

The Secret of the Snake

by Josephine Reed

My brother, George, liked snakes. I can't remember a time when he didn't have at least one. He also kept iguanas, skinks, box tortoises, horned toads, and an Indian monitor lizard that he got free because it had bitten off the fingertip of the pet store owner. But snakes were his favorite.

George's friend Teddy also liked reptiles. Teddy's mom let him have baby alligators in their bathtub once; our mom never did. To give Mom credit, though, she did put up with a lot from George's pets. Once, a king snake got loose in the house. For three days, George was afraid to tell her. On the fourth day, Mom opened her bedroom door and found herself eyeball to eyeball with the snake, who had chosen the top of her door as a hiding place. I guess I can't blame her for saying "absolutely not" to baby alligators.

Teddy's father was the head of the herpetology department at the university. Sometimes he took both boys on collecting trips to the desert. They'd drive around at night until a snake, lizard, or tortoise was stunned by the car's headlights. Then they'd get out of the car and catch it.

It was on one of these collecting trips that George acquired a boa constrictor. "Large boas don't normally live in the desert," said Teddy's father, "so it must have once been someone's pet." It's very difficult to tell the sex of a snake, but George wanted it to be a boy. He named it Julius Caesar. I thought it was a girl because of its beautiful yellow-and-brown pattern, but it was George's snake, so he got to name it.

Soon Julius was almost six feet long, taller than George! Julius was a welcome addition to our family. Friends came over to see him, and some even wanted to hold him. Julius didn't seem to mind. He'd just wind himself around the new person. If you've ever held a snake, you know that once it wraps itself around you, you feel it's the snake that's holding you!

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Session 3

That summer Dad got a job in Hawaii, and our family would be gone for three months. We couldn't take Julius with us—Hawaii doesn't like people to bring animals to the islands. And Teddy was going on vacation, too, so he couldn't take care of him. What would we do with Julius Caesar?

The day before we left, Dad took Julius's cage downstairs. He unplugged the heat lamp and left the snake in the dark, cold basement. Julius would go into a sort of hibernation without light or heat, so he wouldn't need to eat.

Summer passed, and finally we returned home. The first thing George and I did was to go down to the basement to see Julius Caesar. Julius was, as we expected, asleep. But he wasn't alone. At the back of the cage, not far from where Julius lay, was a pile of uneven, oval-shaped lumps. They were semi-transparent, yellowish color, five or six in all. I thought they looked a little like soap Easter Eggs that had been chipped.

I ran upstairs and called Mom and Dad. "Come see George's snake cage. There's some really weird stuff in it!" They came and looked at the things. We wondered whether someone had come into the basement while we were gone and put rocks inside, maybe as a weird joke. Finally Dad picked one lump up. We all felt it. It wasn't exactly slimy, but it felt kind of spooky to me. We smelled it but it had no scent. Much to our surprise, Dad chipped off a little piece with his nail and put it into his mouth!

I half expected him to throw up, but he didn't. Very carefully, Dad held the piece in his mouth and then swooshed it around to get the taste of it. He spat it out. "Vegetable matter!" proclaimed my father.

Then George called Teddy. His father looked at the "vegetable matter" and told us that a very rare event had occurred. They were snake eggs! Unfertilized and dried up, but egg sacs just the same. Snakes very rarely lay eggs in captivity, but that's exactly what Julius had been doing while we thought he was sleeping.

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Even more amazing was that all this time George had thought Julius was a boy, he was actually a girl. I beamed with pride. I'd been right all along. Julius with the beautiful yellow-and-brown pattern was a girl!

George changed her name, of course, from Julius Caesar to Julia Squeezer. A good name for a girl boa, we all agreed.



Session 3

- 1** How does the author show that the boys and their fathers are used to being around reptiles? Support your answer with details from the story.

- 2** How are the narrator and her brother George DIFFERENT from their mom? Support your answer with details from the story.

- 3** What is the secret of the snake, and how is it discovered? Support your answer with details from the story.

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