

Behold the Ducking Snake Fiasco



By Star Williams & Duck T.

It's seven in the morning, but I don't yet realize it's snake o'clock. I get out of bed, being careful not to wake my peacock-partner Riley, and flipper-slap out to the kitchen. As usual, I slide my duck-sized coffee pod into Riley's fancy PeaKeurig machine, then I go to get the duck-duck-milk. But when I open the fridge door, to my amazement, I see a pair of yellow snake-eyes staring back at me.

WHAT THE DUCK?

I let out a high-pitched quacker-scream. The snake screams too, coiling itself more tightly around my bottle of pondweed salad dressing. Neither of us shuts up for a *ducking eternity*. Once I've almost run out of scream-air, I slam the door and quack, "RILEY! RILEY?"

After a moment, my peacock partner clips into the room, clattering their painted claws against the linoleum. As usual, their tail feathers drag along the floor, knocking one of the breakfast stools sideways. Riley's wearing their red kimono, some smudged lipstick, and a befuddled look. "What's wrong, Duck?" they ask with an unimpressed blink. "Did Duck find another spider?"

"Riles, there's a DUCKING SNAKE in the fridge!"

"Uhuh," agrees Riley. "And...?"

"No, *that's* the story," I say, twice as peeved now. "There isn't a more EXCITING END to the story. I'm not going to ducking HOLLYWOOD with the story. It just goes, 'Duck opens fridge, sees snake, freaks the duck out, and STILL has no duck-milk.'"

Riley rolls their eyes and opens the fridge. This time, I realize the fridge light hasn't gone on.

The snake looks at Riley. Riley looks at the snake. "Good morning, Lavinia," says Riley. "How did Lavinia sleep?"

"OMD," I cry. "We know the snake's *name*?"

"Hi, Riley," hisses Lavinia The-Snake-With-A-DUCKDARN-NAME, who APPARENTLY deserves a good night's kip in our fridge. "Thanksssz for turning off the power. I was chilling my scales off in here. Any chance of a warm cup of tea?"

"Give Riley a minute," says Riley, closing the door. "It's all right, Duck," they say. "Remember how I told you that I, Riley the Marvelous, am going vegan and will no longer be eating snakes? Well, according to 1-800-SNACK-SNAKE, Riley can't go vegan without giving them seven days' notice."

Long story short, Riley's snack-snakes, which they usually eat straight from the delivery box, will keep coming every day for the next six days—only now, Riley can't actually eat them. And given that yours truly is a snake-phobe, this is far from a good thing.

“For duck’s sake,” I mutter, “what about a magical solution? Can’t you wave your wings and make the snakes disappear?”

Riley rolls their eyes. “Duck, you know very well that most magical peacocks can’t *control* our magic. Riley doesn’t own a top hat and wand!”

This is true. Riley actually just purchased a book called, TIME-TRAVEL TO A PLACE ON PURPOSE: THE VERY FIRST STEP IN CONTROLLING YOUR PEACOCK MAGIC. Yes, when it comes to making snakes disappear, I’m snatching at straws, of course. Even so, I have a number of duck-darn questions:

1. Couldn’t we pay for the snakes to NOT be delivered?

Apparently that’s a no.

2. Could we pay SNACK-SNAKES-1-800 to EAT THE SNAKES THEMSELVES?

Nope. That’s been tried.

3. Could we pay them to leave the snakes in the desert, rather than bringing them all the way to the New York City Bird District?

No way in ducking heck, says Riley. This snack-snake system is unshakeable, they say. Plus the website’s a ducking nightmare. Even Riley’s offer of complimentary opera tickets to see *La Peacoquetta*, (starring Riley of course,) couldn’t dampen the snake-delivery momentum.

4. Could we release the snakes?

Apparently, this is immoral. Although Riley’s actually worried *the snakes* will get hurt.

I had to face it. We were up the duck without a quacker.

Realizing Lavinia The Snake has squatter’s rights, I grumpily get my breakfast—including a duck-milkless coffee—tremble some more, get dressed, then leave for work, where I spend the day trying to forget I own a pet snake.

At five in the evening, I’m hoping the mother-plucking fridge is empty of reptiles. After all, tomorrow is Saturday and I was hoping to spend the weekend

snacking on STUFF FROM THE FRIDGE. But for now, I pick up some sushi, so we don't have to cook. I even bring some shrimp for Lavinia the snake.

Once home, Riley and I eat vegan sushi. Riley apologizes that the snake is still in the fridge and has polished off most of the salty olives. "Duck shouldn't open that fridge," says Riley, "unless Duck has to." Then, before I can answer, Riley sneezes and disappears in a puff of smoke. As usual, I go and open the window and *hope* Riley will be back within the next twenty-four hours, so I don't have to get the duck-milk from the fridge alone.

Riley actually pops back onto the couch about five minutes later, bringing even more smoke with them. They're now wearing a pirate's costume and brandishing a sword. As I fan away the smoke, I notice their ruffled shirt and pirate hat have a tear down the middle. (This is what it's like being married to a time-traveling peacock. I'm constantly having to open the ducking windows.)

"Why does Riley always end up mid-fight on some ship?" they ask, straightening their hat. "*Plus* Riley didn't get their hands on *any* treasure. *Again.*" They look at the clock on the wall. "Oh, beetle-scratch! Riley's curtain call is in twenty minutes." With that, Riley heads off to their late-night performance of *La Peacoquetta*, leaving yours truly ALONE WITH THE SNAKE-FRIDGE.

I head to bed, taking my mind off of who's likely STILL eating the salty olives by watching my favorite movie, *Duck on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Around one in the morning, I wake to the sound of Bob Marley's *No Woman No Cry*. Yes, it's a classic, but why is it playing in the DUCKING KITCHEN? When I head in, I find the music's coming from the fridge. I take a deep breath before opening the fridge door. My beak is hit with a cloud of smoke that makes me cough. When the smoke clears, I see there are now TWO snakes inside: Lavinia, who seems to have acquired a snake-sized boombox plus another snake—a green one, who's wearing diamond-studded shades. This new snake is reclining inside a half-eaten salad box, as if they're a mermaid lounging on the seabed. There's a tiny, snake-sized cigarette in their mouth. They're also reading a snake-sized copy of ON THE ROAD. And from the marble-sized knobble in their larynx, they've *also* been eating my Kalamata olives. Oh, the quackduckery! "Not another snake delivery!" I quack.

"Why, yessss," says Lavinia, who's looking a bit peaky after eating all those olives. "Thissss is Rocko."

Rocko tips his head. "Whazzup?" he asks.

Riley has clearly failed to mention the SECOND 1-800-SNACK-SNAKE delivery.

“Rocko,” I quack, trying to sound confident, “turn down the duck-darn tunes. A duck has to sleep, you know.”

“Sure, man,” says Rocko with a slurry lilt.

I notice my flippers have started to tremble at the thought of these snakes going anywhere near my sensitive feathers.

“I was just chillin’,” Rocko adds, which is a lie because the fridge isn’t turned on. (Riley tells me these snakes need mild temperatures.) Rocko adjusts the volume. “Join us, pal. We were celebratin’ the good news.”

“Does it involve a snakeless fridge?” I ask.

“The opposite, man,” says Rocko. “Lavinia’s pregnant.”

I quacker-scream, terrified by the thought of fifty baby snakes crawling all over our fridge, then slam the door. In the middle of my meltdown, I hear the front door opening.

Flipper-slapping into the living room, I find Riley, still in their stage makeup. Their sequined feathers and beak glitter are glinting in the half-light.

As soon as I see them, I DUCKING LOSE IT. Why aren’t the snakes gone, I quack? Why didn’t Riley mention that we’d gotten a new delivery? Doesn’t Riley realize that the only way I can have a snake in the house is if Riley eats it straight from the box—as per usual. I quack and quack, until I’m exhausted and there’s drool flying from my beak. “And what about my flippers?” I ask. “They’ve dried right out! It’s the stress!” I raise one to show Riley the flaky underside. “Behold the ducking snake fiasco!” I cry.

That’s when I pause and look at Riley’s face.

Riley is crying.

“Oh!” I quacker-gasp. “Oh no!” I rush over and take my peacock in my wing-arms. “I’m sorry,” I quack. “It’s not your fault! You didn’t create this quackduckery. You’re trying to do the right thing. I should be more supportive.”

I let Riley sob it out. Finally they pull back from me and ask if their face is a mess. And even though there’s glitter and scarlet lipstick smeared all over their beak, I tell them the truth: They’re completely ducking radiant.

We go and sit down. Riley arranges their super-long tail feathers over the edge of the couch and gives a sigh. “Riley *has* been trying to fix the problem. Riley’s asked every peacock they know if they’d like some free snakes, but *all* the New York peacocks seem to have gone vegan.”

I quack, “*All* of them?”

“It’s a trend,” says Riley. “There was this expose in Peacock Cosmo that delved into the cruel plight of the boxed-in snack-snake. It was called, ‘What It’s

Like To Be A Snake In A Box.' Shocking stuff! Everyone's read it. And who wants their dinner to *suffer*?" Riley touches the sleeve of my orange bathrobe. "Riley's sorry. Snakes are terrible for Duck. Riley will fix this."

But I want this fixed *yesterday*.

"Might animal shelters take the snakes?" I ask.

"Riley made some calls about this today," says Riley. "The animal shelters seemed to think Riley was making some kind of threat. Riley was offended at first. But then it gave Riley an EXCELLENT idea." As Riley recounts how they purchased a toy gun, then put on a full face of make-up and their Lauren-Bacall-style hat with the lace veil, my heart starts to sink. Then they get to the bit where they packed the snakes into our picnic hamper, headed to the local branch of 1-800-SNACK-SNAKE, and HELD UP THE RECEPTION STAFF at gunpoint, insisting that they take back their snakes. Apparently, the penguins behind the front desk were quivering—and seeing as they're penguins, I imagine this had *nothing* to do with the temperature.

"Unfortunately," Riley said, as they continued with the story, "while Riley was brandishing Riley's gun, some crafty devil dialed 911. So now, Riley has to always stay fifty yards away from EVERY 1-800-SNACK-SNAKE in the U.S, otherwise they'll face a prison sentence."

"*Whaat?*" I quacked in amazement, rising to my flippers. "Riles, in the name of duck, *why?*"

Riley gave a nonchalant flap of their wing. "You know how the police overreact. It's a thing."

I quack with exhaustion, then accidentally sit on Riley's new copy of *You Don't Have To Sneeze To Time-Travel: A New Guide To Taking Control Of Your Peacock Magic*. "Ow," I say, passing the book to Riley. "That book has serious corners."

Riley takes the book and give a sigh. "After the incident, Riley had a realization. The snakes were hapless victims of Riley's criminal instincts. How could Riley the Magnificent have coaxed those poor reptiles into that basket in the first place? That wicker must be so rough on their poor snake bodies. As a vegan who only eats berries, vegetables, and beetles, Riley isn't meant to harm *any living thing*."

I decide this is NOT the moment to break the news that beetles, including the chocolate-covered ones that Riley buys from Peacock-Are-Go, were actually once alive. Instead, I plonk myself down couch. "Now that you're a wanted

criminal, Riles, there's only one thing for it," I say. "We need to get those snakes back to the desert. But how in the name of all duck?"

Riley stares down at the book in their hands, then gives me a sideways sparkle. "You know, Duck, Riley just had the strangest idea."

Riley's "strangest idea" takes a week to put into action. It all starts with Riley sitting cross-legged on our bed, humming mysteriously with one eye open, as they turn the pages of *You Don't Have To Sneeze To Time-Travel*. On Sunday, nothing happens. But on Tuesday, they do the very same and accidentally end up in Japan, when they *meant* to go to Jamaica. It takes them three hours to reverse the process—which, I later discover, has made Riles a pondweed-sushi snob.

On Thursday, they attempt to time-travel to Peru, but end up in 1970's Paris. There, they buy a gorgeous Versace hat and some odd potpourri that smells like panicked skunks.

But on Friday, Riley successfully goes to 1980's Delhi eight times in the space of eight minutes. It's a ducking triumph! Riley has mastered time-travel.

"Now," Riley announces with pride, "we can take the snakes back to the desert ourselves!"

Scoot forward to Saturday: We're in the truck, ready to go. Riley's pissed because they have to travel in the front of the truck with me. They usually recline in the back, where they can artfully pose, their voluptuous tail feathers floating in the breeze. But today, it's the snakes that have to be in the back of the truck. After all, to keep them contained, Riley insisted on bringing the fridge. You see, 1-800-SNACK-SNAKE have continued with the deliveries, and we now have *five more* snack-snakes, including one called Jamila who likes to yodel—especially at five in the morning. Plus Lavinia has given birth to *ten* babies.

That makes FIFTEEN SNAKES. (It also explains why I've taken up yoga.)

Anyway, Riley and I are in the truck, but we're not moving yet. I'm watching Riley, who's mysteriously humming while visualizing the desert. They're wearing pink sixties' style sunglasses that vibrate on their beak as they hum. After a while, the truck starts to fill with time-traveling smoke. "Duck, turn on the aircon," says Riley. It's a good tip, because as the smoke clears, I suddenly realize we're on a duck-darn desert road and the sun is blaring down.

"Ducking awesome!" I cry, turning on the engine. I can finally *feel* the end of this snake fiasco. "Riles, you're a ducking genius!"

Riley glances around furtively. “There better not be any 1-800-SNACK-SNAKE offices around here, or Riley could be locked away for the rest of their seven magical lives.”

“I’m sure there’s no one here for miles,” I say, happily. That’s when I look in my rearview mirror and see that there’s now a DUCKING BIRD-POLICE CAR behind us. And shock, horror! The officer inside is pulling us over!

“WHAAAA...?” I ask, panicked. “There are cops in the ducking DESERT?”

“It’s all right,” says Riley. “It’s not as if Duck and Riley are doing anything illegal.”

“Then why do I have a sinking feeling in my flippers?” I ask, as I turn off the engine.

The officer, an eagle, clips over and gets me to wind down my window, so that all the desert heat comes blasting in. In his police cap, he looks ducking austere. “Good afternoon, folks,” he says. “What’s in the fridge?”

“Um....” I begin. My duck-heart is beating in triple-time.

The officer chuckles and gestures for me to climb out of the truck. As I do, he says, “Well, as long as it’s not drugs or snakes, there’s no problem. Mind if I take a look?”

As he heads round the back, I swallow with a loud gulp. “We can’t have *snakes?*”

“Right?” says the officer. “What beak-brain would make such a law? But mark my words, there’s this whole new ‘Barred Transportation of Serpents Act.’ Gone are the days when you could drive snakes around without a permit. But honestly!” He gives a snicker. “What beakless snipper drives around the desert with a load of random snakes, am I right?”

I try a quacker-laugh. It sounds oddly strained.

Round the back of the truck, the officer observes the fridge. I wipe the perspiration off of my beak and wonder why there’s a tight sensation around my ankles. Is my circulation is shutting off because of the stress?

The officer prods the fridge, making it rattle. “Just as I thought,” he says. “It could be better-secured. What’ve you got in here anyway?” He climbs up there and wiggles the fridge door open. I cover my eyes.

“There we are,” says the eagle-officer. “It’s empty. No safety hazard here.”

The fridge is *empty?* Where in the name of duck have the snakes gone? “Uh, yes, officer,” I say. “Empty fridge. We’re just taking it to ... a place ... in the desert.”

The eagle-officer gives me a brief talk about using bungee cords instead of chains next time, then wishes me a good day.

By the time I'm back in the truck, I'm so tense that I might pass out. As I'm relating the whole sorry story to Riley, I glance down at my ankles, which still feel tight. That's when I spot two of Lavinia's green snake babies, coiled around my legs, blinking up at me with big eyes. One has a pink pacifier in their mouth. I give a small quacker-scream.

"You're our hero, Papa Duck!" says the left one.

"We love you, Papa Duck," says the right one, accidentally losing the pacifier. Then they start to cry.

Okay, I'd be lying if I said this wasn't super-ducking cute. I reach to retrieve the pacifier and pop it back in the little one's mouth. "Where in the beak-hole did you come from?" I ask. Then I notice Lavinia sliding over the dashboard, and I hear Jamila yodeling coming from behind my seat, and I see Rocko, still wearing his sunglasses, sitting on top of Riley's rose-print sunhat, some kind of cigarette in his mouth. "Duck *me!*" I say. "You snakes escaped from the officer? That's duck-darn clever!"

"We thought we'd bessst," says Lavinia, as I spot another of her babies coiling around the steering wheel. Lavinia lets out a burp. It smells of olives. "But guyszzz," she adds, "why are we in the desert? You know we're not *dessert* snakes, right?"

"Our snakes don't even eat vegan *cheesecake?*" asks Riley. "Riley *loves* cheesecake."

Lavinia sighs. "We come from the rainforessst."

I let out a devastated quack. "Riles, did you just *assume* they came from the desert?"

"Mmm." Riley awkwardly rearranges their designer sunglasses and ignores this question. Instead, they ask the snakes, "*Which* rainforest, exactly?"

From on top of Riley's sunhat, Rocko says, "The wet one, pals. The one with all the leaves."

That's all any of the snakes can tell us.

But you know what? Now the snakes are all hanging out in the truck and clinging onto my ankles, calling me Papa Duck, I figure they might as well stay *outside* of the fridge while Riley concentrates on getting us home again. In fact, once we *are* home, I don't get really the urge to put the snakes back in the fridge.

They're our partners in crime now. I feel responsible. Plus I'm in the middle of teaching them the lyrics to 'She'll Be Coming Round The Mountain.' Needless to say, it's a work in progress.

In fact, it gets to a point in the evening when Riley's lying on the couch with their feet in my lap, I'm painting their claws with red nail polish, and the snakes are all just hanging out. Some are on the table with Lavinia, playing with some snake-sized dominoes that Riley ordered from PeacockSmart, and a brown snake is climbing up Riley's Art Nouveau lamp. *What We Do In The Shadows* is playing and one of the babies, who's a huge fan of Guillermo, is lying right across the TV screen writhing with laughter. Rocko's helping himself to a piece of the pizza we've been eating, but he's trying to take it in all at once, rejecting my sage advice to never eat anything bigger than his head. His top half looks peculiarly triangular.

The only snake who's in the refrigerator is Jamila the Humming Snake, because we have a new rule:

If you're going to be musical, especially at night, have the duck-darn grace to do it in the fridge.

THE END

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