The Sneaky Snake Story

Over the course of our nearly fifty years of marriage, my spouse has been affectionate nicknamed “Nature Boy.” Much like Kipling’s Mowgli in “Jungle Book,” he is a little naughty, but has a respectful kinship with all animals. In our house, most “critters” are never exterminated without his careful inspection to ensure that taking the poor creature’s life is necessary. I learned to go along with this, with two exceptions. I passionately dislike anything rodent related: mice, rats, hamsters, possums, etc. And snakes - I hate snakes. They were cursed by God in the Garden of Eden and that’s good enough reason for me! In general, my loving life partner respects these boundaries, but occasionally, his fascination with the natural supersedes my fears and we end up in some interesting situations involving wildlife.

In May of 1979, we moved from a suburban setting to a small five-acre farm in south Texas with our three young daughters. Like the city-turned-country-dwellers of “Green Acres” fame (Google it), we embraced farm life. We populated our property with chickens and rabbits, grew our own vegetables and occasionally hunted small game on our modest estate. Despite our delight with country living, there were unexpected challenges, like skunks who ate chicken eggs and armadillos that wreaked havoc in our gardens. And of course, there were snakes. Our city-turned-country dogs and a few feral cats kept the majority of these unwanted vermin at bay, but I learned to wear closed-toe shoes and shoot a .22 caliber rifle!

We erected a good-sized chicken coop adjacent to a small barn about a hundred yards from the house. I’d open the coop during the day to allow the chickens to graze free-range style, then in the evenings, our Irish setter/Ridgeback, Nancy, and I would round them up. “C’mon, Nancy,” I’d tell her. “Let’s go get the chicks!” Like a sheep dog, Nancy would herd the flock back to the coop. I loved my chickens, especially the mama hens who provided us with lots of fresh eggs, and who doesn’t love baby chicks? Because of predators, we always locked them in the coop when we were away from the property.

One afternoon, as we returned home from errands and pulled into our driveway, I heard a commotion in the direction of the chicken coop. “Take Nancy with you and go let the chickens out,” I told our oldest, who was seven at the time. I was getting the baby out of her car seat when the oldest came running back to the car, out of breath, wide-eyed.

“What is it?” I asked, concerned by her obvious fright. Still out of breath, she shook her hands up and down and tried to speak. “Ss..ssnnn...” she stammered, and hesitated. “Ss..ssnn....” she repeated, tears welling up in her eyes. I was getting anxious.

“Honey, what is it? What is out there?” I raised my voice and put my hands on her shoulders.

“SSNNAAAAKKKE!!!” she finally burst out as the tears poured down her cheeks. “It’s a BIG one, Mama!”

I felt like Indiana Jones in that first movie. Snake! Why did it have to be a damn snake? My feet went cold, and my stomach knotted up.

“A snake?” I asked. “Where? Did it bite you? How big?” The questions fired like bullets from my mouth as I tried to steady myself and comfort my panicked child at the same time.

By this time, Nature Boy was on the scene and headed down to the chicken coop to investigate. The girls and I retreated to the safety of the house, waiting for their pioneer daddy to report back.  He returned in a few minutes, with Nancy trotting behind him.

“Well, it’s a big snake all right,” he smiled. “Probably close to five feet long. Nothing harmful - a rat snake. Looks like it squeezed through the chicken wire, helped himself to a couple of baby chicks for lunch, then couldn’t get back out through the wire after that.” My heart sank as I thought of my sweet fuzzy yellow babies being downed by a nasty giant serpent.

“So, are you going to kill it?” I asked him.

He seemed shocked. “Of course not. It’s a rat snake, honey. They’re not harmful, they’re our friends. They even eat rats and mice.” He flashed a teasing grin at me. The fact that this snake was not venomous didn’t cheer me.

“Apparently they eat baby chicks as well,” I muttered. “That doesn’t sound ‘harmless’ to me! So, what are we going to do if we aren’t going to kill it?”

“I figured we’d take it in the truck down the road to the big ranch and let it go over there. It’s pretty lethargic right now because it just ate, but we need to move it pretty soon.” My skin began to crawl at the thought of sharing the front seat of our tiny Ford Courier pickup with a large snake, no matter how innocuous it was.

“Are you serious?” I shot back at him. “And what do you mean ‘we?’ You can’t move it by yourself?” He seemed amused, but I could also tell by his face that he wasn’t teasing me.

“Look, dear,” he started, “we really don’t need to kill this poor thing; it doesn’t know the difference between a field mouse and a baby chick. These snakes do more good than harm around here by keeping rodent populations down, and it’s too big for me to take in the truck by myself. You can drive and I’ll hold the snake. Unless of course, you’d rather hold the snake.” I almost hurled the can of tomatoes I was putting away at his smirking face. But I knew we were going to move that snake, no matter how much I protested.

I called my neighbor Barb to come sit with the girls for a few minutes while we ran our “errand.” I grabbed the truck keys and carefully slid behind the wheel of the truck as my spouse settled into the passenger seat with the snake in hand. I sidled as close to the driver’s door as I could, to which he quipped, “It’s half asleep; it’s not going to bite. They don’t bite anyway, they just open and swallow.” He was going to make this as much fun for himself as possible - at my expense. I gritted my teeth, fired up the engine and peeled out of the driveway.

“Hey, take it easy!” he laughed. “You might wake it up!” I shot him a dirty look. As we bounced up and down on the caliche road toward the ranch gates, I noticed the snake writhing a bit more.

“Hey, seriously,” he said, the humor fading from his voice. “This thing is waking up!” I watched in horror as the snake began squirming its way out of his lap and onto the floorboard of the truck.

“Don’t let it come over here!” I pleaded, while the truck nearly swerved off the road.

“Just watch where you’re going,” he barked, this time not laughing. Despite his grip, the snake slid out of his arms and was making its way under the seat. As we pulled up to the gates of the ranch, I slammed on the brakes and jumped out. He opened his door and leaned in to try and retrieve our reptilian passenger.

“Damn it!” he muttered. “The danged thing has wrapped itself around the springs under the seat. You’re going to have to help me get it out.”

I stared at him. “What do you mean?” I asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

“I need you to try to uncoil it while I try to pull it this way.” I began to feel nauseous.

“Seriously? What if it bites me?” He could tell from my rising tone that I was genuinely terrified.

“Just try to wrap the back end away from the springs and I’ll try and uncoil it from this end,” he said patiently.

We worked from both ends for several long minutes on this critter, who was obviously not aware that we were trying to set it free. I began to notice an extremely pungent musky odor permeating the cab of the truck.

“Ugh!” I groaned. “What’s THAT??” Nature Boy shook his head and sighed.

“Defense mechanism. Like skunk spray. Supposed to repel predators.”

I gagged and choked, “It’s working!”

After struggling with our stinky serpentine captive for some long minutes, the snake finally sensed freedom and began slithering toward the door of the truck. With one final tug, Nature Boy freed and carried him triumphantly to the edge of the ranch gates.

“Make sure it goes *away* from our property,” I yelled at him. He retorted with a grin, “No worries, scaredy cat! But I told him to come visit the next time he’s in the neighborhood! And to bring his family!”

It’s a miracle we’ve survived 50+ years together.