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## Lovie

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# LOVIE

Annie Vitalsey



Lil should have said no to the snake. She should have told Flip to take it back to wherever he got it. She should have told him it was insane, a ten-foot snake in a one-bedroom apartment, worming its way into their couch cushions, tangling itself in their sheets. The snake was midnight-black, smelled of fish, of dried out grass, it moved across their kitchen floor with a violence, as thick around as her own thigh.

She should have said no, but she couldn't. Not when Flip stood there with it, his face red and sweaty from the mask, his glasses fogged.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Flip asked her. "He was the last one they had."

Flip had looked so young, there in the kitchen, that snake squirming out of the bag he used to carry it home. Lil had seen pictures of Flip as a boy, but they hadn't met until college. His sweet face, curious and open. She pictured him small and felt awash with tenderness.

"Let's call him Lovie," said Flip.

"Can I—ruminant?" said Lil. She didn't know why she said it like that. Lately, her mouth felt forever cotton, her tongue slow and swollen from lack of use.

"Sure," Flip said.

\*

The first month of lockdown had been, Lil was embarrassed to think now, nice. The two of them, alone together, having cozy sex. Sex like burrowing into the ground. Sometimes, they did it in the middle of the day. They heard stories about people dying, what it felt like to suffocate to death. Heart attacks. Little, spiked particles carried through the air conditioning. But everything felt so far away. They rinsed their hands and stayed home.

After that, though, the months began to blur. The sex stopped. Too stressed, Flip had said. Too much going on in the world. The president, he wants to feed us bleach. When was the last time you hugged somebody? Looked somebody in the eye without fear?

"Do you still love me?" Lil had asked him.

"Yes," he had said, but he sounded short, like he was annoyed.

She didn't know what else to do but watch TV.

\*

Lil hated the snake at first. He curled himself under their bed and stayed there

through the night. She couldn't sleep, afraid it might spring out and squeeze the air from her lungs while she was dreaming. A monster, like. In the daytime, it turned up at the corners of her vision, while she worked on the computer, while she cooked her meals. It made her want to scream.

Flip, though, loved Lovie extremely. He let him coil around his arms, his neck and chest, until, fully wrapped, he would shout for Lil, "Look! Look at us!"

The singular joy in his voice almost made Lil cry.

He made up songs about Lovie—*Lovie, tender, Lovie, sweet*—he danced around the kitchen, stealing kisses from Lil between his twirls. Before, he had spent most days furiously scrolling on his phone, the blue light from the screen deepening the shadows of his frown. He said things like, "I don't see how this is ever going to end!" He had felt so far away from her. She couldn't remember the last time they had talked, like, really talked. She couldn't remember the last time they had anything new to say to each other.

But now. She wanted to love it too. She wanted it for Flip.

Flip came up behind her and whispered in her ear, "Lovie, Lovie, Lovie. Lovie Love You."

He curled himself around her.

\*

Lovie must have known what he was doing. He must have known, by the time he found Lil in the bath. He slithered right up to her, vibrating pleasantly, tucking his head in the nook of her palm that hung over the rim of the tub. When Lil felt him there, reminding her of a child or a small dog, it filled her with a new kind of warmth.

"I think he likes me," she told Flip later.

"What's not to like?" said Flip.

Still, outside, it went on. The numbers jumped, daily counts on CNN, scrolling up, up, up. Pictures of emergency morgues circulated around on the internet. Clean white trailers filled with bodies. Lil called her sister, but she didn't tell her about

the snake. It felt like too much work to explain, really. She would tell Lil it was a bad idea. Instead, Lil asked her what she was eating, asked her about the last time she went outside. They ran out of things to say after about ten minutes.

“Gotta go,” said Lil.

Flip was waiting for her on the couch with Lovie, Lovie nuzzling his head—a head like a fist cocked for punching—in the nook of Flip’s neck.

“What do you think he’s thinking, right now?” asked Lil.

Lovie flicked his tongue against the rough of Flip’s beard. Lil put a hand on Lovie’s cold, smooth body, and she could have sworn she felt a flutter in his three-chambered heart.

\*

There was a time, before, when Lil would have said no to letting such an animal sleep with them in their bed. Lovie, looped between them, under the blanket. She could feel his warmth, her warmth, Flip, radiating back. Lovie made a low hum when he slept. Lil pressed her ear to his side, felt the delicate movements of Lovie’s single lung, in and out, in and out.

If Flip had asked, she would have told him she was happy.

“Lovie Lovie Lovie,” he said instead, before they fell asleep.

“Lovie Lovie Lovie,” she said back.

In the morning, Lovie had swallowed Flip’s left foot, all five toes and nearly to the arch.

“Whoa!” he said as he jerked his foot away and jumped up, out of bed, still naked. The tender curl of his penis reminded Lil of a little girl’s ringlet—delicate and vulnerable. She pulled the duvet around herself instinctively.

“Why’d he do that?” asked Lil. The question felt dumb when she heard it out loud.

“Fuck,” said Flip. “I don’t know.”

Lovie's jaw had stretched beyond what either of them had thought possible. He beheld them with his back eyes, blinking down the clear scales of his eyelids.

That morning they left Lovie twined in the bed and took a shower together, water running hot. They kissed and lathered and then they had sex, quick and rattled, like they had forgotten what was going on.

\*

They decided it would be best if they kept Lovie out of the bedroom.

"He can sleep on the couch," Lil said. "He'll be comfortable out there."

That night they climbed into bed together with the door closed, and Flip looped his foot around hers, like he used to when they first started seeing each other, back when everything was still new.

"How do you think he sees us?" asked Lil. "Is it still love?"

"I'm sure," said Flip. He kissed her on the cheek before falling asleep.

In the morning, they woke up to Lovie twined between them once again, tickling Lil's earlobe with his tongue. He was gentle, warm.

"Oh," said Flip.

"How long has he been in here?" said Lil.

Flip didn't answer her right away. She felt the heft of Lovie's muscles stretch against her, the patter of bones. She waited until she felt his weight give over and she knew he was asleep.

"Hmm," said Flip.

\*

As the weather changed and the rules eased, they still did not go out.

When Lil's sister called and asked to meet, safely, somewhere outside with masks, Lil said no. She said she wasn't feeling quite right. A headache, a tingle. She didn't

want to risk it.

On the couch, Flip mindlessly fingered Lovie's mouth and tongue until he opened wide for the arm.

"What are you doing?" said Lil.

"It's fine," said Flip.

"I don't know."

Watching them like that made Lil think about what it used to feel like to be a child. Helpless. Like she was waiting for somebody to help her tie her own shoes.

"You seem stressed," said Flip. "If you want, we could give you some space."

"That's not what I want," said Lil. "Is that what you want?"

"Well, no," said Flip.

"Just not too subterrestrial," she said. No, wait. "Just not too deep."

"Lovie Lovie Lovie," said Flip.

\*

Of course, things got worse outside again. Baseball started up, then shut down, too quick after a wobbling first pitch. The haircuts they put off, they put off again. There was a woman who got knifed for refusing to cover her face. People hosted superspreader house parties, hoping for immunity, life back to what it used to be.

"What if?" said Flip, and he let Lovie swallow him up to the shoulder, the hip, the belly button.

"Do you—" said Lil. God, they both looked happy. "Never mind."

Flip's body looked sweet half-gobbled. Squirming like a mermaid on the kitchen floor. Flip's ass looked good under the scales.

"It's a thrill," said Flip.

"I prefer to observe," said Lil, her tongue catching cotton again. Then, "Lovie, Lovie, Lovie," the only natural thing to say next.

\*

When Lovie swallowed Flip to the neck, Lil watched Flip's stomach heaving through Lovie's skin, his lungs pumping, his arms flush and meaty at his sides. It scared her. Made her think of the outside. People waking up, yanking out their own oxygen, dying on the floor on their way to the bathroom.

It required butter, tickles, and a broom to shoehorn him out.

"Oh my God," said Flip. "Again."

But Lil didn't want him to. "Enough," she said. She would have said more, but she had forgotten how to start.

"It's fine," said Flip. "It passes the time."

"Jeopardous," said Lil with her cotton mouth, "more like."

"Whatever." Flip switched on the TV and didn't look at her again for an hour.

\*

The next time Lil found Flip inside Lovie, it was just his face poking out, just like he was tucked, snug in a sleeping bag, wrapped up to the ears. Outside, children pulled down their masks to stick out their tongues at each other. Virus swirled in the air as they walked.

What was once normal had begun to feel so far away. Lil started to doubt if she would ever want to go back to a crowded bar, sit next to a stranger on an airplane, gather around a table with people she hadn't seen in forever, breathing freely, all at once, out into space. She was getting so used to things, the way they were. There was comfort in them.

Lil's sister had left her a voicemail: "Hey. Haven't heard from you in a while. Just thought I'd check in. I miss you. I hope you're safe. Give me a call when you get this. It's kind of lonely over here, you know?"



Lil thought about texting her back, but she wasn't sure what she would say. Flip was whispering to her out of the snake, out of Lovie's own mouth, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

His face looked so sweet, so open. He gleamed, slick with saliva, eyes wide, lips curled into a smile. It made her think of what he must have been like as a baby—baby Flip, just now learning what the world was.

"I love you too," she said. So much tenderness she could hardly bear it. "I've never loved you more."

With his upturned face he beckoned her, "Come on," he said, "it's nice in here. It's safe."

And he did look so happy.

Outside, the deaths had crept up far beyond initial predictions. When was the point, Lil wondered, when she became so numb to those numbers? It had all become so easy to ignore. Flip slid down, away from her, smiling.

She held her breath and crawled inside.

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**ANNIE VITALSEY** holds an MFA from Arizona State University and was the 2019-20 Olive B. O'Connor Fellow in Fiction at Colgate University. Her stories have appeared in *Reed Magazine*, *Bennington Review*, *Juked*, *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Bat City Review*, and elsewhere. She currently lives in Phoenix, AZ.