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*Snake Dreams in Pine Valley*

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**Snake Dreams in Pine Valley**

by

**Dick Croy**

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## *Snake Dreams in Pine Valley*

It was the first day of summer, the solstice — I remember reflecting on that later after my daughters were gone and I got canned and wasted the Friday before the Fourth of July weekend— when “the day of the snakes” occurred. Sounds like a Sergio Leone western doesn’t it? That high desert country in the mountains east of San Diego looks like it too: dry and clear, stark — especially during the heat of the summer when the stream that winds through Pine Valley dries up.

That’s where I lived for a year and a month, in a big modified A-frame set amidst manzanita and the pines the community chose for its name, with a splendid view of mountains from the deck. There were only three or four neighboring houses, none close to me and all of us hidden from one another by live oaks and the eponymous evergreens.

When I moved in the previous July Fourth weekend, I had no idea my twin daughters would be joining me in just a few weeks, but I had plenty of room for them in the almost new three-bedroom house I’d been able to lease because the owner couldn’t sell it. For most people at the beginning of the ‘80s Pine Valley was just too long a commute into San Diego. But I worked in an eastern suburb — making TV commercials for “the world’s largest RV dealer” — and compared to L.A. where I’d come from and would be returning a lot sooner than planned, the 35 freeway miles I drove each way weren’t an effort but a beautiful drive in both directions that I never tired of.

I awoke to brilliant sunlight most mornings and, descending into the Cajon Valley from 4,000 feet on the nearly deserted interstate, looked down on a thick layer of dazzling white clouds with a few peaks sticking through them, as if I were flying rather than driving to work. It felt that way too with the radio or tape player on full-blast, the sun roof wide open and, far too often, the CHP emerging from wherever the hell they managed to hide to bring me back down to earth. Of course to flatlanders the clouds were just coastal fog, which by the time I pulled into my employer’s huge lot full of motorhomes had been pretty well burned off by the Southern California sun.

In the evening, the gradual, almost continuous ascent through the Cajon Valley’s air pollution soon left strip malls, suburban squalor and ozone behind as the Cuyamacas rose up around and in front of me like brawny welcoming arms. My view of this arid uncompromising landscape, embellished wherever contemporary pioneers had been able to gain a foothold with small farmsteads, orchards or landscaping, never repeated itself — even the spectacular setting I cherished most, which greeted me as I swung down off the freeway in Pine Valley.

The exit ramp brought me around 90 degrees to a scenic panorama that looked too designed to be real, as if it belonged on a state seal or the head of a coin. No, not a coin; there was far too much color. What I’m picturing are those classic orange crate illustrations of the Golden State: land of milk and honey derived from an endless vista of California orange groves. Dramatically cross-lit by the intense westering sun, with a forest of pines at their feet, three mountains converge in the middle distance: a tableau of the American West, where wilderness is ennobling, profoundly spacious and imbued with such promise that its most commonplace images have become icons.

Although no doubt overpriced and over-developed now, when I lived there Pine Valley, still too new to be called “rustic”, had the feel and certainly the exhilarating piney scent of the mountain communities Southern Californians are always escaping to when they get the

chance. There *was* a lodge and a general store that catered to campers as well as the few hundred residents, but none of the traffic associated with places like Idylwild or Big Bear.

What Pine Valley shared most with such towns was that indescribable mountain air only an hour or two off the Pacific, which smelled much of the time as if it had just rained. And when it *did* rain, your lungs and nostrils wanted to open as wide as they could to inhale the fragrant vital essence of such fresh clean air. This was as much drinking as breathing, of some magical life-giving elixir that cleansed and refreshed your soul, mind and body simultaneously.

But every Eden has its serpent. The very day I moved into this high desert paradise I helped a neighbor kill a rattlesnake in my driveway. I was uncomfortable doing it; the snake was small, anything but dangerous-looking, and we hacked away unmercifully trying to behead it — me with a shovel, my neighbor with a rake. I felt like the phobia-ridden killer of anything both “repulsive” and defenseless.

Of course, my daughters hadn’t moved in with me yet; I didn’t even know they were coming. No doubt I’d have felt different with children about. As it was, my stricken conscience kept asking, “Is this really necessary?” as the sharp edge of my poorly aimed shovel cut that small snake into pieces. “Well, after all, I’m the newcomer,” I answered myself. “This must be the way they do things here. Maybe the place is overrun with rattlesnakes.”

Later I would see coyotes, jackrabbits and tarantulas but never another snake, for almost a year. As a matter of fact, that was the last real interaction with my neighbor as well. We’d see each other occasionally and wave, but the people of Pine Valley hadn’t moved out here to socialize.

After the rattlesnake had been dispatched and we co-executioners introduced ourselves, I unloaded the car and sat down on the deck to savor the view. Annoyingly, the faint hum of the interstate intruded slightly on the otherwise pristine silence of my new home, but I decided I was being too critical. The distant intermittent flow of traffic was pitched barely above the threshold of hearing; I had to listen intently to hear it — and soon tuned it out.

On a walk later that afternoon I found myself gazing with a sense almost of wonder at the silent brooding mountains surrounding me. I found it hard to believe that my own back yard — the Cleveland National Forest, a misnomer if there ever was one to a southern Ohio native — was the kind of country to which I used to drive an hour and a half to get out of L.A. for a while, only to have to turn around in a few hours and head back down into all that heat, smog and traffic.

I got so used to living in the mountains, the environment had such a wholesome influence on my well-being, that I began to experience the week as being about equally divided between weekend and work. I didn’t think things could get much better, for the time being I mean — then my twin daughters’ mother calls: an occasion so rare I immediately think something has happened to one of them.

But after assuring me they’re both fine, she segues into what I identify as the preamble to some kind of major request, probably more financial help. With my new job I’ve only recently been able to resume the child support that has been sporadic since the girls were born.

“...Could you possibly...is there any chance you could take the kids for a while?” she finally asks. “I’ve just got to have some time to myself. I need to get my life together. It would be good for the three of you too, don’t you think?”

There’s a long pause at my end, caused not by reluctance or indecision but their opposite: momentary speechlessness brought about by trying to comprehend my good fortune.

“...Are you there?” she asks plaintively

“Yes, I’m here. Sure I can, Carla! And I’ve got a perfect place for us now. They’ll love it.”

“Ohh, that’s *wonderful*. I’ve been wanting to suggest this for quite a while, but you never really...this is the first time you’ve been in a position to help out. It sounds like things are really going well for you now.”

“That’s true. It probably *wouldn’t* have worked before. Some of the apartments I’ve lived in.”

“Well, I couldn’t have let them come. I mean, weekends are one thing, but...”

“I know, I’m glad I can help out now. I’d *love* to have them come live with me. How long are we talking about?”

Another slight hesitation: “...Well, I was thinking for the coming school year. They’ll be in fourth grade now, you know.”

“For a year? That’s *great!* Longer if they want to. As long as they want.”

“Not a whole year — just the school year. Let’s see how that works out first, okay? I mean, if they want to stay longer when it’s over, and *you* want them to, then fine, we can talk about it.”

“Makes sense to me.” Man, I was in heaven.

It hadn’t occurred to me that one of the perks of this new job would be having my daughters come live with me. I didn’t think Carla would allow it, let alone suggest it herself. Not only were we never married, but she was the lover of my best female friend when they were conceived. Until that extraordinary day I thought Carla hated men, and she thought I represented far more competition for our mutual friend Katya’s affections than I did. Katya and I had become close although never intimate in the two years we’d known each other, but I was about to subject our friendship to one hell of a test.

Carla, two other women and I had gone up to a friend’s cabin on Mt. Baldy, just east of L.A., to rough it for a couple of days. Soon after we arrived, Carla and I went hiking alongside another of the mountain streams I seem drawn to in life. Attracted by her dark looks and fiery nature, I found it difficult to take Carla very seriously with all her ‘60s era rhetoric about offing the pigs and putting the middle class and straight men out of their misery. On the deserted trail that afternoon I assumed the electricity in the air was of my own invention, or perception, until she turned to me and said, “You know, don’t you, that I’ve been wanting to fuck you all day?”

## *Snake Dreams in Pine Valley*

Fortunately, no one came along for the next 30 minutes, but we must have made our companions more than a little suspicious, slipping away as often as we did for hikes the next two days. Hell, we could have climbed to the top of Mt. Baldy and back. Four or five times.

Katya, absolutely fantastic about the whole thing, was Carla's LaMaze partner some nine months later. And although they're no longer together, she was as much the girls' "father" as I was the first couple of years of their life. It's only because of our daughters that Carla and I have kept in touch; we've never had anything else in common, including the sexual relationship I pursued without much success after she and Katya parted company.

The Friday night before my daughters' arrival is still one of my favorite memories. I'd spent an hour and a half or so at one of the two big department stores in Mission Valley, buying sheets, blankets, towels and stuff, all of which were now crammed into the like-new Celica I'd recently purchased after driving around in one sled after another for the past few years. The moon, just a day or two past full, was rising above the Cuyamacas as I flew home with the makings of my fatherly nest. The late-summer evening, warm and relatively smog-free for a change, came rushing in through the open sunroof as I climbed higher and higher, psychologically as well as topographically, into the mountains. Zena and Emily, my 9-year-old daughters, were coming tomorrow. *To live with me!*

Fourth grade went by so fast — yet occupies a disproportionate chunk of my memory, as if it were two or three years instead of just nine months. After five years of occasional weekends with the girls, then four more following their move to Seattle, when the vicissitudes of the writer's life limited visiting them to an infrequent cause for celebration, we finally got to live life *together* for a while.

I knew what it was like to be awakened at three in the morning by an ill child who'd vomited all over her bed — and another time by a loud crash and screams after Emily fell through her bunk bed, mattress and all, on top of Zena. One whole week the girls and I battled a school epidemic of head lice together. But those weren't hard times. I felt my love for them all the more strongly when comforting Zena and cleaning the puke out of Emily's hair.

...Nonetheless, they'd decided to return to their mother in Seattle. I hadn't tried to dissuade them but I guess you could say my feelings were a little hurt, though I made it a point to hide this not only from them but from myself as well. We were walking down to the stream in Pine Valley in swimsuits and running shoes, for what we knew would be our last swim together, when we saw the first snake on that hot June day, the first the kids had seen since their arrival.

"Is it poisonous, Dad?" asked Zena as we watched it scrawl graceful essses across the gravel driveway.

"No, it's no rattlesnake, Sweetie," I was able to reassure her, "and those are the only poisonous kind we have around here." "That's the first snake I've ever seen outside of a zoo," said Emily, staring after it in fascination.

I, too, was pleased by this sighting just a few days before they'd be leaving: one more encounter with nature. By now we'd taken many hikes together on various trails up into the mountains and through the dry canyons around my house. Over the years, the girls had grown well beyond the little tenderfeet reluctant even to venture from the car whom I'd introduced to the "wilds" of L.A.'s Topanga Canyon half their lifetime ago. After a few short

hikes ending in picnics, they began anticipating our forays into the wilderness as much as I did. And aside from an early phase in which no hike was complete without one of them being allowed to “poop in the grass”, they were great trail companions.

Today, accompanied by Raisin, another neighbor’s overweight Lab, we walk down the hot asphalt road that dead-ends just a quarter of a mile past the house, then pick our way through cactus, sagebrush and maroon-stemmed manzanita to a clear amber-colored pool we discovered in the stream a few weeks ago. After our encounter with the snake I scan the trail and all rocks within striking distance even more carefully than usual for any sign of another one, without incident.

In a few minutes we have our shoes off and our feet in the cool transparency of the pool, which is deep enough to receive our grateful bodies if not quite to swim in. Raisin goes in at once, submerging all but his head, then shakes himself out and flops down nearby for a nap. I’ve already shown the girls how to float in the two feet or so of gently flowing water to keep their weight off the jagged rocks along the bottom, and we’re soon happy as clams in our languorous water play, shielded by overhanging cottonwoods from the glare of the afternoon.

Emily has even brought along a small uninflated raft which I blow up for the two of them to share. I spread out a towel on a pebbly patch of sand that will do for a beach, take a beer from the cooler and lean back against a rock to enjoy the improvised frolic of my squealing daughters.

“Remember, keep your eyes out for snakes, girls! I know we haven’t seen any down here yet but that doesn’t mean we don’t have to be on the lookout for them.”

“Wouldn’t we *hear* a rattlesnake first?” asks Zena, suddenly subdued.

“If we don’t surprise it we should, but you’d better not count on that. Use your eyes *and* your ears.”

They both just stand there in the water for a moment, looking around fearfully, as if I haven’t given them this same advice every time we come here.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t have fun, girls. Just be alert.”

They share a not quite ironic look that makes me wonder whether I’m doing that parent thing of talking out of both sides of my mouth. I decide that I am but for a legitimate reason.

“Rattlesnakes don’t go in the water do they?” Emily is looking down at her feet, as if she were in danger of stepping on one. Apparently spotting the earlier snake has spooked them a little.

“No, they’re not water snakes. If one were nearby it would probably be under a rock somewhere out of the sun. As long as you keep your eyes open and your hands out from under any rocks you’ll be fine.”

Reassured, they’re soon engrossed in the water again rather than in what might be lurking around or beneath it. Emily has already mastered the raft, and Zena is pulling herself through a shallow part of the pool by grabbing hold of rocks beneath the surface and pushing off from the bottom, occasionally holding up a particularly interesting or colorful specimen for our viewing pleasure.

Their beautiful little pre-pubescent bodies have acquired more of a golden hue than real tans; the sun's just too hot here in the mountains to expose bare skin to it for any length of time. Their flashing, supple limbs are in constant motion, churning the pool, splashing each other, airborne water and youthful flesh sparkling where the sun finds its way through the leaves of the cottonwoods.

"My turn with the raft, Emily — you've had it long enough!"

"Whaddaya mean, Zena? I just got on."

"You didn't either, you've been on a long time — hasn't she, Dad?"

"Five more minutes, Emily," I tell them, issuing the x-hundredth such compromise since becoming the astonished father of twin girls. (They were an even greater surprise to Carla's obstetrician. "Here comes the afterbirth," he'd announced just a moment before Emily popped out five minutes after Zena's arrival.)

...What a change this is from the last stream we used to swim in — not so much in the surroundings but in the girls themselves. That was in Ventura County, north of Los Angeles: another California swimmin' hole near Ojai. Sam Porter and I used to take our three- and four-year-old daughters and some of his exceptional weed up there on hot Sunday afternoons when we were neighbors in Oxnard.

He's the one who knew about this place. You had to hike in just far enough from a two-lane road to keep most people ignorant of an idyllic spot that would otherwise have been overrun with the curious and the prurient-minded. Because not only was this as beautiful a mountain stream as you're ever likely to set foot or stick a toe into, pristine and studded with boulders, but the nude female bodies draped over some of those rocks were often the most gorgeous natural features of that little-known landscape.

We'd all strip the minute we got there, the girls running off to wade and play and quarrel, one or the other of the twins eventually being excluded from some game Sam's older daughter had concocted. Sam and I meanwhile would share a discreet toke or two and settle back with a six-pack beside us in the cold rushing water to talk, watch our daughters and marvel at the beauties of nature.

And I don't mean of just the feminine variety. Enhanced by our altered state, the stream and its mammoth sculpted rocks (Henry Moore does Ansel Adams); gently rustling eucalyptus, live oaks and evergreens set against a blue sky visited by puffy white clouds — this was a setting in need of no enhancement whatsoever. Our choosing to add it is either another story or an element of this one I'm not going to get into.

In any case, I'm sure those days were another source of Zena and Emily's love of nature. That we're wearing swimsuits now is due more to the ruggedness of our swimming hole than to modesty, which isn't much in fashion in our household.

Sitting here, what? five or six years later, beside another stream with another cold beer in hand, the sounds of my daughters' happy play in my ears, I feel... "blessed" is the word I come up with. The same way I feel standing in the doorway watching them sleep, then walking out onto the deck under the incredible stars up here. Glorious. Jacked in to eternity beneath that glittering celestial canopy; connected heart-to-heart to the universe through the umbilical of love, an energy I can clearly feel, between my daughters asleep in their bunk beds and their father, standing out here in the crisp night air blissed out of his fucking mind.

And of course it goes without saying, though I'm going to say it anyway, that this is after a long, often stressful day's work, then picking the girls up at the babysitter's where they go after school, followed by the drive home — about an hour from my office to the front door if we don't have shopping or laundry to do — then fixing dinner, usually with the kids' help, and cleaning up the kitchen while they prepare for and fall into bed, ready for another chapter of *Wind in the Willows* or whatever book we're reading.

Looking back over our life up here together, I ask myself, not for the first time, what the hell Carla could have meant on her last visit — “last” meaning final as well as most recent — when in the midst of one of her tirades she screamed at me, “I know you must be doing horrible things to them!”

The tirade was apparently instigated by my running out of coffee, Carla's being marooned all day in the mountains with neither caffeine nor a car. That and the terrible parenting *she* received as a child, information which Carla's never been reluctant to share with her friends and lovers. But where did the accusation itself come from? My casual nudity around the girls — which she's never witnessed but may very well have learned of from them? Some other behavior or incident which seemed innocent enough to me but suspect or worse to her? Something the girls said which she may have misconstrued? Or just her occasional craziness?

Maybe I'll never know. This was just the punch line of a jeremiad that began at the dinner table and didn't end until I yelled at her to call the airline and make a new reservation for the next day — I was kicking her shapely ass out. Although we've talked on the phone since then, to make all the arrangements for the girls' return to Seattle, I'm wondering how completely the already tenuous relationship between their parents will recover after Carla's abrupt departure.

...By now I've finished my beer, thought my deep thoughts. Noticing that Zena has her eyes closed on the raft, I put a forefinger to my lips as a sign to Emily and slip quietly into the pool. A moment later a serpentine finger emerges from the water beside the raft to slither up Zena's arm. She shrieks and flails all four limbs at once, falling off the raft of course — while I fall once again from her good graces.

“God, Dad, that's not funny! I nearly had a heart attack.”

She starts to cry quietly, and Emily's laughter dies out. We can both see that this wasn't one of my more inspired ideas. Teasing is like telling jokes — you're bound to bomb once in a while.

“I'm sorry, Honey,” I tell Zena, putting my arm around her. “You're right, it wasn't funny.” She snuffles and nestles against me, and I give her a hug and kiss her wet little head. “The devil made me do it.”

Emily laughs, out of loyalty and to encourage her sister to see the “humorous” side of my cruel prank, but Zena glares at me, her sharply arched eyebrows making her appear somewhat Mephistophelian herself. “It's not funny, Dad.”

“You're right, it was mean and dumb — I was just trying to help you forget about it.”

In spite of myself I know my expression's a combination of genuine remorse and orneriness, but it seems to do the trick. Zena smiles sheepishly. "I knew it wasn't a snake — *but it still scared me!*"

"Dad screws up again," I admit.

"You said it." She tries to glower, but she's having no more luck with her facial muscles than I am.

"Dad screws up again!" proclaims Emily, liking the sound of that.

"Hey, *I* said that — I *admitted* it!" I release Zena and swim toward Emily, who's already trying to get away. "You don't have to rub it in!" My last words end in a ferocious growl, uttered with my mouth half in and half out of the water to make it sound all the more frightening. Emily shrieks and dissolves into helpless laughter as I grab her with snaky arms writhing around her body.

The girls have packed us a picnic: sandwiches, fruit, cheese and chips, with juice for them. This seems to be a good time for it. We get out, dry our upper bodies enough to keep from dripping all over the food, and settle down in the shade to enjoy it.

Afterwards, the girls go in the water again but I lie back, close my eyes and doze fitfully between the shrieks and squeals of my daughters. When we're ready to leave, I suggest returning by a different trail that we've used on earlier visits and Emily and Zena enthusiastically agree. We walk downstream before performing a spinal tap dance across the water from one slippery vertebra to the next, then wind in single file amidst scraggly pines and chaparral toward the road.

My eyes sweep the path as Raisin leads us through a field of luxuriant bright-green marsh grass, then, snuffling and snorting, begins to nose his way through a thick litter of pine needles beneath the manzanita blanketing the ground between us and the road.

I'm right behind him when Emily calls out from the rear in a quavery voice, "Daddy, I think I saw a snake!"

I immediately picture her lean bare legs within striking distance from the cover of that ankle-high grass we've just traversed. Did my roving eyes overlook it, or has my daughter seen a serpent that isn't there?

I'm about to backtrack to find out when I notice Raisin's interest in what looks like the taped handle of a Louisville Slugger — an image familiar enough from my distant boyhood but clearly out of place here — in the shade of a manzanita bush, about twenty feet in front of me. I stoop to see a rattlesnake as big around as my wrist stretched out in torpid disregard of Raisin's olfactory curiosity.

Suddenly Emily's sighting seems all the more likely, and for just a moment — like a scene from the snake dreams I had when I was younger — I imagine them everywhere, slithering around us in nightmarish profusion beneath the rocks and arid foliage, until we dare not take one step.

Even when the mental image — more than an image: the remembered *experience* — has dissipated, it seems to me unwise to turn around and look for another path, because of the

snake Emily thinks she has seen behind us. But the one in front of us, a good four feet in length, is within striking distance of the trail.

“...What are you looking at, Dad?” asks Zena, catching up with me.

“There’s a rattlesnake up there ahead of us. See where Raisin’s sniffing under that bush?”

By now Emily’s joined us too, and the two of them join me in a family squat to peer into the deep shade of the manzanita.

“...Gol’ — look how big it is!” exclaims Emily.

“...What are we gonna do?” asks Zena.

“Well, I don’t know. Ordinarily we’d just turn around and go another way. But Emily thinks she saw another snake back the way we came.”

“*Did you, Emily?*” The skepticism I can hear in her voice no doubt stems from the love of exaggeration and melodrama the girls share with most children. Zena’s a step ahead of me in ascertaining the credibility of Emily’s sighting.

“*I think I did,*” she says defensively.

“If you say you saw one then I’m sure you did, Emily,” I tell her, trying to sound considerably more calm and deliberate than I feel at the moment. The snake in front of us *appears* mellow enough, lying there stretched out rather than coiled defensively, its rattle mute though within an inch or two of Raisin’s inquisitive nose. But will it stay that way when we pass in front of it no more than five feet away?

And Emily’s reported snake behind us represents an even bigger unknown. Once again the reptilian *deja vu*-like ambience of my snake dreams creeps from some dark cellar into the more recent rational rooms of my mind. I’m not paralyzed as in the dreams, but I don’t like the idea of turning around; I want to get us to the road. Now.

By now Raisin, too, has backed away and is eying the snake suspiciously. I spot a dead pine branch lying a few feet away. It looks long enough to prod the rattler with, urge it along to some other manzanita bush, away from the trail.

“Okay, girls, I want you to stand back and be ready to run if you have to. I’m going to poke it with this stick and see if I can get it to move.”

“My teacher said you should never bother a rattlesnake!” says Emily.

“She’s right, you shouldn’t. But this — I think it’s the best thing to do in this case, Emily. It’s too close to the trail, and I don’t want to turn around and go back. You just stay well behind me, ready to run, okay?”

Of course it’s *not* okay, but they do as I ask, and I advance to where I can reach the snake with the stick. I don’t want to hit it, just do a little rattlesnake herding.

Instantly the snake tenses to defend itself. Its white mouth springs open as if those long glistening fangs were hinges, to hurl a primeval reptilian *hiss-sss* at its tormentor.

Startled, I jab at it again — and the snake comes toward us!

My left arm goes out reflexively if ineffectively to shield my daughters, as if they needed to be warned, and I scramble backwards, my mind racing through survival scenarios: how to keep this angry poisonous snake off of me and my girls. Seeing just that gaping mouth, those deadly down-curving needle-like fangs, with size out of all proportion to reality, the savage mouth as big as a moray eel's lunging at me from some coral reef.

Our retreat slows, then stops, the blurred lethal scrollwork towards our feet. I freeze apprehensively, though I can hear the girls still slipping and sliding behind me. At last the snake gathers itself, glaring hatred into my eyes like those venom-spitting cobras of Africa, and begins to slither sideways across the trail into a tangle of manzanita.

We track its forward progress with our ears, for though hidden now from our view, the enraged snake assails us long after we've hurried up the path to the road — with a savage sound no more mere "rattle" than gunfire or thunder. All the way to the house we hear the sound of reptilian fury, harsher than an insect swarm, loud enough to warn off hikers a quarter of a mile away.

None of us says anything on the way back. We're all listening, in awe. As we turn into my driveway and the girls walk on ahead, I stop to marvel at how far it carries: the sound of survival through hatred...blood fury...the color red. I'm suddenly reminded of how at least twice in my life, provoked into rage myself, I experienced not a black-, but a *redout*. Everything went red and I blew apart.

But the snake's rage is contained, like the fire in a furnace, the power in a nuclear reactor. *No* — "serpent fire" made audible! The latent metaphysical energy thought to lie coiled at the base of the spine: what those involved in yoga and other Eastern disciplines, call "Kundalini".

I stand there mentally toying with the metaphor, then, strangely, think of Carla's vicious harangue, the last night of her last visit. Today I was barely able to protect my daughters when I was *with* them; my actions may only have exacerbated a potentially dangerous situation. How can I expect to be of help to them when they're back with their mother, in a household where her anger might erupt at any moment?

But that situation can't be so dire if they're returning to Seattle of their own choice, after all. I haven't performed that poorly as a single parent have I? No — I dismiss the possibility. Despite her volatile personality, Carla is a loving, nurturing mother. And Seattle has more to offer the girls than growing up here would.

Our encounter with the high desert's Kundalini, lying asleep at its headwaters, coiled at the base of its mountainous spine, wasn't about parenting, I've decided — although in continuing to reflect on this incident marking the end of Zena and Emily's stay, I do feel that it may have something to tell me about the love between fathers and daughters.

On that June day, though, I merely turned and followed the girls up the drive, into the cool shelter of our home in the mountains, where the rattlesnake's rage could no longer be heard.

**END OF STORY**

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