

Snake Medicine

By Alexander Saxton

He was up at five AM again, staring at a ceiling lit up grey by the light that sloshed around the edges of his faded charcoal curtains. It was a wintry light, filtered through grey clouds, and reflected from the faces of grey, frost-rimed tenements, and from the slush-spattered windows and grimy sliding doors of the 504 streetcar.

He'd slept less than four hours. It was the fifth night in a row.

He squeezed his eyes shut. His jaw ached and his throat felt raw, as if he had been screaming.

He could feel sleep lurking nearby, but every time he lunged for it, it slithered just beyond his reach.

After a now-customary hour of struggle, six AM rolled around, and with it came the scratch of the cat at his door. He sighed, letting himself fall out of bed, and then muddled to his feet, groping for the latch. The cat's screaming was a short, blunt knife between his eyes, and he swore under his breath as he rummaged for a can of wet food. A few vile droplets of fluid sprayed over his wrist as he cracked the can and put it down, and the cat shouldered him aside to feed. He turned on the radio so he had something else to ignore.

His roommate wandered in just as he was scraping the last grey breakfast from his plate.

"5am again?" She said.

He guessed he must look bad. He tilted up the knife, and saw his own baggy, shadowed eyes reflected between the flecks and smears of egg.

"Yeah."

"There has to be a reason. Maybe something's happening at 5 that wakes you up, but you don't realize because it doesn't fully wake you up."

"Hm."

"Maybe you should see a doctor."

"Yeah, maybe."

He went to the walk-in three days later. It was a two-hour wait out in the cold.

“You seem to be in decent health,” said the doctor, behind her mask. “Any recent changes in your life? Traumas, that sort of thing.”

“You mean other than everything that’s going on? Nothing I can think of.”

“Hm. Have you tried getting more exercise?”

The question irked him.

“Of course I have,” he lied.

“Well,” said the doctor. “I could prescribe something, but we try not to do that except when we’re sure it’s necessary.” She turned to her computer.

“I’m going to recommend you to a sleep specialist. They’ll monitor you overnight. Okay?”

There was another two-hour lineup behind him. The doctor seemed anxious to move on to the next patient.

“Sure thing,” he said, and gathered up his things.

After several days of phone tag, he was able to organize an appointment for three and a half weeks in the future. In the meantime, he kept waking up at 5am. Not every night, but often enough that he was never able to catch up on sleep. When he tried to go to bed earlier, he spent hours lying awake, never drifting off until after two in the morning.

“Maybe you’re depressed,” his roommate said. It was clear to him that he was, but so what? He couldn’t afford a therapist, and he was in the middle of sleepwalking his way through a contract he couldn’t afford to take the hour-a-week away from. Contracts didn’t land on his lap every day, even before the Pandemic. He didn’t have leverage to build his own schedule.

“Of course I’m depressed,” he said. “I’m depressed because I can’t sleep.”

“I still think something’s happening at 5,” she said again. “Have you tried waking up early on purpose, to see if anything’s going on outside?”

Actually, that was an idea.

He fell asleep as early as he could, setting his alarm for four thirty.

He slept uneasy.

He was walking through the empty, grey city, clutching his aching guts with both hands. He was in agony. He called for help, but the windows all around him were empty and dark. Something rippled under his fingers; something scaly and large was bunching and coiling in his intestines. In his dream, he groaned and doubled up over a trash can, just as nausea wrenched his teeth apart.

And then he woke up with his head pounding and his heart beating against the inside of his sternum. He wiped stale drool from his lips. His mouth was as dry and vile as the inside of a reptile cage. He had a painful need to shit. It was 5am; his alarm was blaring, and it seemed to have been for half an hour.

On a friend's recommendation, he picked up some over-the-counter melatonin. He tried it for about a week, and found that it worked maybe half the time. The other half, it made his nightmares worse, and he would wake dripping with sweat, heart thrumming, and with that leached feeling that comes after a surge of adrenaline drains out of your bloodstream.

After another week like that, he bought a bottle of cold-and-flu medication. That night, he slugged back a plastic dose of thick red syrup, and slept nine hours straight.

"But you're not sick, right?" Said his roommate. There was a subtle edge to her voice, and he knew she meant 'sick' as in 'pandemic'.

"No."

"So you just drank cough medicine to get to sleep."

He shrugged.

"Isn't that, you know..."

"Isn't it what?"

"Sort of a bad precedent?"

A 'bad precedent?'

"Like..." she seemed uncomfortable. "Doesn't that stuff have codeine in it?"

"Not anymore. Not these days."

"Then what is it that puts you to sleep?"

He shrugged.

“Well, whatever it is, it can’t be good for you to be using it for something it’s not meant for.”

He gave her an irritated look.

“I wasn’t planning to make a habit of it,” he said.

But after a few more nights of troubled sleep, he found himself slugging down another, sticky crimson double dose. He fell asleep forgetting to close his door, but luckily, the cat didn’t wake him the next morning.

Usually that meant it had gone outside and found something to eat alive and whole. He didn’t give it a second thought. It was nice to have a bit of quiet, for once. But that evening, as he left to catch the masked-and-overcrowded bus out to the sleep lab, he heard his roommate calling the cat’s name at the back fire-escape.

The lab was a nondescript building in the suburbs: the kind of place you had to reach by walking twenty minutes from the bus, to catch another bus. Really only accessible by car, not that he’d ever be able to afford one of those. Inside, he was struck by how beige the place was. Beige floor, ceiling, carpet, upholstery. Beige magazines, posters, scrubs, Beige staff. Except for the doctors. The doctors were all white.

He wasn’t in the waiting room too long; only an hour-and-a-half, watching slow, freezing drizzle glaze the strip-mall parking lot outside. There was a little shrine set up in one corner of the waiting-room, where photographs, crayon-drawings, and memorial service leaflets were lit by the dim flicker of plastic candles. Two women in scrubs smiled out of the photos, their faces framed by black hair. ‘We miss you’, one of the cards read. He looked away.

Eventually, a technician called his name, and ushered him into a beige chamber with a bed and bedside table, where they placed cool gel electrodes on his body, velcroed black bands around his ribs, and inserted little plastic canals into his nostrils.

“Infrared camera there,” said the technician, gesturing. “Two-way microphone here. Just hit it if you need us.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, ~Sweet dreams~.”

They said it with a sort of ironic tone, like it was the sleep lab’s private joke. The door clicked shut behind them. He sat on the edge of the bed and waited to feel tired.

And surprisingly, he did. Something about the atmosphere of the clinic: maybe its complete, unstimulating beigeness, made sleep feel desirable, inevitable.

And before he knew it, he was lying down, and shortly after that, had sunk into a deep, oblivious sleep.

Delicious sleep. Sleep like the taste of honey and fat; sleep like crystal-sugared dates and olive oil on the tongue. Sleep beyond sleep. For a long time, he was drifting in warm darkness, with the murmur of friendly voices just on the other side of the wall. But then something changed, and he found himself outside in the cold, and there was that pressure on his guts again, and he whimpered for help as it writhed up through his stomach, and into his esophagus, and up, and up, striving to *get out*.

And then, unbearable, it pressed its way into his mouth, forcing his jaws apart, and then he heard blaring machines, and a hissing sound, and then there was a yell, and he was awake in semi-darkness, blinking against the lurid glare of an open door, and somebody was screaming, and someone else was shouting, and the lights went on, and something dark was disappearing into the air vent, and the place was no longer beige; the beigeness was broken by bright spots of scarlet, and one of the technicians was slumped over the end of his bed, staring at her arm as bright blood pumped from torn skin to crimsonize the dull-beige sheets.

“Did someone see where it went?” someone was shouting. “For chrissakes, call animal control. No, after the ambulance! Can’t you see she’s going into shock?”

He sat up in the bed, blinking, not sure if he was still dreaming. His lower body was warm and sticky, and when he looked down, he realized he was drenched in the woman’s blood. Another technician was staring at him in horror, as she desperately tried to stanch her colleague’s bleeding.

“*This way sir, please, this way.*” Someone was gently pulling at him, their voice full of controlled panic, and, shellshocked, he followed, slithering out of bed to leave red footprints on the plastic tile floor, pausing only to rip electrodes off his body. Somewhere in the cold distance outside, sirens were approaching. Passing through another beige door, he found himself in another bedroom, this one with an attached full-bath.

“Get the blood off,” a technician was saying. “There’s clean robes under the console. We’ll come and get you as soon-” a choking sob. “As soon as the paramedics get May out of here.”

The door slammed and he was alone again, in a beige room, and wondering what had happened. The wide, staring eyes of the bleeding woman were imprinted on the back of his mind. May... there had been a June working here too. Were they sisters? What had *happened*? He felt cold, even as he stepped into a scalding shower to watch pinkish blood swirl down the drain.

It was an hour before anybody came for him. He heard paramedics outside, and shortly afterward, a couple of animal control people came through with sniffer dogs. Shortly past six AM, a tired-looking doctor knocked on the door, and ushered him into a room where banked beige computers sat, their bulbous, inner-tube screens greying up with decades' worth of grime.

"I'll be honest," she said. She sounded so tired. "I don't know how to explain what happened. I think it makes the most sense to just show you."

She gestured him into the cracked vinyl of an old swivel chair, and kept six feet's distance by taking a seat at the other end of the room. Her fingers thudded against the mid-aughts keyboard in front of her, and his screen woke up.

Another keystroke thwacked, and a recording began to play on the screen closest him. He screamed the chair forward to squint at the fuzzy picture.

He found that he was watching himself sleep, on pixelated thermal footage from the beige room earlier that morning. He was a grey-white monochrome blob huddled against the cooler greys and blacks of his surroundings. The timestamp read: 4:50am.

As he watched, the sleeping form of his past self began to twitch.

"This is when we started paying attention," said the doctor. "Heart rate and brain activity spiked: muscle activity tripled and you started to hyperventilate. Then, just when we were sending someone in to look at you..."

She struck a heavy key, and the video paused.

"D'you see that?"

He squinted. On her own monitor, she was pointing to the sleeping belly of his past-self, but he wasn't sure what he was supposed to be looking at, unless it was a bulge in the sheets over his stomach.

"Here," She tapped a different key, and the footage began to play again at 50% speed.

He leaned in close enough to fog the old glass screen. It wasn't a bulge in the sheets he was looking at; it was a bulge in his own *guts*. And it was *moving*: coiling, undulating, slithering up to his throat.

"*What the fuck?*"

Suddenly, two more white heat sources entered the frame: it was the two technicians, and they were bent over him, trying to wake him, but he wasn't responding.

"Then," said the doctor. "This happened."

In inhumanly slow motion, he saw his jaws... unhinge. Was the footage doctored? It didn't make sense. The inside of his mouth, warmer than the outside, showed up on infrared as a blaze of white. But then something dark appeared at the back of his throat: something cold that blotted out the heat as it forced its way up through his esophagus, and between his parted teeth.

A dark, angular head, followed by a thick, cold body: a body that shouldn't have been able to fit, even through unhinged jaws.

A snake. A python, thick as a mooring cable, black on the thermal camera, though tinged by the residual heat of his body, oozing from him at point-five speed.

With exaggerated slowness, the two white figures of the technicians recoiled, and then the snake bunched, seven feet of it having unspooled from his mouth, and when one of the technicians made a sudden movement, it struck. White heat spilled across the screen as the technician's blood sprayed: and then the snake recoiled, crashing to the floor where it flowed toward the air-vent, uncanny-quick for all the footage was slowed-down. It vanished through a slit no wider than a child's paperback.

Thunk. Another keystroke as the doctor stopped the video, turning to stare at him with tired, hollow eyes.

"Do you have any explanation for this?" she said. There was a pleading quality to the question. He realized she was just as close to the edge as he was.

"No."

She sighed and took off her glasses, grinding weariness from her eyes with the heels of her hands.

"I don't know what to tell you," she said. "I've been on sixteen-hour days. Most of the people here have been working extra shifts off-site. It's been bad. We weren't ready for any of this."

He waited for her to say something else. He waited a long time.

"I don't know what's wrong," she said at last. "I assume whatever that was... it's... at least it's *out* now. We'll send you to emerg. It'll probably take the rest of the day, but you'll be able to get some tests done. I don't think there's anything we can do to help you here."

“But they’ll be able to help me at emerg?”

“...yeah. Maybe.”

By the time he left, the halls stank of bleach, and the last of the blood was being mopped away in pink streaks. Animal control had found a crimson, winding trail through the vents, but no sign of the snake itself. The doctor had emailed him a PDF to show at the hospital.

He walked out of the clinic and into a grey morning, where last night’s drizzle had hardened into gritty blowing snow. He had the taste of snake in his mouth.

It took him two hours to ride the crowded, coughing bus back downtown to the hospital, and after making his way through screening, he waited thirteen hours for several batteries of tests. He was handed off from doctor to doctor: some exhausted-looking, and some merely jaded and abrupt. Each time he repeated his story, it sounded less real, until eventually he found himself muttering something about ‘exposure to exotic animals’, and a ‘possible parasitic infection’.

It was well past dark when they spat him back out onto the street.

“We should have your results in a couple of days,” the resident had told him. “We’ll call you.”

“What, I’m just supposed to go home?”

“Yep,” said the resident. He was one of the jaded, abrupt ones. He was already flipping through a different person’s chart.

“But-”

“Trust me,” the resident said. “You don’t want to be here right now. It doesn’t look from your file like you’re in any immediate danger. But a hospital in a pandemic is about the least safe place for you to be. Now I’m sorry, but I have a backlog of other patients.”

The resident was already out of the room before he could respond.

Outside in the night, he found himself protected from the falling grit by a metal awning, but not from the chill wind. Among the chain-smoking emphysema patients in their paper-thin gowns, he dialled the number of the sleep clinic doctor.

No answer. He walked home, passing parks full of tents that trembled in the wind, rattling against the hard ground. When he arrived back at the empty apartment, he called again, and the other end didn’t even ring. He wondered if his number had been blocked.

And that was the moment he realized nobody was going to help him.

“How did it go?” his roommate asked.

“Not great. You seen the cat at all?”

“No. I’m starting to worry....”

“Well if he shows up, keep him in your half of the apartment tonight.”

Without saying anything else, he shut himself in his room.

He couldn’t afford to buy a nanny-cam, but put one on his credit-card anyway. It was labelled as same-day delivery, and arrived after only two days, which was pretty good, considering. The cat had yet to return. His roommate was distraught, but he was no help to her. He was so tired he couldn’t bring himself to feel for another human being. He was a grey automaton; he was no longer himself.

He’d ordered the cam from Amazon. They had snakes in the Amazon. His desiccated mind found something significant in that connection as he aimed the camera at his bed that night. He’d been drinking the red medicine again, but the same dose didn’t work as well as it had the first two times. He’d tried to call the sleep lab, but again had had no answer. ‘Whatever it was... at least it’s *out*’, the sleep doctor had said. He wasn’t so sure. He was determined to know.

He was awake the next morning at 5:05am: damp with cold sweat, as he sat at his laptop and pressed play on the nanny-cam recording. For a few minutes, grey images reflected from his dark, tired eyes, and he watched without reaction. He hit the space bar. The image paused. He stared at it in silence for a few moments, and then slammed the laptop shut, leaning back in the chair with his face in his hands.

It had come, just as he’d feared, just before 5AM. It was the same snake. He felt sure of that, though he had no evidence to support the feeling. He didn’t know how it was getting back into his mouth. It always left, but it never came back in.

In the corner of his room, there was an old water hookup for a laundry machine, and one of the holes for the pipes had been cut too big. The recording showed the snake disappearing down into this hole, but when he shined the light from his phone down there, he saw no dark sheen of scale, no glint of light from a slitted eye.

He was making coffee when his roommate woke up. Because of their mismatched schedules, he hadn’t seen her since the night he came back from the hospital.

“Look at you, up and about,” she said. “Get your test results yet?”

“Yeah. Got an email first thing this morning. Nothing showed up on any of them.”

“So what happens now?”

He shrugged. He’d just been asking himself that question.

“So that’s it? Just, ‘we don’t know’, you’re on your own?”

“Seems like it,” he said.

That night he set multiple alarms for 4:58am, and slept with a kitchen knife underneath the pillow. He’d made up his mind. He was going to kill the snake.

Sleep didn’t come easy. Wanting to be sharp when he woke, he hadn’t taken any of the red medicine, and the thought of waking up to red violence was making his heart play against his ribs. He was up until three-am, tossing and turning until the light in his mind went out.

At 4:58, the alarms blared, and his eyes snapped open; his mouth was full of snake; the thing was already halfway out of him; he tried to scream, but gagged on coiling, scaly bulk as he groped behind his pillow for the knife. He couldn’t breathe; the reptile’s weight was on his windpipe, and they tumbled together out of the bed as he tried to wrap a hand around its throat. They crashed hard to the carpeted floor, and the snake hissed, striking his arm, sinking teeth deep into the muscle so that the pain was searing white, white like blood on a thermal camera, worse than anything he’d experienced before. He lashed out blindly with the knife, and felt the heavy steel bite, and scissor deep through waxy scale and muscly bone. The snake thrashed; he was bitten again; the floor was awash with blood, but still he sawed with the knife, meeting resistance when he hit the spinal cord, and then carving through. The thing was dead already by the time the steel ripped free, and it fell in twain to shudder out its last electric pulses on the rug.

Oxygen-starved, his vision going black, he dropped the knife, and seized the back half of the snake to pull it from his throat. He could feel every inch of its dry length rasping his esophagus. Then, wheezing with pain and revulsion, he fell back against the bed-frame and wrapped his arm in sheets to slow the bleeding.

Something red and wet slithered out of the front half of the divided snake. Something furred and half-digested. When he realized what it was, he looked away and fought down a wave of nausea.

Late that evening, he returned from the hospital with his injuries cleaned and bound, and tidied up the mess with a sense of giddy joy, despite the pain. From somewhere, the blood had attracted flies already, and so he opened all the windows, letting in the cold. He packed the carpet, snake and... and cat, into a series of black garbage bags. There were plenty of restaurants in his neighbourhoods, and plenty of dumpsters that already stank of rotting meat.

He hesitated as he threw the bag away. It was no dignified ending for the cat. But for all his giddiness, he still was not himself, and so he disposed of what he had come to dispose, and then went home.

He showered again before bed, and without taking anything, drifted into a deep, untroubled sleep.

...

But at 5AM, red-eyed, he found himself staring at grey footage on his laptop screen, and his tired pupils had shrunk to the size of pinpricks.

He called the clinic one more time. He couldn't even get an answering machine. He called the hospital. An automated phone menu connected him to an automated phone menu, connected him to an automated phone menu, and then a fourth a fifth, and after that back to the first. Your call is important to us. He dropped the phone.

After a long time sitting, staring at a brown spot of dried blood near where the beige walls of his room joined the floor, he made up his mind.

He was tired. So tired. He didn't want to fight the snake again. Whatever was happening to him... all he wanted was to sleep right through it.

And so he dug a duffel bag out of the closet and went out to the pharmacies. By the end of the morning, he had filled the bag and emptied what remained of his bank account. When he came home, the contents of the duffel spilled across his bedspread, like so many drops of blood.

It took more to put him to sleep than it had before. But he had enough red medicine to last a little while more.