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Living with Snakes

“I’d rather have ten snakes in the house than one fly.”

—Mark Twain, 1910

A true story about Gandhi revealed his ability to accept calmly a cobra as it slithered onto his bare legs while holding an outdoor prayer meeting. Meditating deeply, he quieted himself sufficiently to pose no threat to the snake. Eventually, it glided away into the woods behind him, enabling the crowd at the prayer gathering to sigh in relief en masse. But I am no Gandhi, and when snakes took up residence in our house, a twenty-one-year war commenced, beginning in the living room.

As a child, I played with model trains in the cellar of our bungalow, especially during the winter months. An unfinished basement, friends often came to play Ping-Pong under asbestos-covered pipes. Both Mom and Dad regularly fed the coal-fired basement furnace until we converted to oil. My mother cleaned our laundry in the washing machine near the foot of the basement stairs. Although I played in our cellar’s hidden recesses happily, whenever I headed up the stairs, I ran quickly, skipping steps. Once, my mother asked why I always ran up the stairs. I said, “So a snake won’t bite me.”

Growing up on Staten Island, one of the five boroughs of New York City, I learned that poisonous snakes did not live in the wild on the Island. Playing in the fields and woods and climbing trees on the borough’s South Shore during my pre-teen years, I took comfort in this knowledge. Once on my birthday picnic I met a black snake in the grass beside a stream. Startled, I jumped as it sped away. I remember my brother cheerfully playing with a garter snake as it wriggled across our front porch floor. As a boy, I disliked snakes, but on the Island, I never felt at risk by the prospect of meeting up with one. After all, none were poisonous.

It struck me as curious, even regrettable, that an island hosting no poisonous snakes in the wild boasted one of America’s premier venomous snake collections. That distinction persists today at the Staten Island Zoo, which I visited frequently with my parents in the 1950s and early 1960s, always running straight to the Serpentarium upon our arrival. The zoo’s rattlesnake collection still retains its reputation as one of the biggest and most complete in the United States.

At twenty-nine, I moved to northeastern Connecticut with Susie, my wife, and our one-year-old, Abby, pleased to know that our corner of the state had few poisonous snakes. No one I knew encountered copperheads nearby, and while timber rattlers inhabit Connecticut, none of my acquaintances reported running across one. In the western part of the state in a region of outcroppings, an accommodating habitat for copperheads, my brother killed one on his front lawn. Corn, milk, black, grass, and garter snakes were the only members of the suborder Serpentes—legless squamate reptiles possessing a cylindrical body and flexible jaws—I met face-to-face in our part of the state during the first twenty-two years we lived here.

Susie and I began building our house in 1979, two years earlier apprenticing ourselves to two generous carpenters we hired to add a wing to a one-family house in Massachusetts that we purchased with friends. An addition would allow us to convert it into a two-family residence. That apprenticeship gave us the confidence to believe we possessed enough skill to build an entire house on a piece of land we had purchased in Connecticut. For three years, using our newly minted—but limited—carpentry skills, we did just that, building a small, passive-solar home. A windowless basement served as foundation for half the dwelling, the other side anchored to a cement slab.

During the first summer of construction, we hired two high school students of mine to take care of Abby while Susie and I cut boards and banged nails. To minimize disturbing our daughter's naps, Abby slept in a tent a few hundred feet up the hill from where we sited the house. Julie and Debbie checked on her periodically. Whenever Abby awakened, they managed her care if we were busy. At summer's end, upon breaking down the tent and pulling up the tarp on which Abby slept soundly, we found a den of snakes, the first ones we encountered in our new surroundings.

Our house, now over forty years old, sits at the end of a winding dirt road above a marsh. We raised our children in the tiny subculture that developed along that road. Friends purchased two additional parcels on the 0.3-mile lane, eventually dubbed Tull Lane. During the years we constructed our house, these other landowners also went about the business of building their dwellings. A community developed. Forty-three years later we remain friends, even as Susie and I battled our snake problem.

Infrequently, we'd find a snakeskin hanging in our basement yet never met its former occupant. We descended to the basement often, our tools and workbench, exercise bike, and washing machine located there. We surmised that a snake, from time-to-time, detected basement access through the bulkhead. Our resourceful neighbor

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designed a simple system to tighten our cellar door to the frame of the exit into that space. Upon its completion, he pronounced it snake-proof. But the skins of molting snakes continued to appear. Evidence of snakes spooked us, but such reptilian trespass appeared minor, sporadic, and contained. Besides, we realized that though we might be surprised, they would likely not be venomous. Mildly agitated by our intruders, my wife and I still managed to accept our invisible, uninvited lodgers.

In the spring of 2001, after living in our house for twenty-two years, the effort to coexist with these ophidian basement-dwellers deteriorated. Early one evening, Susie and I sat in our kitchen on the western side of the house, the portion built over the basement. From the eastern side, the section on a slab, we heard a thud, as if a picture fell from the wall or bird flew into a window. I went to the living room. Everything appeared in place, no painting dropped to the floor, nothing disturbed. I returned to the kitchen and reported my failure to discover anything unusual. We resumed our former activities, but that lasted only a moment. Unsatisfied with the absence of an explanation for the thump, I again went to the dark living room to ferret out a cause for the noise we heard.

About to give up a second time, I sensed something, barely visible in the twilight, an unfamiliar shape atop our antique-blue cabinet, its surface table height. I stepped closer; the shadowy form now looked snake-like. "How could that be?" I wondered. I called to Susie while stepping back, asking if she had recently seen our toy snake, a brownish object consisting of wooden segments connected by a string running through drilled holes in each tubular piece of wood. She had not, nor had I. We flicked on the light, and there appeared a three-foot snake sliding slowly along the cabinet and wainscoting. It sported markings similar enough to a copperhead that I jumped back involuntarily.

Immediately, my mind in overdrive, I ran through multiple possibilities for responding to the horror of what we observed, an unidentified snake, perhaps poisonous, slowly slinking onto the arm of our couch. We did not want to lose track of it, yet we needed a means to remove it and a fail-proof method of identification. I decided to stay with the snake, which slithered under a throw pillow on the couch, poking its head out to survey its options. We closed doors to contain it. Susie hurried to the garage to find a shovel, then called our neighbors. I wanted something in my hand to kill the unwanted newcomer, if necessary, but I also registered that it would be unsafe for me to arouse the ire of a copperhead if I failed to attack it successfully on my first attempt. My mind raced to the conclusion that taking out a snake on a soft couch, using a shovel, might be difficult, foolish, and messy.

Our 5' 2" neighbor, Sue, wearing hat and gloves, arrived with pail and shovel. We three gazed at the snake, debating next steps, wondering how it entered, ruminating about our problem. Were there more? How best to remove the crusher? I expected an uncomfortable night, believing that the unknowns associated with this snake presented us with a puzzle unlikely to be solved immediately.

Sue's husband, Charlie, appeared minutes after she arrived. He used the time following Sue's departure to race to his shop, where he made a snake-catching tool—a narrow pole about the length of a broom handle. To it he affixed two eye hooks, one at the lower end of the pole, the other close to the upper end. He tied a string to the bottom hook, then looped it through the eye, running the string up the pole through the upper eye hook. Anyone using his creation to snag our snake would simply loosen the string leading through the bottom hook to form a large loop at the end in which to ensnare the intended target, then pull the string tight around the creature and against the pole, keeping the serpent from wriggling free.

Eventually, the snake made its way to the floor. Charlie set the loop on the rug, close to the snake's head. When it lifted up its body, head-first, Charlie slipped the loop around it and pulled it tight. His device worked. We decided to let the snake survive, walking it to the swamp several hundred feet away. Just then, our other neighbor, Donna, arrived. She identified the intrusive critter, northern water snake. While not poisonous, its bite is severe. If a person picks up one, it will bite repeatedly and inject through its saliva an anticoagulant that impedes healing. My worry that the snake was a dangerous copperhead was not without foundation. According to one online source, the coloring of northern water snakes allows them frequently to be mistaken for a poisonous cottonmouth or copperhead.

Shortly after Donna determined its identity, her husband, Michael, came down the hill. Like Charlie, Michael also went to his shop to invent. His snake-catcher, while using the same principle of snagging the snake in a loop, involved dropping a looped wire down a rigid hollow tube, its two free ends poking out of the top of the channel. Once the snake is encircled in the wire loop, then the two free ends of the wire are pulled taut, squeezing the snake's body across the bottom edge of the hollow tube, effectively immobilizing it.

After addressing our emergency, the entire human population of Tull Lane chatted for another twenty minutes. After our neighbors left, Susie and I continued to theorize about how that snake dropped into our living room. Although we slept uneasily that night, imagining a second one finding its way into our home and terrorizing us, we appreciated the exceptional support we received from neighbors, each one arriving quickly in response to our call for help, each

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bringing either an original tool, expert knowledge, or common sense to aid us in solving our predicament. Two neighbors, not just one, devised snake-catching contrivances. Within thirty minutes, both of their brainchildren hand delivered. Shortly thereafter a six-person colloquy developed around snake identification, snake removal, and ophidiophobia.

We awakened the next day peering into every corner, half expecting to find a snake, nervous we might step on one unless we behaved like sleuths. That day our daughter, Becky, arrived home from the Dominican Republic. At night, en route to the porch with a platter of food for dinner, Susie encountered another snake, this one on the threshold separating porch and living room. It measured about three feet. Northern water snakes are big, the average length of females 2' 8", males slightly smaller, averaging 2' 3". The largest of the species can reach 4' 5". Staring at the snake leisurely bridging the span between the door frame, we both sighed, asking questions: "Where did it come from? Do you think there are others? Had it, too, slithered down from the wainscoting, then to the blue cabinet, and onto the couch and rug, and finally to the open porch door?" Neither of us heard a thud like we did with the first one. A mystery!

Now prepared, we grabbed Charlie's snake-catcher. I caught the unwanted guest, taking it to the edge of the swamp. Donna, our local snake expert, happened to be outside—serendipity. Susie, Donna, and Becky looked on from behind me. I pulled back the pole, as if getting ready to cast a fishing line. Becky jumped back unexpectedly. Apparently, with my back swing I had slung the snared snake very close to her face. Happily, Becky's quick reflexes enabled her to avoid both a painful bite and bloody cut that might have had trouble healing. Unaware of her hairbreadth escape, I flung the snake into the marsh. Later, we laughed about my poor judgment when releasing the snake, but I felt mortified by the close call and grateful for Becky's quick response to the patterned blur passing her face.

Both snakes seemed lazy, probably recently brumating. After this disruption to our equanimity, we studied snake behavior. Brumation is similar to hibernation, except brumating snakes avoid falling into deep sleep. During winter, they avail themselves of light sleep, more like a catnap, a low-energy state from which snakes move around intermittently. Brumation enables them to conserve energy and maintain their body temperature.

The second living room snake was thinner than the one we caught the previous evening. Perplexed about its path into our residence, our edginess about living in the house intensified. Would we find another snake tomorrow? When could we relax? Walking through the living room turned us into bloodhounds. We passed through every

room with a hunter's alertness, shifting our gaze from one surface to another, searching behind doors, peering into corners and under chairs, checking beneath pillows, wanting no serpentine surprises. As spring passed into summer, we rationalized that no snake would live inside, instead favoring a summer outdoors. That false belief offered us a measure of solace, yet we never allowed ourselves to relax fully.

Several years without discovering snakes in the house improved our disposition. We plugged up some possible entry points, one inside the circuit breaker closet above the blue cabinet. Believing the site where the main power line for the house poked through the wall might allow a snake to squeeze in, we caulked that area liberally. That likely entry point would account for the thud if a brumating snake woozily dropped onto the surface below the circuit-breaker cabinet affixed to the wall, having slipped beneath its unfastened door made of shiplap. "Yes," we murmured, "that was our vulnerability," attempting to convince ourselves our riddle solved.

Ten years later, however, Susie went to the porch in early spring. Reaching into a built-in locker to grab a porch screen to install, she almost clutched a snake. Our tamped down anxiety instantly resurfaced. Donna, our intrepid, snake-loving neighbor, came down the hill again to identify our guest and help us remove it. She gingerly pulled it by the tail, careful to give it a wide berth in case it coiled and readied for attack. After a few tries and with help from a shovel, we got it to the floor, where I used the wire snake-catching tool Michael fashioned for us years earlier. It worked superbly. Into the marsh I again relocated my catch, a young, brightly-patterned northern water snake.

But how did a member of *Nerodia sipedon*, the formal classification of the northern water snake subspecies, get into the locker in which we stored porch screens during fall and winter, exchanging them for windows in the spring? Puzzled, we sought answers. The storage box spanned the entire thirteen-foot width of the southern wall of the porch, stood about three feet high, and opened from the top, hinges along the wall allowing it to open and close. Deep down between the cinder blocks and the floor of the box, we discovered that snakes could find refuge. The rectangular cavities within the cinder blocks themselves also provided direct pathways to safe havens on the ground below. We could not find an entry point, but we suspected there must be a crack in a cinder block or a passage beneath the porch floor or in the porch wall that became the highway for our snakes. While disappointed that disturbing images of snakes returned to the front of our minds, we soberly assumed that a closed porch locker confined our ophidian interlopers from entry into the house.

Thereafter, we remained haunted by the well-founded

expectation that we might encounter another reptilian antagonist hiding in the storage box. Sometimes we spotted one or two lounging about the top of the screens just under the hinged cover of the locker, but Susie's first sighting trained us to adopt the appropriate caution; whenever we lifted the box cover, we performed that task warily, usually stepping away from the edge of the box, pushing up its cover with a shovel. We got used to seeing snakes inside it, so much so that Susie remarked, "They must have put out a large neon sign pointing '*This Way In*' to their friends." Later, I heard her explain to an acquaintance, "They moved right in, replacing their houses with hotels, just like on a Monopoly game board." Our pleasure in believing the Water Snake Hotel complex remained limited to our porch faded quickly when my wife discovered another large snake slipping through a tiny opening at the top step of our basement stairs into our greenhouse, where it simply stretched out across the bricks, sunning itself, motionless, and thinking about its next move—to slither under the built-in bookshelf along the wall.

I got the call while driving. "How far are you from home?" she asked. "About an hour and fifteen minutes," I replied. "Make it less, they're back," she grumbled. "What do you mean?" I inquired. "Snakes. There's one in our greenhouse," she softly answered, as if to avoid upsetting the trespasser while keeping her eye on its movements. When I returned, the snake, another northern water snake, had fled, compressing itself into a very narrow passage, so small it surprised me that a sizable snake could exit through it, except that Susie witnessed the act. Presumably, this passageway led to our backyard, where previously we had observed only garter snakes.

We realized we had a disquieting problem. If a northern water snake, camping in our basement, used a passage upstairs to exit outdoors to hunt for food, then the interior of our house, not just adjoining greenhouse, could be penetrated by snakes. Questions we suppressed for years began to reassert themselves, provoking in us a persistent, faint anxiety and more questions: Do snakes have access to the main rooms in our house? Are we living alongside snakes? Should we check our boots before putting them on? How many snakes live in the basement, and for how long have they been there? Is there a way to stop them from entering our cellar? Can we effectively eradicate them from our home? Will we ever enjoy living in our house again? If so, when? Do we need to sell?

We imagined a long voyage of uncertainty ahead while determining a way to outsmart the silent intruders, rid them from our home, and live contentedly. Apprehension, uncertainty, and melancholy mobilized Susie to address our problem, launching a full-court press to figure out how to protect our house from the invasion of the northern

water snake. After a period of admirable, single-minded Internet research, she called Catch All Pests (CAP)¹, a company that achieved evaluative ratings higher than its competitors. Though Sunday, Darren—CAP’s public face, its front man and dealmaker—arrived that afternoon. We cut a deal. Clint came the next day, a quiet force who calmly stepped into the eye of Hurricane Water Snake, which flooded our daily existence with anxiety and unpredictability.

Clint placed glue pads in the basement to catch roaming snakes living there. He also put traps in the storage box on the porch and at the top of the cellar staircase, where Susie saw a meanderer enter the greenhouse. Clint plugged up the two holes into the greenhouse with silicone, the one from the basement, the other exiting outside. His calm mien and extensive knowledge of snakes consoled us, giving us hope for a snake-free future. He assured us, “We’ll stick with you to the end. I’ve worked for the company for nine years.” Discovery of his obvious love of reading led me to offer him a few books, as I was trying to reduce the size of my library. I gave him one by John McPhee, for Clint an unfamiliar author, adding that McPhee published several fascinating books exploring aspects of the natural world, a subject area to which Clint gravitated. Soon after his visit, a snake got stuck on a glue pad.

As instructed, we called CAP. Its manager sent someone out to remove the snake (still flexing on the pad), assess the situation, and set out additional pads. The sticky adhesive on these traps is strong. When a snake’s head lands on one while zigzagging toward its destination, it instinctively whips its tail to free its head. In so doing its tail brushes across the pad, that part of its body now also immobilized. Any additional squirming of the snake’s body still free of the glue inevitably moves onto the pad, effectively paralyzing its occupant, surely uncomfortable for the snake, undoubtedly dispiriting to a sensitive, nature-loving spectator, Jain, or Buddhist to contemplate, but a heartening triumph for Susie and me.

During this phase of CAP’s operation, we caught snakes in the basement and storage box on the porch. While pleased, the success of the mission also gave us the willies, our home not snake-proof. On the contrary, it harbored a snake colony. Twice we found two snakes on one pad. Were we operating a brothel for serpents? When we achieved the capture of a ninth snake, two CAP employees at our place that day said our house “is the worst we’ve seen.” CAP personnel came often to address our situation, both to remove snakes and seal up tiny entrances outside that they believed our reptilian nemeses used. We also learned that when “a snake finds a safe haven, it returns often, even daily, even

1 Catch All Pests (CAP) is a pseudonym for this nationwide company’s actual name.

in summer.”

After installing CapGuard² along the house foundation, CAP employees declared it snake-proof, a term we heard applied to our basement door years earlier. The workers left. We inspected the work, circling the house to observe the laborers’ handiwork. Although grateful for the optimism of the CAP team who installed CapGuard, the quality of their work disappointed us. We believed a few places lacked adequate protection against our unwanted guests. The branch manager came to our rural abode to respond to our criticism. He agreed, saying, “I found five or six access points.” Then he remarked, “There goes one into the house right now.”

After poking around, the branch manager confessed to us that our house presented some “unique challenges exceeding the skill set of the guys we sent to your house. We need to rip this out and start again. We need to get it right. This calls for our most experienced crew. I’m sending Jason.” I wanted to hug Brian; I think Susie did, our confidence in the company restored. He assured us the challenge would be addressed effectively. But could it be? Our psychological state seesawed. Whenever we faced the fact that we already invested more than two months in search of a means to solve our problem, our optimism flagged. Frequently, we found ourselves brooding about our dilemma.

When the skilled “A” team arrived to tear out the shoddy, porous workmanship, Jason talked frankly about the earlier installation of the bent metal barrier dubbed CapGuard. Of the previous team’s unsatisfactory work, he said: “It was beyond them. They’re good but not good enough for a job like this.” We welcomed his honesty. I think he knew we needed a hook on which to hang a much-wanted revival of hopefulness, his candor that hook.

Regarding the reinstallation of the right-angled, bent metal strips secured to both the foundation and the ground-facing undersurface of the sheathing—the latter including the plywood and the shingle cladding that overlay the plywood—Jason stressed that any tiny entrances impossible to secure with CapGuard would be plugged with caulk. He explained that mice, like snakes, can squeeze through very small holes—and mice are the snake’s meal of preference. Finding these tiny entrances and fortifying them, he assured us, would stop mice and snakes from gaining entry or getting out. Any snakes imprisoned indoors eventually would die or, more likely, be captured on glue pads, the best defense against such boarders wreaking havoc. He counseled patience: “Snakes can live a long time without eating.”

During the reinstallation of CapGuard, more snakes were caught in the basement and three outdoors, one under our newly

2 An alias for the product’s actual name.

disassembled front deck. Some tiny ringneck snakes found their way to a glue pad in the greenhouse closet; one northern water snake landed there, too. Baffled as to whether they came from outside directly through passages still unplugged or, having now been confined to the basement, discovered new routes upstairs to the closet, we suffered. These captures alarmed us, but they also aided CAP inspectors tracking down points of entry; twice they pointed out snake poop, a linear shape as one might expect. Each snake seizure led to strengthening our fortifications.

As CAP workers removed snakes from our home—usually by bagging the squirmers stuck on glue pads, depositing the bags in their trucks, and hauling them away in bright orange vans decorated with common animal intruders, rodents, and pests—we remained troubled by how new snakes found their way into our cellar. Uncomfortable in our home, Mark Twain’s remark, “I’d rather have ten snakes in the house than one fly,” seemed truly naive. We remained perplexed until educated about the power of pheromones.

Pheromones are chemicals similar to hormones but secreted outside of an animal’s body. Species-specific pheromones influence behavior of animals of the same type. Pheromones left behind by snakes removed from our basement triggered a response among other snakes, drawing them into the very place once occupied by their relatives, making it tricky to eradicate them forever from houses where others of their subspecies once lodged. Pheromones turned out to be the “neon sign” Susie believed pointed “*This Way In*” to their friends. If a snake’s tongue encounters a pheromone, the serpent can detect the pheromone’s scent when it makes contact with the roof of its mouth via a flick of the tongue. Without sealing a house externally to protect it from subsequent snake intrusions, earlier pheromones left behind invite them back. To plug every passage from the outside into our basement, the kind of subterranean vault they like to inhabit, became both necessary and our obsession.

Five months after recruiting CAP, we had snagged twenty-four snakes, the last four trapped in the basement. Clint returned to remove them. His assessment of our situation encouraged us to trust that we were closing in on the capture of any remaining basement-dwellers. More than a week after Clint’s big catch, no snakes were trapped in either the cellar or closet. That quiet period inclined us to believe our house truly buttoned up and safe from serpentine invaders. But finding evidence of snake activity in an area where a rigid plastic pipe brings water from our pump more than three feet underground and through the foundation, we called the branch manager again. Brian showed up right away. He wanted to experiment before plugging it up, so he surrounded the pipe with glue pads. Sure enough, the next day we had a new snake

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hanging on the pads around the hole. He plugged it. Eventually, we caught three more. We then suspected that only one or two snakes, if any, remained in the cellar. Were they still lingering in the basement, we hoped they would find it impossible to divine exits leading to their liberation, instead affixing themselves to glue pads on the cement floor as they slithered beside basement walls.

After three years of restlessness following Susie's call about the snake in our greenhouse, we emerge from our twenty-one-year combat with snakes—a war originating earlier with a baffling thud in our living room—slightly injured but marginally triumphant. So often have these slender squatters, which are good for the wider world but not for us in our living quarters, outwitted our determination to expel them, we find ourselves loath to declare victory. Certainly, we want to believe that our house is sealed successfully, that our current effort amounts to little more than a mop-up operation after contending with twenty-eight snakes throughout this fight. It may take a year or two to confirm our hunch. Until then, our tenacious team of snake-catchers at Catch All Pests continues to reinforce our fortress and counsel patience.

