

From *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self* by Danielle Evans

Snakes

I consulted the books my parents had left me, contemplating metallurgy and purification rituals as forms of protection. Actually undertaking any of them was impossible, especially when I refused to leave the house. It wasn't just the outside world I was newly afraid of: I was haunted by what my grandmother had said about baby pythons, and imagined one growing and swelling inside the walls even now. My grandmother had won one battle—I satyed where she could see me, I tracked no more mud into her house—but she hadn't bargained for the way the fear would overtake me. I was afraid of snakes, yes, but I was also afraid of open windows, peeling paint, creaking floorboards, sinks, bathtubs, toilets. I dropped the talisman I'd made out of the pastic wings and chewing gum down an open shower drain while trying to wash myself and hold it under the faucet at the same time. I refused to pee unless Allison held my hand, panicked when within ten feet of a wall, and tried my best not to sleep at night.

In my grandmother's butterfly theory, my mother was the moth who flapped her wings in Japan and caused disaster; there was an inevitable correlation between her being in the wrong place at the wrong time and my grandfather's untimely accident. I had been given this secret knowledge too early to know what to do with it. I was old enough to know better than to prod my mother with questions, but too young to understand debt and obligation. Too young to understand what my mother must have felt during her mother's flight with cancer, or to appreciate the uncertainty my grandmother must have been living with. I was too young to understand that a python could be not just threat but a warning, and too young to understand why this summer of all summers, I had been sent off as a flawed peace offering.

"Look," said my grandmother, exasperated, "it's possible that I *exaggerated* a little, so you would learn a lesson about running off. [...] Get dressed."

"I don't believe you," I said.

"Why would I lie to you now?" she asked

"Why would you lie to me about it in the first place?" I asked. "Either way, it makes you a liar. Maybe you just want me to get eaten."

I looked out the window, watching people at a park through the glass. I thought of saying a lot of things that I didn't. I didn't tell her how badly I had wanted her back, not just that summer, but all the years before it; how those days she had lain beside me in the hospital bed, for once mine and mine alone, were among the best of my childhood. I didn't tell her that every time I took note of the scar on my elbow, I thought she ought to thank me for giving her the

way out of her mother's house that she'd never found for herself, no matter how many times she ran away. I didn't tell her how I had learned it wasn't just snakes that could eat you alive. I didn't tell her what I had told no one in all these years, what I had lied about even to the love of my life, because saying it out loud would unravel so much. Whatever motives Allison had for saying so—whatever she thought she saw a way out of, or more likely, back into, in confession—there had been no push, no one's hands on my back. I hadn't fallen, I'd jumped. It was shallow water, and though as it turned out I'd been lucky not to kill myself, at the time it hadn't seemed like a long way down. Twenty feet and I would have my parents back, I would have my mother forever, I would have years before I had to consider the costs. I'd been, for the second time that summer, less afraid of the fall than what else I thought awaited me. That afternoon above the murky water, which I remembered quite clearly, there had been nothing but me, looking down at my own reflection, and seeing at last a way toward what I wanted most.

The King of a Vast Empire

The official police report says that it was a no-fault accident, but it is always someone's fault. At the start of high school, they sent me home with this puzzle:

The king of a vast empire is so impressed with his new and foreign territories that he is hardly home, forgoing the palace to visit the rest of his realm. Lonely, the queen takes a lover, a nobleman in a neighboring town. Not wanting to raise the awareness of the king's loyal guard, she sneaks out of the palace to meet him disguised as a peasant. The guard is aware of this deception, but says nothing and does nothing to stop her. Traveling alone, the queen is attacked and murdered by highway robbers who have no idea who she is. Who is most at fault for the queen's death: the robbers, the guard, the queen, the king, or the lover?

I took the puzzle home and told Liddie about it. I said the robbers were to blame, Liddie picked the queen. The next day, the teacher told our class that who you blamed showed what you valued: justice, duty, faith, love, or family. I thought it was bullshit, and when I got home I lied and told Liddie that the teacher had said she was wrong, that only the robbers were at fault, because only they acted with intent. Liddie shook her head and said that was stupid, the queen probably knew the road was dangerous and anyway the robbers were the only people who didn't owe anybody anything to begin with.

To me the accident is something like that, blame for everyone and no none. A stupid puzzle, not worth solving. My parents never saw it that way.

Robert E. Lee is Dead

I hadn't been paying much attention at the time and assumed that the chorus of boos was just a general reaction to Mrs. Peterson's voice. The woman was thoroughly disliked; hatred of her was one of the few things upon which everyone at Robert E. Lee High School agreed. The Eastdale kids hated her because she had a habit of hanging up on people's parents when they didn't speak English, instead of getting a translator as was county policy, and she was known for suspending people based on their zip codes rather than their behavior. At a school assembly last year, she'd rather infamously blamed the schools's dropping standardized test scores on immigrant kids who had never been to school before because before they moved to Eastdale, they'd been "living in jungles."

I hated her because she'd earnestly tried to talk me out of honors classes and I'd had to threaten to go to the principal before she'd sign off on my schedule. I was an accident; I'd slipped through our school's de facto segregation and she wasn't happy about it. I had been dealing with people like her since the third grade, when I'd been shipped off to "gifted" elementary and middle schools as a reward for outsmarting standardized tests. The magnet schools were the Lake County School District's last line of defense against the evaporation of its upwardly mobile white people and its infiltration by people of all sorts of colors and languages. The population hadn't grown enough to justify a new high school, so here we had to settle for an honors wing, which housed everyone whose standardized test scores placed them into honors classes, or everyone whose parents knew that you could pay a private psychologist to declare your child a genius if the school's official test thought otherwise. Essentially, the honors wing housed all of Lakewood, and me.

"Antisocial back there might be alright if she'd put that book down for a second."

I looked up. It was the first time all season I'd been addressed directly and I wasn't prepared with a clever retort.

"Aww, leave her alone. She probably got homework," Jason called.

"That book ain't homework."

"How the fuck you know what homework they got in honors English? You barely know what homework you got in plain old regular English."

"*Negro*, I go to Robert E. Lee High School. I know dam well ain't no *Souls of Black Folk* required reading. Maybe *Black Folk Ain't Got No Souls*, *Who The Hell Told Em Tom Stop Picking Cotton Anyway*."

The people around us laughed; hearing that he had an audience, Eric lifted himself onto his knees and kept going.

"Don't know why the fuck you laughing Garcia. The next book they read is *Mexicans Ain't Got No Souls Either and Tem Mothafuckas Don't Even Speak English*."

She babbled on about the State Summer Academy and how good it would look on my college applications, and I sat back catching bits and pieces of it, thinking free room and board sounded almost as good as a philosophy seminar. I was thinking also that I was not stupid. I read the papers; I knew the governor had just started a state commission on the achievement gap between white and minority students. I could picture Mrs. Peterson pouring the state investigator a cup of tea and shrugging, “*Crystal* has done beautifully, and has been rewarded for it. If her friends showed the same motivation. . .”

I let the promise of summer comfort me while Geena avoided me. Violeta and April became Geena’s new best girlfriends. I was somewhat consoled by the fact that it took two people to replace me. Vi made a point of telling everyone that she’d gone to middle school with me and I’d been a bougie bitch then too. I started to eat lunch in the library again. If Geena thought she could make me lonely enough to change my mind about summer school, she’d vastly underestimated my capacity for loneliness. I’d perfected lonely in the third grade.

“Hey,” Geena started, “we should do something. Like a senior prank.”

“Geena, they do senior pranks. When we try it they’re called felonies.”

“I thought you were practically one of them anyway.”

I shot Geena a warning look, and she dropped the subject. Still, I could see her getting more and more upset by the little things.