, Bryn Hodson?' Cat asked later that evening, finding me leaning up beside the make-shift bar.

I swayed a little on my feet and tried to focus on her eyes. 'I'm a ... solicitorologist.'

'A lawyer.'

'Only during business hours. What about you?'

She laughed and tucked a strand of golden hair neatly behind one ear. 'Oh, I'm a kept woman.'

I was quite drunk. 'So we're both parasites.'

She didn't like that. And then she did. She laughed again, appraising me. 'To parasites,' she said, raising her glass to clink against mine.

'What about we unzip it real slow, and open the bag out? See what we're dealing with? It might just be a big old carpet snake trying to cuddle up to Hodo's schlong.'

Pete doesn't even entertain the idea. 'If the snake is disturbed at all it could be agitated enough to bite.'

Brett goes back to the drawing board. 'I've got it,' he says after a while. 'We pound a sand peg through the bottom of the bag, get on one shoulder each, and yank Hodo out before the fucker knows what's happening.'

Even I can see the flailing complications inherent in that method, and I'm more desperate than anyone to get my body out of the bag.

Pete's shaking head is a russet blur in my periphery.

'Well, it's fucking obvious then, isn't it?' says Brett, forgetting to whisper. 'I'll drive back to Granites and call in a chopper. You stay here with Hodo, in case the bastard bites him while I'm gone.'

I calculate the minimum time that would take and even my most wildly optimistic estimate is three hours. It takes every shred of self-control to keep from scrambling out of my rank cocoon.

'I'm not really a kept woman,' said Cat, propped up on her elbows. Her lower back was indented with two symmetrical dimples as though someone had gently pressed her skin with their thumbs. 'I'm a sculptor.'

I wasn't really listening. She rolled over, climbed nimbly off the bed and wrapped herself in a

sarong. 'Come with me,' she said.

She led me out the French doors of her bedroom and across the baking earth to a building at the end of the property. Inside it was cool and dark. When my eyes adjusted I saw that the space was filled with tables and shelves weighed down with bodies. A body reclining on one elbow, a body tucked into Child's Pose, bodies cradling other bodies, arched backs, entwined legs, long upstretched necks.

'Wow.'

Cat moved among the bodies, tracing a shoulder here, a stomach there. 'I'm just starting out. I've had one piece acquired by a university, but mostly I just sell to friends.'

I stopped in front of a limbless torso, twisted as though the headless woman was looking over one shoulder. 'This is you,' I said. I reached out and placed my thumbs in the twin hollows I'd stroked ten minutes ago.

'Dimples of Venus,' said Cat. She was shy all of a sudden, but not, I came to realise, about her body.

'This is wonderful,' I breathed. 'I have to own this. I don't care what it costs.'

She smiled, relieved. 'Don't be ridiculous. What if Pete saw.'

'I'll hide it when I know he's coming around.'

She laughed, buoyant now. 'What if he shows up unannounced?'

'I'll throw a towel over it. I'll store it in a cupboard, get it out at night-time when no one's around.'

In the end she gave it to me for nothing.

The departing troop-carrier leaves a vacuum of silence.

Pete stands over me. A dead branch in the tree above appears to protrude from his forehead, like a horn. I imagine Cat creating a Rhinoceros Pete out of clay with her long, knowing fingers. I wish now that I'd looked around her studio longer; looked for evidence of a thin, elongated form like a baby crane. At the time I was obsessed with getting Cat back to the bedroom.

'My wife wants you to stop calling her,' says Pete. I stare up at him, paralysed. Even the cicadas are silent. 'People often wonder what Catherine sees in me. They even ask her in my presence.' He smiles and looks down with a fondness that isn't directed at me. The only sound is my heart beating. Thump. Thump. Thump. I want it to keep beating, for many years to come.

Eventually Pete blinks and focuses on my face. 'I tell them, my wife loves me because I have a vast capacity for forgiveness.'

I try to speak but my mouth is dry. I have a headache too. I wonder if the snake has already bitten me without any of us noticing.

Pete kneels down by my side with infinite care. He reaches out and places a hand on the lump on my stomach, very gently.