

Feeding

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First Three Chapters

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1. Dinnertime

I know what happened to Daray Gilliard. I'm sort of responsible for his disappearance.

I mean, he hasn't entirely disappeared. After all the news reports and his parents one floor up weeping and crying on Mama's shoulder, and Mama praying over me and Tanna, hoping that nothing bad ever happens to us kids like whatever happened to Daray, all anyone with any real curiosity has to do is go down to the cellar of our brownstone apartment building in Astoria and find the dark, cobwebby corner with the loose bricks down by the floor.

It's kind of an out-of-the-way corner. I guess the building super isn't all that curious.

Behind the bricks is a small hole leading to a dusty little room, a space built into the building a hundred years ago and then walled up later. Daray found the room a couple of months before all this started, and he kept it secret from me. It's a good place for keeping secrets. The little room is located right behind the old boiler, so Daray can be comfortable on chilly nights. His blood is turning cold and he can't stay warm by himself anymore; not the way humans can.

I'm going to see Daray now. It's time to feed him. I hope Mrs. Mandracchia doesn't miss her cat too much.

My name is Tajo Borrego, and I'm thirteen. I'm kind of small, so I can wriggle through that hole in the cellar easily. So much crumbling mortar gets caught in my curls that my black hair looks gray by the time I'm done. I have to make sure I shake out all the dust before I go back upstairs or else one of the neighbors is gonna figure out what's going on.

Daray is fifteen, and I love him. You know I do, because I sure as hell wouldn't do this for anyone else.

* * *

It all began as a crazy idea that Daray had, and he needed me to help him carry it out. Everything went okay at first, until the evening when I carried Mrs. Mandracchia's cat down to the cellar.

At the bottom of the cellar stairs, I headed toward the farthest, darkest end of the room, stopping to pull the chain that turned on the lonely light bulb overhead. The boiler in the cellar thumped on and on, like always. I think Vinnie, the super, forgot to shut it off when winter ended. He was usually passed out drunk in his broom closet office while you were waiting for him to show up and fix your leaky faucet or whatever. Spring was warming up the city of New York, but I didn't mind the boiler running on this late in the season. Daray needed the extra warmth.

I heard the burble and hum of steam going up the pipes. My sneakers shuffled over the dusty cellar floor. I didn't worry about leaving footprints; the rats would come out later and erase my tracks with their running about. Outside, the sun was peeking through a few clouds, but you couldn't tell that through the ancient dirt layered over the two windows placed high in the cellar's back wall.

Mrs. Mandracchia's cat was tucked under my left arm. He knew me and didn't mind being carried. I tried not to think about what I was doing. I only remembered that Daray was hungry and needed me to take care of him.

I slipped past the old boiler, feeling its heat through the back of my shirt. To the right of the boiler, in the wall behind it, stood an archway made of crumbling old bricks that looked as if it might also serve as one of the gateways to Hell. I edged slowly into the darkness beyond the archway and sighed, trying to think of a way out of this. The cat began purring for some reason. You think he would have known better.

In a couple of steps, I reached the hidden corner, turned to my left, and knelt on the floor. I knocked away the bricks over the hole with my right hand. Mrs. Mandracchia's cat stopped purring and started to wriggle. He could tell something weird was on the other side of that wall. Cats are smart that way.

The cat began growling a little bit.

I ducked down and creepy-crawled through the hole, into the room. I held tighter to Mrs. Mandracchia's cat. He was *not* happy about all this, feeling the dust in his eyes and seeing only darkness and hearing the sound of something else breathing inside the little room. The cat kept grabbing at my body to pull himself away, digging his claws into my legs through my jeans. But I can take a lot of pain. I turned and used my free hand to stack the bricks back in place over the hole, so the cat couldn't escape. I told him, "Shhh, it's gonna be okay."

I was getting very good at lying. Blame Daray for that.

I stood up. The room was small and there weren't any windows in it. The smell coming from the pile of kitty litter in the far corner was sharp and icky. Daray used the kitty litter for the same thing kitties did, since squatting on the pot wasn't an option for him anymore. The only light in the room came from a tiny LED indicator on an old cell phone, the ancient kind of phone you could only talk and text on. I think that phone was older than me. Before all this started, Daray rigged the LED to stay lit up all the time, wiring a charger into the electric power cable high up on the cellar wall. He was always good working with things like that, even back when he was little. With Daray's eyes now changed, the LED was all the light he needed. It was the first thing I saw whenever I came into the secret room: that glowing red dot on the old phone, looking at me like the devil's eye.

I heard Daray barely breathing. Good. This time, at least, he wasn't dead.

"Daray?" I said.

The cat mrrroowwed. I heard squeaking springs from the rusty old cot frame on the other side of the room. Daray

must have been napping on the cot's old, stained mattress before I woke him up.

"Tajo." Daray pronounced my name carefully, as if it might break if he said it too fast. It was getting harder and harder for Daray to speak with his new tongue. I couldn't get down to the cellar to see him as often as I wished. Too much school and dancing. Maybe if Daray and I talked more, he could learn how to speak better.

I held the cat close to my side, under my arm. He was a grey tabby with white socks, and he mewled as if asking me to take him away from there. I felt sorry for Mrs. Mandracchia's cat. I wondered if he had any idea what was about to happen to him.

I said to Daray, "I have your din... what you wanted."

"I see," Daray said out of the dark. The cot creaked again; I think Daray sat up on it. I felt a chill run up my back—something big had made that noise. Something bigger than the Daray I remembered; the Daray that started changing a couple of weeks ago. I heard the swish and thump of Daray's tail as it slid off the cot and fell to the floor. The cat growled and clawed at my shirt.

"Hey!" My shirt wasn't as thick as my jeans, and now the claws hurt. I pulled the cat away from my body and gently pulled his claws out of the fabric, trying not to hurt his paws. He flattened his ears and looked at me with his glowing eyes, like he didn't trust me anymore.

Daray said, "Puppins, isn't it?"

"Puppins" was the cat's name. I could never figure out why old Mrs. Mandracchia gave her cat a name that began with "pup."

"Yeah," I said. I felt Puppins' body tense, and he hissed in the direction of the cot. I bet the cat's sharp eyes already saw Daray.

"Put him down," Daray said.

I hesitated. "Do we have to?"

"Rats aren't enough for me anymore," Daray said.

"This cat won't even make much of a meal."

I set the cat down on the floor. The cot squeaked again as Daray stood up. I heard metal clink against the wall

when Puppins dashed under the cot frame. It was the only hiding place in the room.

Footsteps came toward me, slow and shuffling, and definitely too big to be made by a cat. I could see a little bit better now. I think a tiny bit of light seeped in from the little entry hole, or maybe from a small crack in the wall behind the boiler. When you're in that much darkness, your eyes grab hold of every bit of light they can find.

Daray came close to me, closer than I had seen him in a couple of days. I couldn't help it; I gasped.

"What's the matter, boy?" Daray said. I heard the slight chuckle in his voice. "Scare ya a little?"

I shook my head and tried to hold back my tears. I had already lost so much of him.

Daray's face... man, he used to have such a cute face. It wasn't all gone yet, but his pale skin had turned all copper and gold, and his new scales were growing more distinct each day. His long blond hair—I used to love stroking his hair—had almost all fallen out. Daray's blue eyes had turned yellow and grown much bigger, and his black pupils were elongating into vertical slits, pointed at the ends like thorns. The new eyes were gradually pulling around to the sides of Daray's head, and his nose and mouth were stretching into a wide snout. His ears were disappearing into his skull like flower petals folding up for the night.

I felt Daray's stubby arms slide around my waist. His fingers had all but disappeared, and his arms had become shorter as they retracted further into his body. He could no longer put his hands together behind my back, and I told you how little I am. That's why I wanted to cry, because I remembered the first time he held me like that, with his arms around me. He made me feel so safe and protected. I knew the same transformation was happening to Daray's legs, but he was still taller than me because his gut was stretching out longer, like a piece of gum when you hold one end with your teeth and pull on it.

Daray drew me close and I put my arms around him. His naked body was filling in and rounding off to a new shape. He no longer had a chest like a teenage boy; he was

developing a ridged belly made for slithering. I ran my fingers over the scales on his back; they were flat and smooth like polished pebbles, and felt pleasant to touch. Daray's body gave off warmth from the heat of the boiler on the other side of the wall. He didn't really have hips anymore because his body had pushed aside what was left of his legs. Where his butt used to be was what I called his tail, but it was really the rest of his body growing and growing. Soon, Daray would have no more arms or legs at all. His boy junk had already retracted into his new body. I felt sad about that. Daray was the first boy to show me how to make my body feel good other than from dancing. We used to fool around all the time after school, quietly, in his room or my room; mostly in my room because Mama worked and Mrs. Gilliard stayed home after what happened to Daray's little brother. When Daray and I fooled around, we were always afraid someone would walk in on us. We used to giggle while trying to come up with good excuses for what two boys like us were doing in bed together. Not that it really mattered; everyone in the building and even the whole neighborhood knew about us. We were a couple; we were together; we were a thing.

Daray and I had been best friends for years. You gotta understand; I'd have done anything in the universe for him.

I heard Puppins claw desperately at the bricks over the hole. Then he growled and ran back under the cot again. There was no way out of this for any of us, I guess.

Daray's mouth was wider now, but he could still smile at me. "Am I too ugly for a kiss?"

"No," I said, and I meant it. We kissed slowly, and his lips, which had turned into two rows of scales with rounded edges, were dry and smooth, but they still felt wonderful. They were *his* lips; they'd always feel wonderful, no matter what.

"You'll never be ugly," I said. "Not to me." We kissed again and held it tight. A cleft was forming in the middle of Daray's upper lip where his tongue could zip out and scent the world. Daray quickly slid his narrow tongue in and out of my mouth. I giggled and shivered at the same time. He'd

already warned me not to slip my tongue into his mouth anymore. Daray's teeth had become too dangerous; he had a mouth full of curved razors.

We held each other close for several minutes, the way we always did when no one else was around. Then Daray stepped back and said, "You wanna watch?"

I didn't want to watch, but I wanted to know. I loved Daray. I wanted to know everything about this new life of his, no matter how hard it was for me to take.

"Yes," I said.

I heard Daray shuffle over to the cot. Puppins hissed at him, then mrowred and spat. I could tell from the sound that Daray had picked him up. The cat moaned pitifully, and I winced. I didn't want to see this; I really didn't. I was glad the light was dim.

Daray came close to me again, and I saw Puppins wriggling and howling in my boyfriend's stubby hands.

Daray saw my sick-looking expression and said, "You have to be braver, Tajo. We all do."

I twisted my fingers together and squinted so I couldn't see very well, but I nodded anyway.

Daray held Puppins up higher. "I can't do this with my body yet," Daray said, "but someday..."

Daray squeezed the cat in his chunky hands, constricting the furry body very slowly. Puppins struggled and howled at first, and his green eyes looked like they were going to pop right out of his head. My eyes watered and my shoulders hitched, but I forced myself not to cry. I cried too much, anyway; it was a dumb, little boy habit, and I'd stopped being a kid long ago. Daray was right; we all had to be braver now.

Puppins clawed at the air, desperate for escape. Finally, the cat stopped mmmroowring because he couldn't breathe anymore. In a minute or two, Puppins was dead.

Daray smiled at me. "You did very well, Tajo. I'm proud of you."

At that moment, I didn't feel very proud of anything at all.

Daray opened his mouth. The top of his head swung up as much as his lower jaw dropped, and when it dropped, it looked like a trap door falling open. The size of his maw was huge; I could have fit my whole head in there. And inside his mouth, I saw the teeth Daray warned me about: fangs curving backward toward his throat, so he could hold on to a creature after he killed it and drag it away, if he had to. Nature gave pythons hooks in their mouths to make up for not having hands. On his upper jaw, I saw the second row of those horrible fangs growing inside the outer line of teeth. The wet length of Daray's thinning tongue quivered; it had started to fork at the tip. I wondered if the dead, furry animal would actually taste good to Daray.

Daray popped Puppins into his mouth, brought his jaws together, and swallowed, just like taking a vitamin pill. He grabbed my left hand.

"Feel," Daray said. He pressed my hand to where his chest used to be, and I felt the cat's lumpy body slide past my fingers on its way to Daray's stomach, like a secret you keep hidden in your pocket.

Daray pulled me close again, smiled, and kissed me. "Thanks for dinner," he said.

* * *

My body trembled as I crawled out through the hole and blocked it up with bricks again. The boiler thumped and thumped, and I wanted to scream at it to shut up. The cellar air held an acrid tang, like a boiled-out teakettle, or puke on the boys' room floor at school. I shook dust out of my hair and wiped my mouth. I found a couple of cat hairs stuck on my lips from kissing Daray. I wiped the back of my hand against my jeans over and over to get rid of the cat fur and, through clenched teeth, I squeaked out Puppins' name a couple of times.

Stop crying, Tajo, I thought to myself. *You have to be braver now.*

I ran up the cellar steps, then up another floor, ignoring that it was time for me to go feed Daray's snakes. On the

second floor, I rushed past Mrs. Mandracchia standing in the hallway in her nightgown at 3:30 p.m., looking lost while she called for her cat. She held a wooden spoon coated with tomato sauce in one hand, and I knew she had been making meatballs again. I hurtled up one more flight of stairs, burst through the apartment door, and nearly bowled over Tanna when I ran past her. She screamed something mean to me, but I didn't hear it. I went into my room and slammed the door behind me. I fell onto my bed and cried, and I didn't stop for almost an hour.

My boyfriend was turning into a snake, and I had absolutely no way to stop it.

2. Snakes

It seemed weird being safe at home after what I'd just done to Puppins.

Mama called out that dinner was ready. I heard her voice through my bedroom door. We didn't have a really big apartment. Our home was cozy and comfortable, with Mama's colorful little decorative thingamabobs on the walls and shelves, along with a couple pictures of saints and a copper crucifix; just normal, family stuff, if your family is Mexican and Catholic like mine. Mama's family had come from a small town in Veracruz. Pop's family came from a small village, too, but in Tlaxcala. My parents had been raised with those small town values and were both a little less twenty-first century than I thought was healthy. I'd known all this hominess since I was a kid: the saints and the crucifix and the Bible and the old, old framed pictures of relatives from Mexico, long ago. It felt safe and secure, though much too stuffy and religious for my taste. But that night, after feeding Daray, I felt like an intruder at home because I had done something horrible.

I stopped crying before I left my room, not that I had much crying left in me. I washed my face in the hallway bathroom and went to the dinner table. Everyone else was waiting. Mama made mac and cheese with roasted poblanos in it and some spicy sausage on the side. She worked hard all day and then came home and made these amazing dinners for us. Sometimes, Mama talked about when she was a girl, here in America, and how the kids back then teased her about eating tacos and enchiladas every night, which was total BS and very mean. Mama knew some tasty recipes, and not just the sort of typical Mexican things you

think. She was a good cook, but Aunt Lola was a total cooking expert. Whenever I saw Aunt Lola, I always nudged her to share her secrets with Mama. Lola replied by teaching her cooking secrets to me, instead. Turns out I kinda liked learning how to cook after all; although knowing how to cook didn't help me much with Daray, did it?

As I sat down with the others at the small table in the kitchen, Tanna started in on me. "We all heard you in your room getting hysterical over your *boyfriend* again!" she said. "Give it up, Tajo-bozo-bun-bun! Daray probably ran away from home because you're so ugly!"

"Santana," Pop said. "Not at the table."

Pop used Tanna's full first name, so she must have pissed him off. Tanna was ten and I hated her. At least she had her own bedroom. Before we moved here five years ago, we had to share a room. I think that's when we started hating each other. Daray once said about Tanna that she got all the brat genes and I got all the nice ones. That was most definitely true, right?

Pop was balding and wore a thick moustache, but when it came to genes, I must have gotten Mama's hair, because I had lots of big curls. I liked to let my hair grow longer than Pop thought was good for a boy. Tanna didn't get curls; just long, black waves. I don't know where she got her attitude from, though; certainly not from Mama. Tanna probably thought being a screaming meanie made her sassy, like Aunt Lola. Aunt Lola wasn't sassy, though; she was fierce. But that's what you can expect from a little kid like Tanna: trying to imitate something cool and getting it all wrong.

Tanna and I didn't always used to fight. When she was little, I was her protector, always holding her hand when we crossed the street or watching over her in the bathtub so she wouldn't drown. I used to bring her pieces of candy or little toys I saw at the bodega that I thought she might like. When we used to share a room, we got along okay, at first. It hadn't always been World War Three for us.

But that was back then, and this was at dinner right now. Tanna glowered at me and we both dug into our food before Mama finished saying grace. Mama gave up long ago on making Tanna and me wait. Pop asked us how school was that day. I shrugged, while Tanna babbled about some science project she was working on. Mama said it had been another busy day at Target, where she worked. Pop never said much about his job. He was a train dispatcher. Daray's dad worked with the MTA, too; a track supervisor. Sometimes, Pop and Mr. Gilliard went to work together, like they did today.

When there was a pause in the talk and all anyone could hear was Tanna chewing with her mouth open because she knew it bugged me, Mama asked Pop, "Have Owen and Eileen heard any more news?"

Owen and Eileen were Daray's parents. Pop shook his head; no news about Daray. The fliers were still up on the lampposts and in the front windows of shops and bodegas around the neighborhood; he'd only been missing for a couple of weeks. The local news had stopped talking about him last week, though. Nothing new. Nothing ever new. Except that Daray was eating bigger food now.

"So sad," Mama said. "And so soon after Morgan, God rest his soul."

I felt like asking Mama if there was an acceptable time between somebody's kid dying or going missing before it was okay that another one vanished. I think I was developing a touch of Tanna's bratty mouth from all the worry I had over Daray. Morgan was Daray's little brother, and he got killed by a car about a year and a half ago. He was eight years old. Morgan was in a coma for a month before he died. Daray stopped smiling so much about that time. I missed those easy smiles of his. I guess I'd never get to see them again; not with that python mouth he had now.

Daray already had pet snakes by the time Morgan died; five of them in a big aquarium complex in his bedroom: a corn snake, two royal pythons (I like that name better than ball python, which is what they're also called), a king snake, and a garter snake. He got them when he was

twelve. Daray didn't tell his parents that the royal pythons were illegal to keep as pets in New York City, and he wasn't one-hundred percent sure about the other two. Fortunately for the snakes, they were hiding when the cops eventually checked out Daray's room. Morgan was scared of the snakes and never went into Daray's room much after Daray got them. Maybe that's why Daray wanted snakes as pets, to keep Morgan out. But Daray always got along okay with Morgan. Daray kept to himself mostly, so the two brothers didn't fight much. But Daray always liked to be alone a lot, unless he was with me.

I looked up and saw Mama watching me, sort of expressionless, but I knew she was worried about how I was taking Daray's disappearance. Everybody had heard me bawling my head off in my room earlier, so Mama assumed that Daray's disappearance was the reason. She was half-right. I think it would have been easier on me if Daray had gone off and done this to himself on his own. But I still would have cried a lot.

"Oh, kids," Pop said. "I got tickets from a guy at work for the Mets game tomorrow night. You wanna go?"

"Can't," I said. "Dance class." Pop knew I had class, and it bugged me that he wanted me to miss it. Ballet dancing is the greatest thing in the world, and if you don't agree, there's something wrong with you. I love it so much. It's like I only really discovered my body when I found ballet, and now all I lived for was to feel my muscles move. Well, that and Daray, too. Thursday and Saturday evenings were the times for my ballet class, and Wednesday afternoons were for my modern dance class. I saw Njowga, my private dance instructor, four other times a week. I was totally serious about dancing; that's what I wanted to do with my life. Pop didn't like it much that I loved to dance. I wasn't crazy about sports. He probably wished that I'd suddenly start wanting to play for the Mets, like a "normal" boy in Queens would. We sort of didn't meet in the middle that way.

"You can miss one class," Pop said to me. He sounded like a little kid, begging for a special treat.

“No, he can’t,” Tanna said. “He might start liking girls then.”

“Shut up, toilet-breath,” I said to her. That was about the worst thing I could call Tanna in front of Mama and Pop without getting in trouble.

“You shut up,” Tanna said right back.

“Whyn’t you shut up so I don’t barf?”

“Whyn’t *you* find yourself another boyfriend, lovey-buttkins?”

You can see where this was going. Mama told us both to hush.

Back to the eternal conflict between Pop and me; between sports and dance. “I don’t wanna get out of practice,” I told Pop.

“That’s okay,” he said, not very willing to give up. “You can take the train to Flushing after your practice; we’ll meet you at the—”

“I don’t want him riding the subway alone,” Mama said. I didn’t try to argue with her that I was old enough to ride the train by myself; she never listened. She didn’t care about sports, so Pop never asked her to go to the game when he got tickets. Tanna was all over the idea, though. She didn’t give a rat’s ass about sports, either, but Pop would buy her every frickin’ snack they sold at Citi Field, and she’d spend all nine innings pigging out. It’s a wonder she didn’t weigh fifty tons, but she was skinnier than I was. Anyway, Tanna was game to go, but Pop looked at me sadly; probably picturing me in my dance tights and wondering where he went wrong. My father thought that way still, like there was something wrong with him because his son was gay. I think Pop hoped that Tanna was right: if he could keep me away from ballet class often enough, I’d start liking girls. The thought of that made me roll my eyes, but I kept my head down and went on eating so Pop wouldn’t see. My parents are mostly pretty good, but there are some things they’re strict about. Disrespect is one of them.

It bothered Pop that the guys at his work knew I liked ballet. I guess they gave him crap over it. That’s the

difference between us; I didn't care about being like anyone else. I fought back if kids at school gave me a hard time about being gay or loving to dance. I told Mama and Pop I was gay two years ago, when I was eleven. Pop did his best to ignore that I liked boys until Daray and I started dating about six months ago, and then everybody knew. A couple of geezers in the building didn't like that, but Mrs. Mandracchia thought Daray and I were a cute couple. *Are* a cute couple. Crap; I guess she wouldn't think that if she had seen us that evening, would she? Especially with Puppins digesting slowly inside my boyfriend's belly.

For a moment, I thought I wouldn't be able to finish dinner, thinking about Puppins and his green bug-eyes and Daray slowly squeezing him. But if I didn't eat, Mama would get even more worried. So I plowed on. As long as I didn't think about the cat, I'd be okay.

No such luck. We heard a knock at the door. Pop got up and answered it, and we heard him talking to Mrs. Mandracchia. She was very insistent when she wanted something, and I heard her getting a little frantic while she talked with Pop. After she left and Pop came back to the table, I knew exactly what he was gonna say.

"Mrs. Mandracchia's cat is missing," Pop said, idly rubbing his moustache. "Either of you kids seen him today?"

Tanna shook her head and I mumbled something that could have passed for, "Nuh-uh." I finished eating dinner fast, trying not to think about people food or cat food or any other kind of food. But then I remembered something else that needed to be fed. I pushed my chair back from the table.

"I gotta go feed Daray's snakes," I said, standing up.

Tanna giggled wickedly; if Mama and Pop weren't around, she'd have made some crack about me and Daray's "snake" for sure. I know she probably listened at my bedroom door after school sometimes, even though Daray and I tried our best to be quiet. Tanna had a dirty mind for a ten-year-old. I think she watched too much TV.

“Nice dinner, Mama,” I said, and I kissed her on the cheek. I was too big for that, too; but it made her happy. Besides, she’s the only hope I have of ever getting Pop to like my dance lessons and all that other “faggy shit” about me. Pop called it that once, when he was mad at me. He never said he was sorry for saying it, either. Mama told me he didn’t mean it. I replied, “Bull...” without saying the rest of the word. Mama would make me go to confession if I swore too much, not that I believed in any of that God crap. At least I didn’t have to go to Catholic school. There, they’d probably try to drown me in holy water for being a homo.

I felt Pop’s sad eyes on my back while I left the kitchen. He wanted to raise a star pitcher for the Mets; what he got instead was a kid whose biggest goal for the year was trying to make it into the School of American Ballet and get picked to dance in *The Nutcracker* with the New York City Ballet. Yeah, I was a big ol’ disappointment for Pop. But he didn’t know how good he had it, having me for a son. At least I was happy being human.

* * *

Man, it was quiet in the Gilliards’ apartment. It was quiet in ours, too, but that’s because we all liked different music and could never agree over what to play on the radio, so Mama and Pop made us turn it off. Tanna liked the stupidest pop music she could find, mostly because she knew it bugged me. I liked classical music, of course, but Daray and I both liked some of the same bands, like Arcade Fire, which was our favorite. I wondered if Daray missed music. People think snakes are deaf, but they’re not. Snakes can actually hear sounds. That’s good, because I’m not sure how I could communicate with Daray if he couldn’t hear me talk. I should ask him next time if he wanted me to bring him his iPhone so he could listen to music. I didn’t know if he could hear things like that anymore, though. Snakes picked up sound wave vibrations through their bodies, more than anything else; they have ear structures in

their heads, but no hole for sounds to get in. I didn't think a little pair of earbuds was going to do Daray much good.

The silence in our apartment was because Tanna and I liked to fight. The silence in the Gilliards' apartment was because of death.

The Gilliards lived straight above us and two doors down, on the fourth floor. Their apartment used to be brighter, but now it always felt dark in there. Daray's mom let me in when I knocked on the door. There was no dinner on the table; I think Owen and Eileen had eaten cold sandwiches again. I didn't say much. I mean, what could I say? It hurt me that Owen and Eileen thought Daray might have run away, or that some bad guy snatched him off the street, as if Daray wouldn't have beat the crap out of anyone who tried that. I think Daray's parents suspected the worst because Daray wouldn't have run away on his own, not without me, and certainly not without telling me. I had to lie really well so they would believe I truly had no clue what happened to him. But there were so many times I wanted to blurt it all out to Daray's mom and say to her, "He's down in the cellar. He's okay."

Well, I wasn't sure about the okay part, but at least he was alive.

Eileen Gilliard was great; she had set out the frozen mice to thaw for the snakes. Yeah, frozen mice. You can buy them like popsicles. I picked up the mice from the kitchen counter and took them back to Daray's bedroom.

I still smelled him in the room: Daray, as a boy, the way he was before. I wanted to cry again, but you already know I did that too much. Instead, I just turned on the light, closed the bedroom door, and went up to Daray's snake tanks. The snakes looked out curiously from their various little caves. Daray had taken good care of them, giving the snakes different hiding places in separate warm and cool areas so they could control their body temperature by moving where they needed to go. He also changed the layout of each enclosure from time to time, so the snakes wouldn't get bored. I wondered if that's why this was all

happening—if Daray had simply become bored with being a human and needed a change of scenery.

The snakes knew why I was there. I don't think snakes ever loved people the way dogs and cats do. The only thing these snakes wanted was food. I think Daray's snakes would eat *me* if they were big enough.

I sat on the edge of Daray's bed, facing the snakes, and thought about the last time Daray and I had been in his bed together. It was just a couple of days before Daray did it; a couple of days before he showed me the syringe and reminded me about the serum we had read about. I wish I could go back to that day and warn him: *You're gonna rip Tajo's heart out if you go through with your stupid plan.*

I opened the aquariums where Daray's snakes lived and dropped a mousesicle into each one. Daray originally wanted to raise live mice to feed his snakes, but his mom wouldn't let him after Morgan heard about the idea and spent a week crying over it. Morgan was kind of a sissy, but he was okay. Daray protected him. I wonder if Morgan had been gay, too, like his brother. We'll never know now, I guess.

Daray loved animals and didn't ever want to hurt them, or at least that what he said. I used to wonder about his live mice idea, though. It was weird; the first weird thing he had ever thought up. He smiled a bit when he talked about the idea, as if he couldn't wait to have some sort of "mice versus snakes" show in his room. Like *Gladiator*, right? Secretly, I agreed with Morgan: no live mice. That was just wrong. It would have been like Pop bringing home a live cow and announcing, "Here's dinner for the next month!" Yikes!

Daray and Morgan had lived in our building all their lives. I moved in five years ago, when I was eight. Daray was ten. We hit it off right away; two little boys who didn't like sports but loved books and mythology and fantasy tales and gaming. I liked classical music, opera, and ballet. I bet Pop wishes Mama hadn't made me take piano lessons right after we moved in here, which is what started it all. He probably found it suspicious that it was that old queer

Tchaikovsky who wrote the three greatest ballets ever. Before I got into dancing, I used to hop around the apartment, pretending to conduct symphonies that played on the radio. Air conducting; it was very cool. And I conducted opera, too. You can listen to live opera on Saturday afternoons from the Metropolitan Opera, which is the greatest opera house in the world, right here in New York City. One of my dance teachers later gave me a real conductor's baton, which made it even more fun to pretend I was James Levine or Gustavo Dudamel or Yannick Nézet-Séguin. If I didn't love dancing so much, I would have wanted to be like one of them.

Daray also liked comic books and scary novels, especially some that were way too scary for me. He'd force me to watch scary TV shows and movies that made me cover my eyes. I mean, really, do people actually bleed that much when you chop them up? I didn't wanna know, all right? Daray and I used to have sleepovers and stay up late, and he would read me the ickiest, grossest passages from those scary books and give me nightmares. Daray liked furrries, too, and probably would have been more into Goth stuff, but his dad wouldn't let him after the time Daray dyed his blond hair pure black. It was kind of sexy, actually, but I liked blond Daray better, too.

Daray and I always did things together ever since we met: go to the movies; hang out; get ice cream; tease Tanna and Morgan. I think we were in love long before we realized what it really meant to be in love.

I opened one of the aquariums again and wriggled the mouse to get the snake's attention. Three other snakes were already swallowing their mice, and the fourth one was nosing at his, getting ready to chow down.

I thought about Puppins' last moments and wondered if Mrs. Mandracchia had also knocked on the Gilliards' door that evening.

Daray was fascinated by Nāgas, which are a kind of snake-human combination in Buddhist and Hindu religions. They're kind of cool, actually; a lot more interesting than the stupid stuff my parents believe. If the Catholic Church

had Nāgas, yeah, I'd be there every Sunday. Nāgas are what got Daray into the furry fandom; well, that and the yiffy art, which we both liked. Daray even talked about having a snake-suit made so he could pretend to be one, like me and my air-conducting. Then Daray found this other thing instead, the thing he was doing now. What made Daray so happy about it was that he was kind of becoming a Nāga himself, for real; not just a costume.

I watched the snakes eating dinner. It only took a few minutes for them to get the mice entirely inside their bodies. This whole thing going on with Daray down in the cellar made me feel trapped, like one of those doomed, lifeless little rodents. Om-nom-nom, little mousie! Be glad you're not a live cat.

Daray's bed was still unmade, just the way he left it. His mom hadn't touched anything. For all I knew, Morgan's bed was still unmade from the day when he was hit by the car at the intersection next to the school; Dutch Kills, just down the street, where Tanna went to school. The car should have hit *her*, as far as I was concerned. I hadn't been in Morgan's room since the accident, so I didn't know what it looked like now. Morgan was the kind of kid who probably made his bed every morning without being asked, so he probably deserved to live, unlike Tanna. Sometimes, Daray wondered if his parents wished that he had been hit by a car instead. He wasn't joking, either. It was hard on Daray when his little brother died. He told me he thought his parents forgot they still had another kid.

I lay back on Daray's sheets and pulled them over my head. I could still smell his body. I remembered how his arms felt around me, all strong and secure. I liked that feeling. It had been a grey afternoon outside that last day here with him, when Daray pulled the drapes closed and came over to kiss me. He put his strong hands on my shoulders and pulled me close, and we both shut our eyes because we knew exactly where our lips needed to go.

I yanked the sheets off my head and sat up. I didn't need to start bawling in Daray's room and have his mother hear me. I don't think his mom had been too crazy about

Daray being gay, and I know his dad was pretty pissed off about it, as if Daray had decided one day to become gay the way he decided to dye his hair black.

The snakes finished dinner. I made sure their enclosures were locked securely, so they couldn't escape. Snakes can slither through some of the tightest spots you can imagine. I turned off the light in Daray's room and took a deep breath before I opened the bedroom door. Walking through the living room in the Gilliards' apartment was worse than going to a funeral home.

Owen Gilliard sat in his chair with the *Daily News* folded on his lap, unread. Daray's mom came out of her bedroom when she heard me leaving. She had stopped working after Morgan died and, as far as I could tell, she basically stayed home and cried all day long. It made me a little bit angry that Daray had done this to her; made her cry even more. In her eyes, he had disappeared. On top of Morgan's death, that just felt mean. But it wasn't a family that had a lot of love in it after Morgan's accident, at least if you believed what Daray said.

"Thank you for taking care of Daray's snakes," Eileen said to me. "I could never bring myself to feed them." She tried to smile. "Just getting the mice out of the freezer to thaw..."

"Yeah, thanks for doing that," I said. "I'll come by earlier next time. I forgot about it this afternoon." It hurt my heart, remembering how Daray and I used to joke about what might happen if his mom reached into the freezer for some chicken or stew meat without looking and tossed frozen mice into her pot on the stove instead. Instant mouse stew. *Ratatouille*, right? Pop and Tanna thought I was weird because that was my favorite animated movie; well, after *The Lion King*, anyway.

"That's all right," Daray's mom said. "I'm sure Daray would appreciate it if he knew you were doing this for him."

I nodded, then left as quickly as I could. I'm just glad she never asked why I suddenly started feeding Daray's snakes, as if I knew he wasn't coming back.

Feeding

Daray's dream was to be a snake; mine was to be a dancer. At least one of those dreams was coming true awfully fast. Whatever happened with Daray, I had to be careful that he didn't stop me from making my dream come true, too.

3. The Syringe

I had to be sneaky about Daray-the-snake, and I didn't like that. I didn't like keeping secrets. It's just like why I wanted everyone to know I was gay.

Before going to school the next morning, I ran down to the cellar to check on Daray. I had to be quick and quiet about it. I didn't want anyone to ask me what I was doing, running all the way downstairs like that. Pop had already gone to work, so I picked a time when Mama was helping Tanna pretty herself up. That was such a hopeless cause, they could be busy for hours, right?

A bare bulb hung in the cellar's low ceiling, and you couldn't turn it on until you got to it. So, while going down, the steep, stone stairwell was dark, especially since I closed the door behind me so no one else in the building would wonder what was going on. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I walked a few steps toward the boiler, then pulled the dangly chain and turned on the light. Cobwebs fluttered in the shadows under the stone ceiling as if waving hello. I walked toes-first to the hidden corner, a ballet step called a toe lead that has the advantage of being quiet. You see cartoon characters do an exaggerated version of it all the time, when they're trying to be sneaky. When I reached the hole, I knocked aside the bricks and crawled into the room.

I couldn't see a thing, but I heard Daray breathing. I shuffled closer to him, trying not to wake him, but also making a tiny bit of sound so I wouldn't startle him. I was a little scared of him, actually. Well, no I wasn't. Or maybe I was. I couldn't tell how much of Daray was still boy and

how much was snake. I just hoped the snake part loved me the same way the boy part did.

Daray sounded so peaceful, sleeping away and digesting his meal from last night. I wanted to see him, actually see what he looked like now, so much. I pulled my LED flashlight out of my pocket, shielded the light with my left hand, and turned it on. The flashlight switch made a small click. I tensed, but Daray kept breathing steadily. I, on the other hand, stopped breathing entirely for a few moments. You ever wonder what it would be like to be up close next to a big animal in the zoo, like a bear or a tiger? That's what it felt like standing next to Daray. He was huge, a good three or four feet longer with his tail than he'd been as a human, and getting pretty big around the middle. And I don't mean fat. All you had to do was touch Daray's body, and you could feel the muscles growing tighter and getting stronger. Daray and I weren't sure how much he would grow but, apparently, it was going to be a lot. I kept the flashlight shielded with my hand. Snakes don't have eyelids, but their pupils close up when they sleep. Daray still had about half an eyelid left over each eye, for now. He didn't see me.

I swept the flashlight beam over the room. I needed to come down with a bag later and clean out that kitty litter; it stank like you-know-what. Daray's piss and turds were becoming less human and more like a snake's all the time, although snake turds look kinda like dog shit, anyway. And snakes don't really pee, either. Before this all began, Daray installed a valve in the water pipe that ran through the room. I used the valve to fill a big bucket of water for him. The bucket was pretty full, but I knew I'd better change it soon to keep the water fresh. I swept the light over the rest of the cellar floor.

I saw something under the table where the cell phone sat. I'd never seen it before. I crouched down and picked it up. The thing came up from the floor like old, wrinkled pajamas. It was pale in color, a sort of beige-yellow hue. And it was big, like a bedsheet, but longer instead of wide.

Daray's skin.

Gross! I almost dropped it. This wasn't the skin of the boy I knew from our afterschool fooling-around sessions. This was snake skin. Daray had shed it.

I held the skin up and shone the light over it. The skin was perfect, as if Daray's shadow had come off; you know, like in *Peter Pan*. Only, this shadow was for real, and a bit creepy. I knew it took snakes a while to shed their skins, but Daray must have shed this one in the short time since yesterday, when I brought him his dinner. Daray was growing quickly, so he must be shedding his skin pretty rapidly. We didn't really know what would happen to Daray's body, not on a day-to-day basis. Even the doctor who created the serum didn't seem to know, from what he said in the article Daray had found.

"Tajo?"

I clicked off the light and turned to see Daray lifting his head sleepily. "Yeah, it's me," I said. "Sorry I woke you up."

"S okay," Daray said. "It's afternoon already?" He sounded groggy, like he just awoke from a dream. I wondered what he dreamed about.

"Naw," I said. "It's still morning. I'm on my way to school. Just checking up... you know."

"Making sure I'm not dead." Daray giggled in a funny way, as if there were any normal way for him to giggle anymore. "You're awesome, Tajo. Don't ever forget that. Come here."

Crap, I hope all he wanted was a kiss, because I didn't have time for anything else. I started to drop the shed skin so I could touch Daray's face. But before I even got up to the cot—

"TA-A-AJO-O-O!"

Cripes! Daray and I were way back deep in the cellar, but Tanna bellowed from somewhere upstairs like a freaking foghorn, and we heard her clearly. I bent over and gave Daray a quick kiss.

"Gotta run," I said. I kicked the shed skin back under the table. "I'll get rid of that this afternoon. See you later." I pocketed my flashlight and ran to the hole, sliding on my

jeans-covered knees for the last couple of feet. That move was more modern dance than ballet; like something choreographed by Bob Fosse.

“Tajo?” Daray said, sounding like he was falling asleep again.

“Yeah?”

“I love... you.”

From outside the hole I heard Tanna shriek my name again. She must have been upstairs on the first or second floor, but they could probably hear her up in the Bronx. I ran back to Daray, kissed him again, and said, “I love you, too.” Then I rushed out through the hole and piled up the bricks over it.

Do you know how it feels when someone besides a member of your family tells you that they love you like that? It feels completely awesome.

Tanna was about to bellow my name one more time when I caught up to her on the second floor landing. She swore like a sailor when Mama and Pop weren’t around. Okay, I don’t know any real sailors, but I bet they didn’t cuss as much as my sister did. Tanna swore like a cabbie in a traffic jam; how about that? If you know New York cabbies, you know that Tanna held back nothing.

“Where the hell have you been, fluff-nuts?” Tanna screamed at me. “You look like a drunk who just barfed up and passed out in the park.”

Crap, I had forgotten to shake out my hair and brush off my jeans. “Uh, down in the, um, downstairs.”

“In the freakin’ cellar? What for?”

Well, that shout was loud, too. Now all of Queens knew where I’d just been. I clenched my jaws to keep from yelling back at the little brat and, instead, I played along. “Yeah, twerplet. I needed a, um, a rat. For a science project.”

“I don’t see that ya got one! Did they scare you off, sissy-pants?” Tanna made little rat-like chittering sounds. “I don’t know how you’re ever gonna dance in *The Nutcracker* if you’re scared of mice, twinkle-toes!”

God, why do there have to be laws against killing little sisters? “No,” I said, and Tanna grinned at my restrained anger, which always made my face darken. “I didn’t see any. And I’m not scared of mice or rats.” That’s true; I would have never, ever have gone down in that cellar if I was scared of rats. The rats used to be everywhere down there, but their population had thinned out a bit now that Daray was snacking on them.

I yanked Tanna’s arm and started to drag her back upstairs.

“Didn’t see any rats?” Tanna cried. “Down there, you could just shovel a shitload of ’em into a trash bag. I think Vinnie is their ringleader.”

“I’m gonna shovel you into a bag with them, brat.”

“Ha! I’d like to see you try, tutu-butt!”

I didn’t say anything until we were back in the apartment, but I made sure I shook out my curly hair in the hallway before we got there. Mama was standing in the living room with her coat on, about to be late for her bus to work. Tanna started babbling about rats and the cellar but, luckily, Mama wasn’t paying attention. We all went downstairs together and said goodbye at the building’s front door.

Tanna and I headed south to school, while Mama went the other way, to her bus stop. I wore jeans and a shirt I’d picked up from the closet floor; it passed the smell test, so it was okay. Tanna wore tight jeans and a pink shirt with sparkly crap all over the cartoon character on the front. She was like that: starting to grow up a little but still hanging on to her little-girl princess gear, which is odd because a princess is definitely one thing my sister wasn’t. The sun was coming up, shining bright off the cars that speeded past us on 29th Street. It might turn out to be a good day after all. At least I wouldn’t have to feed Daray again for a few days. I hoped.

Tanna wouldn’t shut up about me being scared of rats, and she made sure the other kids approaching our schools heard what she had to say. Mama insisted that I walk Tanna to school every frickin’ morning, as if we didn’t live just a

couple of blocks away. But I couldn't argue that it was a hassle. Our schools were right across the street from each other, so it made sense to Mama that Tanna and I would walk there together. Ever since Morgan got hit by that car, that had been my main duty: making sure Tanna got to school okay, especially crossing the intersection where *it* happened. If Tanna didn't shut up soon, though, I was gonna push her in front of a school bus myself. She finally ran off to join some of her friends; screaming something about me being a scaredy-cat. I didn't care. I stopped being afraid of rats when I was nine and Daray killed one down in the cellar to show me he could do it. He used an old machete that Vinnie left lying out sometimes. Vinnie; geez. The super hated kids; well, at least, he hated the boys. He was nice to girls, but that's probably because girls didn't play tricks on him and tease him about his boozing and leaving his stupid tools lying about. Vinnie was gonna get some kid killed with his carelessness if he didn't stop spending his afternoons drinking cheap vodka and passing out in his little office.

I hadn't thought about Daray's dead rat in years. Maybe I should have. It certainly spooked me when Daray killed it, although I admired him for doing it, too. But I should have remembered that day long before Daray started eating the cellar rats, like he was doing now. It was more evidence of the weird ideas growing in his brain.

I went to Holmes Middle School, across the street from Dutch Kills Elementary. Daray went to Long Island City High, which was further up north, so not many kids at Holmes asked me about him. A few kids knew what we mean to each other; I mean, what we meant. Sheesh. At school and pretty much everywhere else, I had to make sure I didn't talk about Daray like I just saw him that morning.

I went inside and said "hi" to some of the other kids I knew. I didn't have a lot of friends. Besides Daray, I never really needed anyone else. He and I were kinda all of each other's lives. Most of the other kids were okay with me; I even knew a couple of them who were gay, too. You think we'd all hang out together, but one gay kid I knew was a

jock, and another was more worked up over his looks than any stuck-up girl ever was; so we were all kinda different, anyway. Yeah, there were ignoramuses in the school, too. Sometimes, I heard someone mutter “faggot” behind my back, like Otis Moraitis, who was pretty much our neighborhood bully. He lived in the building next to ours, on the north side, and he always had a mean word for everybody. He was fifteen, and went to Daray’s high school now, which was a relief to everyone at Holmes. Otis knew better than to pick on my boyfriend after Daray whaloped the crap out of him in sixth grade. I always let the bullies’ insults slide off, mostly because I didn’t wanna get beat up. I smiled a little whenever I heard the taunts; maybe someday, I’d turn around and tell the bullies I was gonna bring my big snake to school the next day. I’d better find a different way to say that, though, or it would get a reaction like the one I’d get from Tanna.

One kid at Holmes wanted to be my friend. I wish he’d go away.

I was on my way to my first class, English Comp. There he was again, one of the little kids, or so we eighth-graders called them. This one was a grade behind me, I bet. I didn’t remember him from the year before, but he didn’t look like he was in sixth grade. Had to be seventh. Maybe he just discovered he was gay last summer and started following me; I dunno. Another one for our team; yahoo. He had lots of blond hair in curls a little tighter than mine, and his eyes were blue; I mean, *really* blue and bright, like sequins on a ballet dancer’s tights. His eyes shone like searchlights from behind little black rectangular glasses that made him look like a brainiac. The brainiac-boy was leaning up against the lockers watching me walk by, like he just happened to be standing there. He was always giving me moony eyes like that, ever since school began back in the fall. I knew the look. *Sorry, kid; I’m already taken*, I thought. I gave him a sharp look as I walked past him. Cripes, he sorta smiled back at me. I whipped my head around like a total bitch and gave him a stern look. Heh. That’ll show him what I think of him.

Yeah, okay; if it wasn't for Daray, maybe. My brainiac stalker-boy wasn't ugly or anything; I just wish he'd say something. Shy kids bug me sometimes. Maybe that's because I was so shy until I met Daray, and I lost even more shyness when I discovered dance. Nowadays, I want to shake the shy ones and tell them to *speak up*, for cryin' out loud.

In English class that morning, I "done did good," like we say in good ol' New-Yorker-ese. I chuckled, thinking how I liked to drop that tough-guy slang on Pop sometimes. He always says if I keep talking like that, he'll slap my butt all the way out to Nassau County. I do very well in English and talk like a proper young man, at least at home. I love books; I love music. I suck at math. Science is okay, but cutting up animals... ick. Maybe I'll get better at that now that I have to keep feeding Daray.

* * *

After school, I went home and got my purple duffel bag with my dance gear in it: tights, shirts, ballet shoes, a towel, a sewing kit because dancers pretty much sew their own shoes to fit their feet, and all my other dance stuff. I also have a knife in my duffel; a good-sized folding pocketknife. My dance class is about a mile and a half walk from home, but I go through a couple of different neighborhoods and the kids there can be pretty territorial. I just wear my usual jeans and shirt while I'm walking, but some kids know where I'm headed and what's in my bag. I get teased as I walk by, sometimes. I've been called a faggot and a sissy and all those other things, and the bullies ask if I have my frilly pink dance tights with me. I just keep my head up and walk like I know what I'm doing, and resist the urge to tell the bullies that the frilly things they're talking about are called tutus, not tights, and boys don't wear them in ballet unless we're joking around. Usually, no one messes with me. If they do, that's why I have the knife. I haven't had to use it on anyone yet.

Why do I dance? A lot of reasons. Can you imagine what it's like to be a bird and fly, to break free of gravity and soar up to the clouds? I don't know a single kid who hasn't dreamed at least once about flying over the towers of Manhattan, but ballet kids feel like we can actually do it. That's why I dance; because it's as close to flying as I'll ever get, unless they invent jetpacks soon. Dancing feels good; it relaxes me and wears me out. I love feeling my body move, using all these different muscles that I never knew I had. Aunt Lola took me to see *Billy Elliot* on Broadway about three years ago, and when it was over, I was shaking so much I could hardly walk. The boy who played Billy onstage looked an awful lot like me, and it wasn't much of a stretch for me to feel I *was* him in some way, a boy with a dream inside that had to be danced out before all my pent-up energy killed me. When Aunt Lola brought me home after *Billy Elliot* that night, I announced to Mama and Pop that I was no longer taking piano lessons. Pop smiled, thinking I was going to say that I wanted to go out for football or something. Then I shoved the show's *Playbill* in his face and said, "I wanna do this." Pop's smile vanished. He's never really smiled at me like that again. Why can't Pop just be happy that I am who I am?

In the musical, Billy sang about dancing being like flying. He was right.

After I made sure my duffel was ready, I tossed my backpack onto my bed and pulled out a few books. Normally, I had a lesson with Njowga on Thursday afternoons before dance class, but he rescheduled that day this week. It made me antsy when I didn't see him. I had time to knock out some homework before going to dance class, but I didn't feel much like doing it. I heard Tanna come home. She had walked home with some friends, which was okay with Mama as long as Tanna didn't walk home alone. I remembered that I had to clean up Daray's room in the cellar, so I escaped Tanna's five-alarm-fire voice and went downstairs to do that while she got on the internet and looked up ways to annoy the hell out of me.

Daray was still pretty much out of it, so we didn't talk a lot. I took my knife downstairs with me and cut up the shed snake skin into smaller pieces, just in case anyone looked through the trash bin and found it. They wouldn't have any idea what the pieces were, I hoped. Some reptiles ate their shed skins, but not snakes. Getting rid of Daray's shed skins was going to be one more hassle I hadn't thought about before all this started.

When I came back upstairs, Mama was home from work and Pop was getting ready to take Tanna with him to the Mets game. I said good-bye to everyone except Tanna, grabbed my duffel, and headed out the door again, going north.

I waved to a couple of the neighbors on the street. Most of them knew all about me and dancing and being queer. They all seemed to like me, or they were at least polite enough to keep their stupid mouths shut. Three weeks ago, a week before I gave Daray the injection that began changing him, I received notice that I'd been accepted to the Joffrey Ballet's young dancer intensive program in July; kind of like a two-week long summer dance camp. The Joffrey has a ballet school right here, over in Manhattan. I was so excited when I found out I got in that I ran all over the neighborhood, telling the news to everyone I'd ever so much as smiled at. The Joffrey is a pretty tough program; you have to know your dance moves to get in. I'd auditioned for it back in January and I'd been dying to find out since then. Daray was, oddly enough, not all that excited for me when I told him, but I didn't yet know he had other, reptilian thoughts distracting him. He'd been spending a lot of time alone in his room, sometimes not even wanting to see me. I was okay with that, I guess. I knew Daray went through these phases of being bummed out about his distant parents and his brother's death. I didn't smoke pot but Daray did, a little, and that didn't bug me too much. I tried it once; it felt like someone had dammed up my brain and filled it with murky water. I didn't like that. Pot made Daray quiet and dreamy. I

figured, with all the stuff he'd been going through, he needed it.

There was that one other drug he took that I wish I could get him to take back.

It happened one afternoon after school, about two weeks ago. Daray had still been human. He didn't get out of school until later than I did, and he stopped by the apartment that afternoon when he got home. Mama and Pop were still at work. I lay on my bed, daydreaming about dancing while ignoring my science homework. I heard Daray knock on the front door, and Tanna answered it with her usual charm.

"I hope you brought along your rubbers, homo," Tanna said.

I heard Daray push past her and say, "Piss off, bitch." Yikes! Tanna just cackled and slammed the door. God, I wish I could talk to her like that! But if I did, Tanna would tattle on me in an instant and I'd get grounded for, like, a millennium. She never ratted out Daray's mouth because I think she really liked getting into it with him.

I looked up when Daray loped into my room, and I smiled at him. He was cute; he was handsome; he was absolutely gorgeous. His long blond hair tumbled over his eyes, and he tossed it back from his face so he could stare at me. Just looking at him made my crotch tighten up. I knew I looked cute, all stretched out on my bed and sexy, like a cat. Daray held himself like a dancer without realizing it; graceful and at ease in his own body. He had nice muscles; not too big yet but just perfect. I didn't know right then just how much Daray disliked that beautiful body of his, but I was about to find out.

Daray tossed his backpack on my bed. "You wanna see something?"

I nodded, thinking about our favorite afterschool activity. "I always wanna see that. Close the door."

Daray shook his head and motioned with his hand. "Come with me."

"Sure." I bounced off the bed and stood up. Daray could have led me up to the roof and I would have jumped

off with him, if that's what he wanted. I trusted him to never want that, though; to never do anything that would hurt me.

Daray and I walked past another rude comment from Tanna, who had no problem with calling both of us faggots or any other nasty names that crossed what little mind she had. If she'd been a little brother instead of a sister, I think I would have thrown him off the roof. Daray would have helped.

On the second floor, Daray and I saw Mrs. Mandracchia standing in the hallway with Puppins under one arm and a wooden spoon coated with tomato sauce in her other hand. I hoped she didn't get any ashes in her pasta sauce from the cigarette stuck between her lips. Mrs. Mandracchia was telling another neighbor about how she made her meatballs, waving her spoon around while she talked. Puppins kept trying to catch hold of the saucy end of the spoon. Daray saw that and rolled his eyes at me, but I laughed. We kept on going.

Daray led me downstairs where it was dark, not upstairs where we could fly. That was what my English teacher would have called "symbolic," given what was about to happen. Daray and I went into the cellar, and Daray made sure to close the door behind us. The super had some kind of an office in a broom closet on the first floor and, by this time of the afternoon, he was usually locked up inside it, already drunk or well on his way there. We didn't have to worry about him bothering us.

Daray led me past the thumping boiler and into the corner I told you about. He knelt down and moved some bricks away. For the first time, I saw the little hole that led to a room I'd never known was there. I thought maybe Daray had found a new place for us to hide and have sex.

I was about right. Daray led the way through the hole and I crawled in after him. I stood up next to him and let my eyes adjust to the lack of light. Daray fumbled in his pants pocket and pulled out a flashlight, then turned it on. He had set up the hidden room already, with a cot and a rickety folding table holding the old cell phone. Next to the

cell phone sat a brown cardboard box, about half the size of a shoebox. I looked back at the ragged entryway into the room.

“How’d you get the cot and table through the hole?” I said.

“There was a gap in the wall back where you couldn’t see, on the other side of the boiler,” Daray said. “I shoved the table through it and brought in the cot in pieces. I blocked up the hole after I put everything together.”

“Great.” I smiled at Daray. “Now Tanna won’t be bugging us when we’re fooling around.”

Daray shook his head and said, “That’s not what this place is for. You remember that post at *Boing Boing* last month about the doctor who said he had developed a virus-based genetic serum that can turn people into snakes?”

“Yeah, that viral vector stuff,” I said. “All the commenters at *Boing Boing* thought the guy was fulla shit.”

“You thought it was a pretty cool idea,” Daray said.

“So did you.”

“Yeah. Be pretty amazing if it was real.”

I shrugged. “Lots of things would be pretty freaking awesome if they were real,” I said. “Like me getting into a great ballet school, or you shutting up and taking your clothes off.” I giggled in the way I knew Daray loved. “What’s your point?”

Daray picked up the box from the table. I saw the box had his address on it, along with some postage labels. He lifted the lid and pulled something out of the box, but I couldn’t see what it was. Daray tossed the box onto the cot and shone the flashlight beam on the object nestled in his hand with his long, bony fingers wrapped around it.

Daray held a monster syringe about the size of a long toilet paper tube. The needle on its tip looked like the top of the freaking Empire State Building. Inside the transparent tube was an emerald green fluid with cloudy swirls moving lazily through it. The liquid looked about as thick as pulpy orange juice, and I swear it glowed in that dark little room.

“Dr. Ballas Kasza,” Daray said, and he smiled at me just a bit. “I don’t think he was kidding.”

My eyes were all wide on that hideous syringe. “What is that? Where’d you get it?”

“All you have to do is email Dr. Kasza. It’s free.”

“Free?”

“He’s looking for volunteers.”

“He’s looking for crazy people!”

Daray shrugged. “Maybe I’m crazy.”

“There’s no way this is legal.”

“Probably not.”

My voice wobbled like a kid still afraid of the dark.

“Daray, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Really? I bet you’ll think this is so cool, you’ll order your own dose. We can be two snakes in love.”

“That’s not funny.”

“We can have twice as much fun fooling around. Did you know that snakes have two penises?”

“No, and I’d rather not find out about it personally.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t that sound pretty cool?”

“Not so cool that I’d wanna do this!”

“Lighten up, ballet-butt,” Daray said. “You have to learn to be braver.”

I swallowed hard. Remember what I said about jumping off the roof with Daray, if that’s what he wanted me to do? That’s what he wanted me to do.

“This isn’t safe,” I said.

“Yeah, well, no one ever got anywhere worrying about being safe.”

“They don’t get far if they don’t take being stupid into consideration, either.”

Daray huffed a little, getting impatient with me. “This isn’t stupid.”

I looked up at Daray; he was almost a head taller than me. I knew tears were forming in my eyes and I knew he wouldn’t tease me about them. How was it that someone could scare you and make you sad while, at the same time, you realized just why you loved him so much?

“Daray,” I said. “Please don’t.”

He handed me the syringe. “I need your help.”

I took hold of the syringe carefully, as if it held poison, and said to Daray, “I’m not helping you kill yourself.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Daray sat down on the cot and unbuttoned his pants. “I’m afraid of needles. Especially ’cause you have to jab that one into my butt.”

* * *

While I was flying at dance class, I thought about Daray in that cold, dirty cellar, digesting Mrs. Mandracchia’s cat. In his own way, he was flying, too.