

Also by Carl Hiaasen
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Hoot

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SQUIRM

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For all those who stand up



ONE

This one kid, he got kicked out of school.

That's not easy to do—you need to break some actual laws. We heard lots of rumors, but nobody gave us the straight story.

The kid's name was Jammer, and I got his locker.

Who knows what he kept in there, but he must've given out the combination to half the school. Kids were always messing with my stuff when I wasn't around.

So I put a snake inside the locker. Problem solved.

It was an Eastern diamondback, a serious reptile. Eight buttons on the rattle, so it made some big noise when people opened the locker door. The freak-out factor was high.

Don't worry—the rattlesnake couldn't bite. I taped its mouth shut. That's a tricky move, not for rookies. You need steady hands and zero common sense. I wouldn't try it again.

The point is I didn't want that rattler to hurt anyone. I just wanted kids to stay out of my locker.

Which they now do.

I set the diamondback free a few miles down Grapefruit Road, on the same log where I found him. It's important to exit the scene fast, because an adult rattlesnake can strike up to one-half of its body length. Most people don't know that,

and why would they? It's not a necessary piece of information, if you live a halfway normal life.

Which I don't.

"What does your dad do?"

I hear this question whenever we move somewhere new.

My standard answer: "He runs his own business."

But the truth is I don't know what my father does. He sends a check, Mom cashes it. I haven't seen the guy since I was like three years old. Maybe four.

Does it bother me? Possibly. Sure.

I've done some reading about this, how it can mess up a person when his parents split, especially when one of them basically vanishes from the family scene. I don't want to be one of those screwed-up kids, but I can't rule out the possibility.

Mom doesn't say much about Dad. The checks always show up on time—the tenth of the month—and they never bounce. We might not be rich, but we're definitely not poor. You wouldn't believe how many pairs of shoes my sister owns. God, I give her so much grief.

The way I look at it, Mom doesn't get a free pass just because she doesn't want to talk about my father. That's not what you'd call a healthy, open approach to an issue. So I stay on her case, though not in a mean way.

"What does he do for a living?" I'll say, like I've never asked before.

"Well, Billy, I'm not exactly sure what he does," she'll begin in the same tight voice, "but I can tell you what he *doesn't* do."

Over time, based on my mother's commentary, I've scratched the following professions off my Phantom Father list:

Astronaut, quantum physicist, lawyer, doctor, heavy-metal guitarist, veterinarian, architect, hockey player, NASCAR driver, jockey, plumber, roofer, electrician, pilot, policeman, car salesman, and yoga instructor.

Mom says Dad's too claustrophobic to be an astronaut, too lousy at math to be a quantum physicist, too shy to be a lawyer, too squeamish to be a doctor, too uncoordinated to play the guitar, too tall to be a jockey, too hyper for yoga, and so on.

I don't like this game, but I'm making progress, information-wise. Mom's still touchy about the subject, so I try to take it easy. Meanwhile, my sister, Belinda, acts like she doesn't care, like she's not the least bit curious about the old man. This fake attitude is known as a "coping mechanism," according to what I've read.

Maybe my father is a psychiatrist, and one day I'll lie down on his couch and we'll sort out all this stuff together. Or not.

At school I try to keep a low profile. When you move around as much as my family does, making friends isn't practical. Leaving is easier if there's no one to say goodbye to. That much I've learned.

But sometimes you're forced to "interact." There's no choice. Sometimes staying low-profile is impossible.

The last week of school, some guy on the lacrosse team starts pounding on a kid in the D-5 hallway. Now, this kid happens to be a dork, no question, but he's harmless. And the lacrosse player outweighs him by like forty pounds. Still, a crowd is just standing around watching this so-called fight, which is really just a mugging. There are dudes way bigger than me, major knuckle-draggers, cheering and yelling. Not one of them makes a move to stop the beating.

So I throw down my book bag, jump on Larry Lacrosse, and hook my right arm around his neck. Pretty soon his face goes purple and his eyes bulge out like a constipated bullfrog's. That's when a couple of his teammates pull me off, and one of the P.E. teachers rushes in to break up the tangle. Nobody gets suspended, not even a detention, which is typical.

The dorky kid, the one who was getting pounded, I didn't know his name. The lacrosse guy turns out to be a Kyle something. We've got like seven Kyles at our school, and I can't keep track of them all. This one comes up to me later, between sixth and seventh period, and says he's going to kick my butt. Then one of his friends grabs his arm and whispers, "Easy, dude. That's the psycho with the rattler in his locker."

I smile my best psycho smile, and Kyle disappears. Big tough jock who likes to beat up kids half his size. Pathetic.

But lots of people are terrified of snakes. It's called *ophidiophobia.* The experts say it's a deep primal fear. I wouldn't know.

During seventh period I get pulled out of class by the school

"resource officer," which is what they call the sheriff's deputy who hangs out in the main office. His name is Thickley, and technically he's in charge of campus security. He's big and friendly, cruising toward retirement.

"Billy, I'm going to ask you straight up," he says in the hallway. "There's a rumor you've got a snake in your locker. A rattlesnake."

"A live rattler?" I laugh. "That's crazy."

"Can we have a look?"

"No problem. Who's *we*?"

"Me. Just myself."

"Sure, Officer Thickley. You don't need to ask first."

"Oh, I always ask," he says. "See, if I show respect for the students, they'll show respect for me. It's a two-way street."

"Be my guest," I tell him. "You can just pop the lock, right?"

"I'd like you to come along with me."

"But I really can't miss this class," I say. "Mrs. Bowers is reviewing for the final."

"Please, Billy. I'm not a fan of snakes."

We walk down the hallway to my locker. Thickley stands at least ten feet behind me while I open the door.

"Here you go," I say.

"Holy crap!"

"It's not real, man." I dangle the rubber snake, its tail jiggling. "See? Just a toy."

The color returns to Thickley's face. I bought the joke

snake for like three bucks at a party store. It's black and skinny, and doesn't look anything like a diamondback rattler. They had it on the same aisle with the fake vomit and dog poop.

"Billy, why have you got that thing in there?"

"Because other kids keep breaking in and messing with my stuff. You knew Jammer, right? This was his locker before he got expelled."

"Oh," says Thickley. "Then we should get you a different one."

"No necesito."

"But the locker still smells like Jammer's . . . stuff."

"Is that what stinks so bad?"

Thickley says, "I'll get you a can of Febreze."

You're probably thinking: *This is a disturbed young man.*

Based on what happened with me and the rattler, right?

But I've been catching snakes since I was a little kid, and I know what I'm doing. Usually I don't handle the poisonous ones, because a split-second mistake will put you in an ambulance, speeding to the E.R. You might not die from the bite, but from what they say, the pain is extreme.

Right now at home I've got a corn snake, a king snake, two yellow rat snakes, and a banded water snake, all non-venomous. I can't say "harmless" because the water snake is mean and nasty. Honestly, the rattler was way easier to handle.

I never keep a snake for more than a week or two. They

stay out in the garage, inside dry aquarium tanks with lids that screw down tight. My mother isn't thrilled about the arrangement, but she's gotten used to it. She says it's safer than wakeboarding or BASE jumping, neither of which is on my list of future hobbies.

A wild snake won't hurt anybody, as long as you give it some space. That's true for rattlers, same as the others.

"What is *wrong* with you," my sister often says. This is never a question. "These aren't normal pets."

"They're not pets, Belinda. I don't *own* them."

"At least a puppy gives you love. A snake gives you nothing but a blank stare." My sister, the comedian.

In a few months she's leaving for college—Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Big-time school. Good for her.

Belinda says she's looking forward to northern winters, but she hasn't got a clue. Like me, she has spent her entire life in Florida, the place everybody up north wants to be every January.

She didn't know about the rattlesnake, of course. Neither did Mom. They steer clear of my aquarium tanks in the garage.

I'm holding the king snake when Mom pokes her head out the door and says, "What happened at school today, Billy? Put that creepy thing away and come inside."

Turns out the dorky kid—Chin is his last name—he friended my mother on Facebook. Who does that? He sent her a message thanking me for saving him from the beatdown in D-5. He said nobody's ever stuck up for him before.

See, this is why I'm not on social media. Way too much human contact.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Mom asks.

"'Cause it was no big deal."

"Fighting is too a big deal. You've got a week left of school before summer. Can you please try not to get kicked out?"

"They won't kick me out, Mom. I've got straight A's."

"But what if you'd hurt that other boy?"

"Only thing I hurt was his shiny blond ego."

She sighs. "We've had this discussion, Billy."

"What—I'm supposed to turn the other way when I see something bad going down?"

"No, of course not, no. What you should do is immediately report it to a teacher. Or run to the office and tell somebody. That's how cases of bullying are supposed to be handled. It says so in the school Code of Conduct."

I have to chuckle. I'm not trying to disrespect my mother, but seriously—the Code of Conduct? Kyle the lacrosse star was punching that poor kid in the head. Come on.

Next day, I notice Chin eating by himself in the cafeteria. He's got a bruised eye and white gauze taped over one ear. He never looks up from his lunch tray, so he doesn't see me.

I walk straight to the lacrosse kids' table, sit down next to Kyle, and start eating my ham-and-fried-egg sandwich. He just glares at me. It's not what you'd call a bonding moment.

One of Kyle's jock friends tells me to move to another table.

"Aw, but you guys are so cool," I say. "I want to be just like you. Talk the same cool way. Wear the same cool clothes. Hang with the same cool girls. It's truly an honor to sit with you here at your special cool table. Seriously, this lunch is the high point of my entire life."

And they thought *they* were pros at sarcasm.

"Move it, Snake Boy!" the kid barks.

I can't help but laugh. Is this what they're calling me now?

"So, you guys are into reptiles, too?" I put down the sandwich, whip out my phone.

Kyle's angry, but nervous at the same time. Doesn't say a word.

I google a picture of a wild-hog hunter who got bitten by a diamondback over near Yeehaw Junction. That's a real place, you can look it up. The hog hunter's arm is swollen thick as a pine stump. His fingers look like boiled purple sausages. I hold up the phone so that Kyle and his all-jock posse can see the photo.

"That's what can happen," I say, "when you're not careful."

Kyle goes pale and edges back his chair. "Dude, you *are* a total psycho."

"Can I have the rest of your Doritos?" I ask pleasantly.

They all get up, snatch their trays, and walk off, Kyle in the lead.

FYI, that hog hunter didn't die from the snakebite. He was back in the woods a month later—but way more careful.

Kyle won't bother Chin again. That's my guess.

The night before the last day of school, Mom's in the kitchen working on the household budget. She has a yellow notebook, two sharpened pencils, and a calculator. I notice the monthly check from my father on the table. His name is printed on it, but no address.

Mom doesn't care if we see the check, but she always cuts up the mailing envelope and throws away the pieces—which I later dig out of the garbage can and try to tape back together.

Usually it's impossible, because the snipped pieces are as small as confetti, but on this particular night she must have been in a hurry with the scissors. When she's not looking, I collect the fragments of the envelope and smuggle them to my room. This time they fit together like a miniature jigsaw puzzle, and it's easy to read the return address printed in the upper left-hand corner.

So I walk back to the kitchen and say, "Mom, how much is a plane ticket to Montana?"

"What are you talking about?"

I show her the taped-together envelope.

She frowns. "We can't go anywhere this summer. I've got a brand-new job here, remember?"

"They've got Uber cars in Montana."

"I doubt that," Mom says. "Uber tractors, maybe."

My sister and I don't approve of her working for a car-service app, because it's so dangerous on the roads. Florida has possibly the worst drivers in the universe. Also the most trigger-happy.

But Mom said she was bored with accounting and wanted a job where she could meet new people every day.

"Let me fly out there by myself," I tell her. "I can pay for it from my savings."

"And where would you stay?"

"With Dad. Where else?"

"But he didn't invite you, Billy."

"I'm inviting myself."

Mom looks sad. "He's got a whole new life now, honey."

"That's bull," I say. "Just because you get a new zip code doesn't mean you get a new life. Look at *us*."

She closes her eyes for a moment, then says: "I wish I could let you go, but it's not a great idea. He got remarried."

"Doesn't he still ask about me and Belinda?"

"I send him pictures."

"That's it?"

"Let's not talk about this now, Billy."

Back in my room, I go online to check the balance of my bank account: $633.24. This is what I've saved up from Christmases and birthday presents, and also from working at Publix for five weekends until I couldn't stand it anymore. Bagging groceries requires friendly conversation with strangers, which I'm not especially good at.

Truthfully, I'm surprised I've got so much cash in the bank. There's a travel site offering $542 round-trip tickets from Orlando to Bozeman, Montana, so I write Mom a check and slip it into her handbag after she goes to bed.

Then I "borrow" her credit card to order the plane ticket off the airline's website.

The last day of school is short because I've got only one final exam, in algebra. I'm done at noon, and Mom is waiting in the parking lot. She found my check in her purse, and she's angry.

"You are *not* going to Montana," she declares.

"It's a nonrefundable ticket."

"Don't be a smart-ass, Billy. I don't even have your father's phone number!"

"Then how do you know he's married?"

"He told me in a letter. This was a few years ago."

"Were you mad?"

"I'm mad he doesn't call you guys. That's all."

"And you seriously have no idea what he does for a living?"

Mom sighs. "He says he's working for the government—whatever that means."

"How come you never told me?"

"Because I was embarrassed I didn't know more."

I reach over and squeeze her arm. "If he doesn't want to see me, I'll come straight home. That's a promise."

She says, "This is all my fault."

"Please don't cry. It's just a plane ride."

But she knows better than that. So do I.

Too much time has passed. I need to talk to the man.