

*from* “Snake Charmer”

Christian is actually a very good belly dancer – better than most women. He can move his hips and shoulders in ways that should not be possible. He can do a back bend from his knees and touch the top of his head to the floor. He can do Flamenco Arms, the Stationary Shimmy, the Walking Shimmy, the Flat Twist, the Hip Bump, the Four-point Pivot, Chest Isolations, Head Slides, Ribcage Circles, and Full Body Undulations. And he can play the zills, those finger-cymbal thingies.

My fascination with snakes crawling on men having long since abandoned me, I didn’t react at all well when he first told me he was going to learn to dance with a snake. He looked at me on our drive home and said, out of the blue, but in all seriousness, “Elysia is going to teach me to dance with a snake.”

My body seized. I screamed and flapped my arms. I slapped the steering wheel. I contorted my face. I filled the car with shock.

“What is the big deal?” Christian asked when I calmed down. His eyes were pinched under a scowl, and along with his nose and lips, were pointed my way. In Christian’s mind, we might just as well have been discussing a tango with a kitten.

“Why would anyone want to dance with a snake?” I retorted. “Who would even think of such a thing?” I had only just gotten past the fact that my son would soon be dancing in a skirt, while swishing purple veils through the air.

Elysia, who is a fifty-year-old, red-haired, Mother Earth type with dreadlocks, and who is an excellent belly dancer and teacher, usually hosts two or three haflas a year. These are events

where belly dancers from far and wide gather to show off their skills, and sell things like jewelry, coin belts, and costumes. Some of them dance with fans, others with canes, and still others with swords or zills. Elysia's troupe is the only one that dances with snakes, as far as I can tell. And its four or five female members do this calmly and elegantly, their makeup in place, their skirts a-sway, as if dancing with snakes were as natural to them as dancing with their husbands.

I like Elysia who, it took me months to realize, keeps four snakes in two aquariums in her dining room, alongside a portable food pantry, a china cabinet, and the family's dinner table.

One, a rescued snake with pretty orange coloring who was near death when she got him, is separated from the others because he is fragile and vulnerable. There would be snake trouble, she tells me, if the four were in the same tank together. I'm not sure what snake trouble would look like, but I imagine hissing and a huge writhing tangle, as if wads of hose had come to life.

During the months when Christian first began learning to belly dance, I coached Elysia's teenaged son in creative writing, by way of exchange. Every lesson, I walked past the tanks filled with snakes, completely oblivious, lost instead in the Arabic art and colorful scarves she had hung on the living room walls. I petted her cats (the tails of which can feel remarkably like snakes when they rub you from behind and you are not expecting it), and plopped down in a chair next to Sean, who – it seems appropriate to me – likes to write science fiction. He has confided that he's not fond of snakes either, but what can he do?

Both he and Elysia assured me, once I figured out snakes were in the room, that the screen tops on the tanks are locked down. They cannot be opened even when the snakes extend themselves up the clear sides and press their heads to them, as they are, I've noticed, sometimes inclined to do. They'll slink around and around the tanks, winding their way over their water

dishes and through the fake tree branches and toilet paper rolls Elysia has placed strategically for their entertainment, before finally extending up toward the lids. I see their long underbellies, cream-colored and with ridges, looking like tiny washboard roads. I see their tongues, pink Y's, poke at the screening. I notice that the "locks" are nothing more than twisted wire off old hangers. How strong can they possibly be?

When I teach Sean writing at the table, I sneak peeks at the snakes, monitoring their behavior, my feet planted firmly on the floor in the event that I should have to bolt. I can only imagine what *that* would look like: a frantic sixty-year-old woman abandoning her student, then racing between a male and female belly dancer and out the front door into the street.

Christian has explained to me that snake dancing had sacred significance in the ancient Middle Eastern world – the same way he's explained that belly dancing originated not as a dance of seduction, but to help women in childbirth.

"Snakes are part of belly dancing," he said. "If I'm going to belly dance, I have to dance with snakes." He was matter-of-fact about it, as if he were telling me that he had to conjugate verbs in order to pass his English class. The fact that he is not pregnant, and that he is not even remotely Middle Eastern, but is instead a part-German, part-Scot male from Michigan is of no significance.

One day, after a couple years of belly dancing lessons, Christian came home from the Renaissance Festival to tell me that he'd met a professional photographer who wanted to take pictures of him with a snake as a prop. I have no idea how they got into this conversation, but you would think that by now nothing would surprise me.

“What?!” I said. I have told Christian that, make no mistake, he will not be getting a snake of his own as long as he lives with his father and me.

“I’m going to have to borrow one of Elysia’s,” he observed. I could tell by looking at the set of his face that he’d devoted a bit of time to problem-solving how he was going to get a snake for the photo shoot. He had made a tremendous leap of self-centered faith.

“She’s not going to lend you a snake!” I said. My voice got louder. I mean really, you don’t borrow a snake like you would, say, a shovel or a cup of flour. What I meant as I spoke was, “I am absolutely NOT going to drive you to a photo shoot with a snake in the car!” I had visions of one escaping its carrying case and slithering around my neck from behind the head rest while I drove down the interstate at 80 miles an hour. This particular vision made my skin crawl.

Christian went back to the Renaissance Festival the following weekend, and when he returned home, said he had come up with an alternative.

“The photographer can get a snake for me. He has a friend who’s agreed to lend us his boa constrictor.” Christian shined his enthusiasm on me as he said this.

“A boa constrictor!” I roared. “You can’t just whip a boa constrictor around like it was nothing. A boa constrictor can kill a person! How big is this boa constrictor?”

I pictured one of those mammoth things, long as a train and as big around as Samson’s thigh, making a U shape across my one-hundred-and-ten-pound son’s shoulders while he attempted to hold it aloft and the photographer to position his lights.

“You don’t want to get one of those things anywhere near your neck,” I said.

“I don’t know how big it is,” Christian responded, “but it doesn’t matter. It’s a *trained* boa constrictor.

“Geez, Mom,” he said, “get a grip.”

“A trained boa constrictor,” I said. “How trained can a boa constrictor possibly be?”

I looked at Christian, all living earnestness before me, all wanting so much to be *somebody* in the world. I held my finger and thumb up in the air, made a circle the size of a small pea, and declared, “You can’t train a boa constrictor! They have brains this big! It’s not like it’s a monkey or something!”

Weeks later, after the argument had simmered down, Christian, using a patient voice, assured me that, in fact, a snake can be trained. He explained that a dancer has to train a snake to be comfortable on a human body so that when the dancer moves the snake doesn’t, as he put it, *freak out*.

“When you move too fast the snake tightens its grip on your body,” he said. “For example, if you’re spinning and it’s around your neck it’ll freak out and choke you.”

He added for good measure, “They like to climb and weave in and out, such as in jewelry and items of clothing.” Then he mentioned Elysia. “... she was dancing with a snake in a live show once and she had hoop earrings on. The snake got halfway through an earring and got stuck. She had to stop the music, get the snake untangled, then keep going.”

A boa constrictor being his only other option for the photo shoot, I cannot tell you how grateful I was to this woman when, the following week at his lesson, Elysia surprised me by saying that, yes, Christian could borrow one of her corn snakes providing that, A) it wasn’t too

cold outside to transport it, since snakes don't do well in the cold, and, B) she could ride along with us in our car to keep an eye on it.

I smiled weakly at her. I was thinking, *Ride with us? I don't think so.*