

COPPERHEAD

It's a copperhead. I'm positive. *Agkistrodon contortrix*—a species of venomous snake endemic to Eastern North America, a member of the Crotalinae (pit viper) subfamily. Stout body, broad head, typically tan to pinkish with a series of crossbands. According to Wikipedia.

It slithers past the rhododendron then vanishes in the brush separating our yard from a fallow tobacco field.

"It's not a copperhead," you say, standing in the doorway, hands in your jeans pockets, indifferent stubble on your face. Orange stubble. Burnt orange, the color of your crew cut.

My hair is yellow. Harvest gold yellow. Like wilting sunflowers.

Yellow and red make orange.

I learned that when I was twelve and we melted crayons in my mother's copper pot then poured the hot wax into a mold, wicks penetrating both ends as a joke. We lit them later—both wicks, then you kissed me while the candle burned at both ends, "Hot in the City" by Billy Idol on my transistor. Maybe it was "Crimson and Clover" by Joan Jett and The Blackhearts. Maybe it was the wind chimes dangling like a body from a pine tree limb in my backyard.

"I know a copperhead when I see one," I say to you now.

You cock your head and look at me askance, the way you did when I told you I'd dreamt of snakes the other night. Snakes boring through my eardrums, tongues flicking my

Eustachian tube, slimy bodies writhing in my mouth. I tried to spit them out. I couldn't swallow. I was choking on copperheads.

"Snakes aren't slimy," you said.

"These were," I said.

"Did they bite you?"

I looked at you askance.

"Then they weren't copperheads," you said.

"I know a copperhead when I taste one."

"*Lover Man*" by Billie Holiday scratches through the screen door. Billie's voice reminds me of Kentucky Fried Chicken—crispy, salty, finger lickin' good. A shot of bourbon to wash it down. She was my mother's favorite singer. *Play "Lover Man," Lilly*, she would say from her bed, pointing to the CD player on her dresser, her voice like winter wind crackling through brambles. I played it for her the morning she died. You were at home, playing with your X-Box. *I'm sorry*, you said later. *Are you?* I said. *I'm not the only one who's played around*, you said. I didn't say anything.

The muggy June breeze teases my tomato plants. I need to stake them. They get unwieldy if you don't.

"I can't tend the garden with that thing on the prow," I say. "You have to kill it."

"I can't kill it," you say. Your mouth is full of Juicy Fruit. You always chew at least two pieces at a time.

"Why can't you kill it?" I say.

“I’d have to find it first, then I’d have to look it in the eyes and chop its head off with a weapon of mass destruction it’s completely helpless against. That’s not a fair fight.” You blow a Juicy Fruit bubble. It pops like a BB gun. “Plus,” you continue, “it’s bad karma.”

I smell putrid ditch water and honeysuckle. The vacant lot across the street is feral, free of Homo sapiens and duplexes. Putrid ditch water and honeysuckle create a color I can’t name. But I can smell it. I can even taste it.

“I’ll do it, then,” I say. “Where’s the hoe?”

You squint at me in the fading light. It’s dusk. The *gloaming*, my mother called it. Never *dusk*. The *gloaming*. I don’t like that word. *Sounds gloomy*, I told her.

You shrug your shoulders. “It’s your karma. Hoe’s in the shed.”

I slip on my sandals and lumber down the deck steps. “Karma be damned,” I call over my shoulder. “It’s the here and now you’ve got to worry about.”

“Funny,” you say, your voice tinny. “I thought it was the future you had to worry about.” You pick dead leaves off the hibiscus. “I’m telling you it’s not a copperhead. I’ve never seen a poisonous snake around here in my whole life.”

I whip around.

“I’m telling you it is,” I say.

You plop down in the whicker chair by the door and clasp your hands behind your head. “Guess you’ll find out.”

We lock eyes.

“So will you,” I say.