

REPTILE MEMOIRS

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Translated from the Norwegian
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I is another.

—Arthur Rimbaud



PART ONE



Liv

Ålesund

Wednesday, 16 July 2003

That first time, his body was a paradox. Like living granite, or silken sandpaper. He was hard and soft at the same time. Coarse and smooth. Heavy and light. The first thing that struck me was how warm he was. As if I had believed his body would be cold both inside and out. As if I hadn't wanted to believe that he was alive. Only later would I learn that he didn't give off any heat of his own, only absorbed what was around him.

He lay in my arms, barely a metre long and still just a little baby. He lifted his head, supporting himself against my arm and turning his shining eyes in my direction. Perhaps he was trying to understand what I was. Whether I was prey or a potential enemy. His split tongue vibrated lightly in the air, and he moved slowly up along my chest, towards my throat. Once there, he stopped, half of him suspended in the air, his stony dead eyes on mine. I looked straight into his narrow pupils, into a gaze that was completely steady, free of any impulse to blink. He seemed to be seeking some kind of connection, despite the impossibility of communication between us.

There was something ethereal about him. This ability to hold such a large portion of his body in the air without the slightest effort, or

so it seemed. As if he had no need for contact with anything earthly and could have simply remained in constant weightlessness had he so wished. Just the thought of having such bodily control seemed impossible—it made me feel weightless, light-headed. I lifted my arm, and he hung down from it as if from a branch, moving searchingly towards my face.

“He likes you,” said the woman with the American *r*'s and *l*'s, bringing me back to the cold attic room that housed all kinds of species in cages that lined the walls. There seemed to be a propensity for laughter in the woman's voice. “Do you like him? It seems so.”

Like. The word was insufficient. Something I might have said about a cool jacket. This was something else entirely.

“Can I hold him?”

“When can *I* hold him?”

Ingvar and Egil looked on from either side of me. I had almost forgotten that they were standing there. Despite the fact that Ingvar was a couple of years older than Egil—and although Ingvar had a beard and long dark hair like mine, while Egil was wearing a white shirt, his hair slicked back and blond—right now they seemed like twins in their early teens. For them, the word *like* made sense. The two of them “liked” the snake in the way that they liked bands and beers and anything else that might briefly preoccupy them. What was it that I felt? Maternal affection? Love? A connection that crossed the differences between species. When I looked down at that tiny face, so far removed from my own, I thought it looked back at me with trust, even understanding.

It wasn't long since the idea had come to us. The living room had been heavy with smoke at five o'clock in the morning in Ålesund's coolest basement apartment, where the red lava lamp stood spewing up its globs 24/7. We were the small group that remained of what had previously been a living room full of people. Close to calling it a night, but not quite ready to do so. The mood was subdued, the air sweet with

smoke, and Ingvar sat in the armchair playing classic rock tunes on his guitar. Even Egil, who had spent the entire evening pumping the living room full of 50 Cent and OutKast, had rolled down his shirtsleeves and settled on the rug with his arm around a girl who was probably in some of his classes at the Norwegian Business School. I was high on the atmosphere and one of Ingvar's strong joints, had withdrawn into myself. I lay on the sofa, concentrating on the ceiling, which was undulating, up and down, up and down, as if it were breathing. Having found the rhythm in it, I had intended to lie there until I fell asleep, but then out of nowhere a guy appeared. He had been outside and came wandering back into the apartment. He must have been an acquaintance of Ingvar's or Egil's, I didn't care which. Later I couldn't remember his face, only that he sat on the floor beside my head and wanted to talk to me, but I was too busy watching the ceiling breathe. After repeated attempts at getting my attention, he went and sat with the others instead.

I slept, or became one with the ceiling and ceased to exist, but soon enough I was back. It was Ingvar's exclamation that woke me. The girl Egil had been hitting on was half hidden behind his back, her hands over her eyes. Egil himself sat with his eyes glued to the TV. On the screen a man was standing in the jungle, half submerged in a muddy puddle and pulling something from the water. It was a snake with gleaming brown and black scales, as thick as an alligator but much longer. The snake got bigger and bigger as the man drew it out of the water. Its skin was brown, black and yellow. A huge python. The man called out as he pulled forth an ever fatter, ever rounder coil. "This is a big snake!" he cried. "The head, there's the head!" An Australian accent and quick movements. At that moment the snake opened its jaws and lunged at its captor, furious. The man backed away, giving a stifled cry, the snake following after him.

I swallowed. Heard Egil's nervous laughter and curses as if from somewhere far away. My heartbeat seemed to drown out everything, filling the room with the sound of my blood. My cheeks turned hot, my hands clammy. I didn't usually feel such an intimate connection to

my body—not like this. There was something about the coiled snake’s soft movements, the muscle power that must be hidden beneath the sleek scales. I felt drawn to the screen, where the man had taken a camera from his pocket and positioned himself to take a photograph of the enormous animal. Right then, the snake and I yawned, almost in unison. We stretched our necks, displaying a long and flexible oral cavity with tiny teeth that almost merged into one. A wet soft palate, a tongue that waved in the air. Then we struck. The room erupted in unanimous fear and fervour as we sank our teeth into a thick, hairy arm.

“I thought I was going to die,” the Australian man said. “I thought it had me.” He sat in a deck chair, a tent in the background. “It would have killed me, had it not got its lower jaw stuck on my trousers. I never would have had a chance against it otherwise.” The clip of the snake biting the man was shown over and over, in rapid succession. The soft pink mouth darted forward, darted forward, several times at speed and then again in slow motion. I saw how the snake bit, how a pale-pink tooth snagged on the fabric of the man’s trousers before finally breaking free. The thought of that tooth, how it would feel against my fingertips. I closed my mouth. Swallowed.

“I know where you can get one of those.” It was the new guy who spoke—the one who had come in from somewhere outside. “Not as big as that one, obviously, but I know where you can buy smaller ones like it—babies.”

When I think back, try to remember what the guy looked like, I recall only a head without features, free of eyes, nose or mouth. But I remember that the room fell silent for a moment. Egil turned his head and flashed me a huge smile. I tried to mimic it, but struggled to overcome the intensity of emotion I was feeling. I was afraid they would notice how fast I was breathing, how I was swallowing saliva, how my cheeks burned. I nodded, slowly. Egil turned to Ingvar, who had a similar smile on his face. He nodded, too. And so, wordlessly, we decided. We would get ourselves a snake.

The evening came to life again, the room filling with laughter and voices. The new guy held up a glinting silver digital camera and snapped some group photos of us. Me, Ingvar, Egil, the girl, the guy, and in the background the TV screen featuring the frozen image of a six-metre-long python.

The new member of our family was a metre-long tiger python. Still just a baby. But I was already lost in this tiny creature. Had the feeling of being suspended in midair above an abyss—an astonishingly pleasant sensation. Before I passed him on, I lifted him to my face and whispered, “You’re coming home with me.”

It must have been a figment of my imagination, but I thought I saw him nod.