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Emergency Exit

by

David Rogers

There were snakes in her trailer. Sometimes they talked. Afterwards, she didn't know if they were real. That didn't mean she shouldn't listen. They were blacksnakes, anyway, harmless, and she figured they ate mice. She knew the mice were real.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Samson asked.

"Sleeping with your boyfriend, I expect." Jordan did not have or want a boyfriend, now, but Samson didn't need to know that. She figured he wasn't actually gay. Bi, maybe. She saw how he looked at her legs, warm days. He let her park her trailer on his farm, as he called it. The main things the farm produced, besides whatever came out of the barn, were coyotes, blackberry vines, and various small trees growing in the abandoned fields. He charged her no rent, she knew, so she wouldn't tell about the lab in the barn. At least, he hoped she wouldn't tell.

He probably thought not charging rent made him some kind of philanthropist.

The old bus, yellow, was half-hidden in underbrush, a couple dozen feet off the long, circuitous, dirt-and-gravel drive that led back to the gray house. In another year or two, the bus would be completely hidden by saplings and honeysuckle, at least until winter came. Vines curved over the wheels.

Inside, summer heat made it smell of rubber and grease and mold. It reminded Jordan of the gym locker room, back when she was in high school. The bus was full of junk—used clothes, chipped coffee cups, old car parts, starter motors, generators, pumps, mufflers, the stripped-out bell housings of transmissions. A washing machine full of empty beer and whiskey bottles. Small branches grew through missing windows.

She pushed aside a cache of rodent-besmirched *National Geographic*s, covers discolored and wrinkled by rain and age. The final few feet between her and the back of the bus were blocked by trash bags full of what felt like clothes. She moved them without looking inside. A dented toaster, once made of shiny metal, now corroded, lay on its side on top of a wooden box, about

three feet long and a couple of feet wide, eighteen inches high. When she picked up the toaster, a small green snake wiggled out and disappeared in a crevice between the trash bags.

The box rested against the bottom of the rear door. She had seen it through the glass, yesterday, coming back from her ginseng hunt, and somehow felt drawn to it. The part she could see through the window said *Dynam*—, the rest of the word obscured by the door's metal frame. She could think of only two words that started that way. *Dynamite*, and *dynamo*. Make that three. *Dynamic*, as in *Duo*. The *Batman* TV show's theme started to run through her head. The show was older than she was, but she'd seen reruns when she was a kid. And now Adam West was dead. Him and a million others.

She pulled the rope handles fastened to either side of the box. The one on the left broke, but the box moved six inches, so she saw the rest of the word. *Dynamite*, of course. She brushed a thick layer of dust off the top of the box, and read the other words, *Caution* and *Explosives*.

The box made a noise.

Or rather, something in the box must be making the sound, a low-pitched rumble. She felt it in the soles of her feet, too. The world's largest dog, a last warning growl before it sprang on the intruder.

The rumble stopped, replaced by a high-frequency whine.

Jordan backed away from the box. The whine ceased. No rumble.

She stepped closer. The rumble began once more, then the whine. She thought of lost puppies, or kittens.

She stepped away. The sound stopped.

She stepped closer. This time, just the whine. Definitely sounded like kittens. She knew an invitation when she heard one.

Also, she knew there were no kittens in that box. It had been buried under too much stuff for even a cat looking for a safe place to give birth to find. Nor did kittens rumble like angry German Shepherds.

The not-kittens fell silent. She heard faint voices, human voices, and looked out the windows of the bus, though she knew they, too, came from the box.

She pulled the rope handle knotted through the top, cautiously, as instructed, expecting it to break. The top came up an inch, stiff hinges creaking. She started to put fingers under the lid, thought better of that idea, pulled a large cooking fork from a box of mismatched kitchenware, and used it to pry the box open.

A dark circle spread, black as midnight, and mushroomed out of the box to form an oval three feet wide at the center, extending to the roof of the bus. It looked deeper than the old well behind the farmhouse.

She dropped the lid. It flapped back over the top of the box with a dull thump, and the black oval disappeared. She saw only the dirty back window of the bus and the woods beyond.

She opened the box again, stared into the seeming abyss, and shut the box to watch the dark give way to a green summer day.

The third time, she pushed a child-sized cowboy boot from one of the boxes into the oval. The toe vanished when it touched the darkness. A second later, the rest of the boot was pulled from her hand.

"Hello?" Jordan said, staring at the oval, as if she would see something if only she looked closely enough. "Hello? Is someone there?"

No answer. Cicadas rattled in the woods.

She closed the box and looked for the

boot, which of course she did not find.

However, on the floor beside the box she did find a notebook, a pocket-sized three-ring binder. On the first page, in block letters, someone had printed *The Care and Feeding of the Oval*. She flipped through the pages, hoping for information, but found only a single ominous entry on the second page: "The portal must be fed on a regular basis, or it will grow voracious."

Fed? Fed what? Apparently, cowboy boots would do in a pinch.

She opened the lid again, still pushing with the fork, and watched the dark oval bloom from the box. Her hand twitched. It wanted to reach for the silky darkness, When she was a kid, a seventh-grade school trip included the Empire State Building. She thought about the view from the top deck, how nobody said so, but when you looked down, you had to wonder how it would feel to fall, to fly, if only for a few terrifying, glorious seconds. Her hand still wanted to touch the darkness, caress it like velvet, or the fur of a cat, the petals of a rare orchid. It should feel cold, even in summer heat.

She picked up a coffee mug with a broken handle and stepped toward the oval. She tossed the mug. Like the boot, it disappeared without a sound. The dark oval did not so much as flicker.

In stories and movies, when people went through the portal, the gate, the wormhole, the rabbit hole, the mirror, whatever it was called, they always had a terrible time, if they made it home at all. It never worked out easily. If they ever made it back, something tragic was sure to happen first. Yet they could not resist. Just as she had not resisted opening the box. She was no Pandora, though. Why should she have thought it was anything except a box?

Jordan asked herself how she knew it

was a gate or portal. How did she know the boot and the cup went anywhere? What if the objects that went in just ceased to exist? Her instincts told her that shouldn't happen, but then her instincts were not trained to deal with whatever was in that box.

This discovery needed a lot of thinking over. She closed the lid, put the bags back on top, and left the bus.

"Oh, you knew it wasn't just a box," Mother Blacksnake said. She lay half-hidden under the towels when Jordan stepped out of the tiny, trailer-sized shower. "You knew it very well." Her obsidian eyes glittered in the moist air.

Jordan didn't disagree. Only partly because it seemed silly to argue with a snake. Getting no response, Mother slipped away behind the sink.

"What's the deal with the old bus?" Jordan asked that evening. "Does it run?" She knew the answer, but it was a way to turn the subject.

"Ha," Samson said. "Probably not since 1992. Why?"

"Just wondering."

He took a long drink of beer and asked, "Find much green gold?"

She poked the bag with a bare big toe. "Couple pounds. Probably worth more than what you cooked up in the barn today. And it won't blow up." Actually, she'd spent too much time in the bus, and filled the bag with leaves and grass, so Samson would believe she'd been cutting ginseng. He wasn't going to look in the bag. She felt protective, almost proprietorial, about whatever was in the box.

"Who does it belong to?"

"You cut it, it's yours," he said, looking at the bag and then her.

"The bus, I mean."

“Roda, I guess. She used it to clear out the antique store when she closed it.”

“The stuff that’s in it is hers, too, then?” Jordan said, tilting the glass to drain the last drop of tea. The ice slid down and hit her nose.

“Rats and all.” Samson reached in the cooler for another beer. “But it’s all junk. Nothing worth a dime, or she wouldn’t have left it here.”

“You ever talk to her?” Roda was his ex-wife, who had left him for the public defender who somehow managed to exonerate her for selling pot from behind the counter of her store. The cops had looked the other way, especially since the sheriff was one of her best customers, until she sold some laced with meth to the mayor’s kid.

“Not for years. Last I heard, she was in Denver. Why so interested?”

“Just thought the bus might make a good camper, if somebody got it running,” she lied.

He laughed. “Yeah. Good luck with that.”

“How much would you pay me to paint this house?” she asked. She didn’t mention the bus again. She didn’t want him to get interested and go poking around.

“Free rent for parking your trailer here.”

“You have paint? Brushes?”

“I’ll get some next time I go into town.”

“When’s that?”

“No rush. Hasn’t been painted in years. It can wait a day or two.”

Mother Blacksnake was coiled on the arm of the recliner. Not that Jordan ever reclined in it. Wasn’t really room in the little trailer. The mother stirred when Jordan poured coffee. “Be careful today. Strange smell in the air.” Her tongue, black as the rest of her body, flickered in and out.

“I’d offer you coffee, but you probably don’t drink it,” Jordan said.

“Makes me jumpy,” the mother said.

“Where are your babies?” Jordan asked, putting the pot back on the stove, but when she turned, the snake was gone.

Jordan took her coffee, picked up her guitar that leaned by the door, and sat outside, in the lawn chair under her trailer window. The grass was still wet. She held the guitar on her lap, careful not to spill coffee on it. Though after all the bars and coffee shops the band had played, coffee was probably the least offensive liquid it might be exposed to.

Samson opened the side door of the house, old hinges screeching in the quiet morning. He walked across the short space to where her trailer was parked by the edge of the woods. There was that look in his eye.

“You want to make some deliveries this afternoon?” he asked.

“Not really. You go put some pants on, I’ll think about it.”

She had expected the question before he asked. The two men in the Cadillac SUV had come the night before, one carrying the briefcase that swung like it weighed a lot more when he left. They talked for fifteen minutes, alone on the other side of the house.

“Don’t think too long. Days are getting shorter now.” He walked away, glutes pumping smoothly in the tight white underpants. He did have a cute butt, she had to admit. She could see what Roda had seen in him a decade and a half ago, when they’d all been young and stupid. Some of us are still stupid, she thought.

After lunch, he said, “So, about those deliveries. . .”

“Right. What about them?”

“They need to be made. Soon.”

“Why don’t you make your own deliveries?”

“My car is not built for it. You know that. Your truck can haul anything.”

It was true. As far as it went. His Miata had room for one passenger and the spare tire. As long as the passenger didn’t weigh much. Her truck, on the other hand, was designed for hauling. She had bought it to pull her trailer, after the band broke up and they all went their separate ways.

“So you borrow my truck. Just don’t bring it back low on gas.”

“I’d rather you do it.”

“So what’s in it for me?”

“Same as usual. Free rent. Free beer.”

“Yeah, that’s not worth going to jail for. Or worse, maybe, dealing with your business associates. And you know I don’t drink.”

“Deliveries have to be made. Like I said, I’d rather you do it.” The way he said it, she knew he wasn’t asking.

“Just admit you’re curious,” Mother Snake said. “It’s easy: ‘I’m curious.’ Then you don’t have to go through the portal. If that’s what it is.”

Jordan plopped spaghetti in the boiling water and turned down the gas. “I’m curious,” she said. “Very curious indeed.”

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Jordan said. She stood on the grass by the porch. Late afternoon cast long shadows across the yard. Samson sprawled on the ancient wooden deck chair on the porch, beer in hand, blond hair pasted to his head with drying sweat. He’d been busy in the barn all afternoon. She didn’t need him to tell her he was putting the final touches on the product he wanted her to deliver.

“Show me what?” he said. “It’s late, and hot. I’m tired.”

“I can’t really explain. Not so you’d understand, anyway. You just need to see for yourself.” She twisted her toe in the grass, drawing his attention to her legs. “It’s way cool. You’ll be glad you did.”

She led him past the first curve in the driveway, and cut across the woods along the deer trail she had discovered the day before. It was shorter than following the curvy driveway. Briars scratched at her thighs. The still air smelled of mold and old leaves.

She carried the hammer and nails in a plastic grocery bag.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“Just a little experiment.”

He shrugged and kept walking.

Halfway along the shortcut, he stopped. “Not that old bus again? What’s your obsession with that, anyway?”

“Not the bus. Something in it, though.”

“I told you, nothing but junk. You think Roda left anything worth a dime in there?” But Jordan kept going, pushing briars away from bare legs with a stick. He followed, cursing the briars.

At the back of the bus, she lifted the bags off the box. “Open it,” she said.

“What’s in there, besides snakes and spiders, probably?”

“No spiders. The snakes would have eaten them, anyway.”

He read the warnings printed on the box, *Dynamite*, *Caution*, and *Explosives*. “Looks dangerous.”

“It’s not. Just open it, you sissy. I did.”

“You’re sure it’s safe?” The box began its characteristic whine and rumble. Samson backed away.

“I’m standing here, aren’t I? Why should it be dangerous? You don’t think Roda was

peddling black-market dynamite on the side, do you?”

Samson shrugged, but he bent forward and gingerly lifted the lid. The oval, black as obsidian, mushroomed up to the ceiling.

He gave a mindless cry and leapt backward, almost knocking Jordan down, but she moved aside.

He stared, then moved forward. “What the hell is that?”

She handed him a *National Geographic*. “Toss this in and see what happens.”

The darkness swallowed the fluttering pages.

“Where did it go?” He leaned forward as if to look behind the oval.

“Beats me,” Jordan said, and pushed him into the dark.

The wood was old, dry, brittle in places, rock-hard in others, but it took her only a couple of minutes and a dozen of the big nails to spike the lid shut tight.

The notebook said the portal must be fed. She believed it. After sitting in the bus so long, it must be pretty hungry.

The following afternoon, when the revving engines on the highway slowed, followed by the crunch of fat tires on the gravel driveway, she took her guitar, the only possession in the trailer that she cared much about, and went up the deer trail. She watched from the shadows in the woods as Samson’s business partners ransacked the house, the barn, her trailer, and were gone in half an hour. It didn’t take her nearly that long to put the sheets back on her bed, her clothes back in the closet, the food back in the cabinet. The dishes were mostly plastic, so hardly anything was broken.

She doubted they’d noticed the snakes.

When the cops came looking for

Samson, not long after the business partners, they asked Jordan about the barn. “He said never go in there. Mean bull.” She paused. “And snakes. Also bats. I’m terrified of snakes and bats. Don’t care much for bulls, either.”

“So you never went in the barn? You have no idea what’s in there?” The deputy who asked was named Fifer. He was young, maybe twenty-five. The other deputies leaned on their cars and smoked cigarettes while he talked to her.

“Of course not. Why would I?”

She could tell he did not believe her. But it was true that she had never been in the barn. She wasn’t dumb enough to leave DNA or fingerprints.

“You have any idea where we might find Mr. Samson?”

“Nope.” Which was true, as far as it went.

“When did you see him last?”

She hesitated as if thinking. “Day before yesterday, I guess.”

“You didn’t talk to or see him yesterday?”

“No. We weren’t that close.”

“He never mentioned going away, to you?”

Jordan shook her head. “Like I said, we weren’t that close.”

“So why did he let you stay here? You pay . . . some kind of rent?” During the pause, he glanced up and down her legs, let his eyes roam over her tee-shirt.

She noticed the deputy’s use of the past tense. “No. No rent. I did odd jobs. Cut grass, paint the house.”

“That’s all?” Fifer asked, after a moment of meaningful silence. He glanced at the mostly silver-gray wood, where paint had faded or flaked away on the wind and rain, years ago. Samson had never gotten

around to buying the paint.

Jordan let her own moment of meaningful silence spool out in the quiet August air. A mockingbird cawed like the rusty hinge of the screen door. “Yeah, absolutely. That’s all.”

“You don’t seem to know much, for someone who lives here.”

“His ex-wife was my best friend for years. She told me more than I wanted to know.”

“Just not what he really did in the barn.” Fifer pushed his hat back, rubbed his forehead and pinched his nose, as if he had a headache.

“Roda just said the same as Samson. Stay out of the barn.” Jordan had called her the night before. They caught up on old times. Roda seemed to have forgotten the bus. “You want it, it’s yours,” she said.

They wanted to search the barn and the house, saying they had warrants. The sheriff himself, this time, waved a paper at her. She didn’t take it. “Not my barn, not my house. Do whatever you want.”

She let them look in her trailer, too. They’d have come back, anyway, with warrants and bad attitudes. If they saw the snakes, they did not say so.

One good thing about cops, they were neat-freaks, as long as you didn’t piss them off. They didn’t make much of a mess in her trailer. The house and barn were no doubt still in disarray from the visit of Samson’s partners. She hadn’t investigated.

“Are you real?” Jordan asked Mother Black Snake, when the cops were gone. The snake smiled and said, “It’s time for us to go.” She flicked her tongue, tasting the air, the acrid smell of cop sweat. “Oh, and Adam West is not really dead.”

She kept an eye on the box, or locked it in the trunk of Samson’s car. If he did come straggling back, she wanted to know about it. Maybe the nailed lid would stop him, or maybe opening it was just the switch. How could she know? Meanwhile, she wondered what happened to him. Did he simply vanish into the void and cease to exist? Or did he find himself teetering on the edge of a cliff, pursued by whatever passed for bears in that world? At sea in a leaky boat? Or maybe it was pleasant—perhaps he was a sultan surrounded by a harem of beautiful humans of whatever gender he was in the mood for. No way to tell. Well maybe one, but she didn’t want to know that badly.

Yellow police tape crisscrossed the doors of the house and barn. She didn’t disturb it. She slept in her trailer, as usual, and got ready to hit the road again.

She put her truck up for sale. Got a hitch welded to the frame under the back bumper of the bus, so she could bring her trailer. It took another couple of months to clean out the bus and give it a new paint job. She considered a multi-colored flower-child design, but went instead with straightforward blue and white. No point inviting hassles from cops, campground managers, and other defenders of the status quo. All new paint except the *Emergency Exit* sign. She took the box out of the trunk of Samson’s car and put it back in its place in the bus, by the bottom window in the rear door. She thought about just leaving it behind, but it was too rare to abandon.

Besides, it was always good to have a way out.

—The End—