

# CutBank

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## Sucker

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## SUCKER

SO HERE'S ONE YOU may not have heard.

A young guy was sitting in a downtown hotel lobby one evening when he was bitten by a rattlesnake.

It just happened: he was minding his own business in a high-backed chair with gold upholstery, reading about a baseball player who had just got caught taking drugs, and next thing he knew there was this hard and fast clench just below his knee. Then a feeling of something syrupy, sweet, and spreading. Then burning. He looked down and saw the snake's jaw, curved around his calf muscle like a handcuff. The fangs had gone right through his pant leg.

The guy wasn't in the hotel lobby for any special reason. He wasn't loitering, or meeting a secret lover or anything. He just liked lobbies. Especially the really nice ones all draped in velvet. He liked how it felt to nestle down into one for a while. Every time he broke up with a woman, he took a newspaper and sat in a hotel lobby for a few hours, and then he would leave to go have beers with his buddies, back to being confident that every decision he'd ever made was the right one.

For an instant, before the pain began to saw away at his leg, he felt flattered. His first thought was: *someone's out to get me*. Someone somewhere was so angry with him, so flushed with vengeful thoughts, that they'd flown to Arizona, caught a rattlesnake, and trained it in a basement, holding up pictures of him every night while poking the snake with needles. What other explanation could there be? This was a guy who liked to believe he made a major impact on everyone he met. He was that convinced of his own first impression: his patented Meaningful Glance across a bar, the way his fingers wrapped around a handshake, the way he introduced himself with confidence, saying his full name like he was carving it out of the air. He was, in his own view, worthy of stalking by trained animals.

The young guy pulled up the cuff of his pant leg and saw the two tiny holes, but they shrunk away before his eyes as the twin rings of flesh surrounding them began swelling fast.

He glanced around. The snake had already retreated, stacking itself into a speckled pile behind a potted palm.

Vaguely confused, the rattlesnake knew something was wrong here. Where was his long, smooth branch with one end stuck in the sand? Or his rock? Where was his desert landscape diorama that kept him enclosed and safe?

Then, real pain. The young guy felt a new sensation, a grinding, like something was starting to make a meal of his leg from the inside. But he wasn't someone who panicked easily. What he really needed, he thought, was a wayward Boy Scout. With a survival manual.

There was a concierge at the front desk, talking on the phone and thumbing through a reservations book. Concierges might know about stuff like this, the guy thought. Just because they're never shown giving CPR and first aid and stuff on the news doesn't mean they don't know how. They could be trained for all sorts of rescue scenarios, like firefighters. Concierges: the unsung heroes of the tourism industry.

Hey, the guy called shakily. Hello? I think I have a situation here.

The concierge looked up from his book. He held up one finger and said, I'll be with you in one moment, Sir.

The guy blinked. He wanted to stand up and shove that big book.

Hey, the young guy called again, trying to push himself up on the chair arms. I have an emergency. Do you know what to do in case of snakebite?

The concierge was too busy playing with the brass buttons on his blazer and talking on his stupid phone. He was so skinny he looked like he was made of coat hangers.

Asshole, the guy thought. Then he realized he had a phone too. He pulled out his own cell phone and flipped it open as he started sliding to the floor. Jesus, he thought, this really hurts. He had his pant leg hiked up to his knee. Below that was a now-inflated version of his leg, turning colors. Then a new thread of fire reached his knee and he bit his tongue.

He scanned the speed dial list on his phone's tiny screen.

Number one was his girlfriend, only now she was his ex-girlfriend. Not the best timing, but this was a snakebite. He had venom. There have to be special rules for venom.

She was getting ready to go out when he called. He could tell because he heard her moving around her living room, looking for keys.

Listen, he said, how are you doing? He wasn't sure how to ease this particular conversation towards *Hey I need a really really big favor*. This would be the truest test of his talents.

I'm doing perfect, she said. Bye.

Wait, the young guy said. I've got a situation here. Do you think you could help me out with something? It's an emergency.

*Oooh*, she said, an *emergency*. I'm late. I'm going to a party. With apple martinis. I'm completely fucking happy now, so maybe you can find someone else for your little mind games.

This was so her. Goddammit, he clamped down over her diatribe, could you just let me finish? I'm at the Braden Hotel and I've been bitten by a snake. A poisonous rattlesnake has just bitten me and I need your help. He hated the sound of his voice, rising into such shallow waters.

She was quiet for a moment and the young man heard her breathing, her tongue tapping against her teeth. It was a great connection.

What the hell is the matter with you? She said. You dumped me, remember? And now you try and get me to buy some load of bullshit.

Listen to me, the young guy said, setting his jaw. His thigh was trembling and down at his ankle, everything was suddenly cold. Couples walking in expensive shoes looked down at him, unsure if they should stop and offer him something.

He kept the begging out of his voice with effort. He said calmly, I need you to come here and suck the poison out, ok? I saw a thing on the Discovery Channel and that's what you need to do. I know it's a big favor.

Big favor? His ex-girlfriend laughed suddenly, hot and bitter. Suck the poison out? I never even liked sucking your dick for you, and you think I'll suck *poison* out of you?

Here's the thing: this guy didn't think it was the most

audacious request he ever made. The truth is, he's asked for bigger favors.

She found her keys. He heard them jingling in her hand as she prepared to fold her apartment up behind her for the evening. Please? He asked. Just please?

I'll tell you what, she said. How about a deal? If you can tell me the real reason you broke up with me, the actual reason, then I'll come to where you are and suck snake venom out of your leg. How's that?

The young guy, damp and crumpled on the Persian rug, got pissy. You know what? he spat, I don't need this. You think you're the only person I can call? I just thought we'd moved past all this, you know?

Turns out not, she replied coolly.

Peripherally, he thought he could see the concierge still hovering over his big book, too motionless.

Fine. Have a nice life, he snorted into his cell phone and beeped off. Bitch.

Fever. He realized he was getting a fever. It must be bad, he thought, because when he looked up at the mosaic of blue and green glass on the ceiling, it looked like it was oozing, going from something Mondrian to something soupy.

To distract himself, he imagined another story behind his snake: the closest zoo was only ten blocks away. A zookeeper, pretty and blonde, in her 20s, was panicking after realizing she had left a feeding drawer open in the Reptile Pagoda. She was recently promoted from the Meerkat Range, maybe, and was really trying to prove herself. She checked the other enclosures, fearing the worst, relieved to see that the other snakes were accounted for. The yellow Burmese python raised its head sleepily, still full from lunch. The spotted boa hung in thick loops. Now she just had to canvass the city, find the snake, and do whatever was necessary to help whoever had fallen prey.

He craned his neck and saw the snake, still a basket of itself in the corner. Fucker, he said through his own spit, you're going to make a great belt.

The snake wasn't talking.

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The young guy blurrily scanned down through his speed dial numbers, dismayed. Another ex-girlfriend, but he couldn't call her. If the first one wouldn't do it, this one definitely wouldn't. This one would bring some friends down, sit in the remaining gold chairs and watch him burn away like an oil stain on a hot driveway. She'd bring popcorn.

Two work friends. He didn't even consider calling them. No work people will ever suck the poison out. People at work didn't like him. He assumed it was because they were jealous, because he was a Go-Getter. He was the only one with initiative at that whole place, while everyone else preferred to remain languid, congealing at their desks. His boss called him The Guy, a compliment. He'd been The Guy at every job he'd ever had, even the soft frozen yogurt place in the mall when he was in high school. Define a problem, seek solution, make it happen, get credit. Next.

He wondered what would happen if the venom widened and pooled in his groin. He began to worry about his balls.

Speed Dial #8: his parents. His father would never do it, which was just as well—even imagining his father's lips sealed onto his leg made him squirm. His mom would, though. He almost dialed, but stopped short. He imagined the next Thanksgiving, relatives gathered around the table, held in awe as his mother told the story. The story about how young Johnny was poisoned and who did he call? His mother. Aunts and uncles nodding, smiling, wishing their own children would call them just to say Hello, let alone to ask for a life-saving favor. His cousins would make gagging noises into their napkins. One was a video clerk, one was a substitute math teacher, and the other was considering dropping out of college to tour with his band, Head Wound.

He tried to concentrate on the revolving door across the lobby. It glinted with each turn. The young guy looked at it through his gummy eyes and thought of spinning Christmas ornaments.

At the flapping edge of his vision, he thought he saw

the concierge start to fidget. The brass buttons on his jacket seemed to be approaching, tentatively.

Just then three familiar faces swam through the revolving door. After realizing he wasn't hallucinating, he recognized his former college buddies. They each had a girl swinging from one arm. This wasn't as big a coincidence as it seems; there was a great blues band that performed in the rooftop lounge on weekends.

Last time he saw them had been at college graduation. Big bragging about big plans. Still: Hey, he called out, his voice thin and brittle. Hey! Kappa Sig Forever! Hey!

They looked over and broke into cheers and waves, which made the concierge dart away like a frightened fish. They crowded around him. Hey Buddy boy! How the hell are you? Get up off the ground and come with us! There's a great band upstairs. How long's it been? You were going to be a sports agent, right? How'd that go?

He weakly lifted one hand for a complicated fraternity handshake that involved a creative twisting of fingers and wrists. Even though he could barely feel the other hands working like gears in his, he still remembered it perfectly. I'm fucking so fucking glad to see you guys, he said. Look. You gotta help me out.

One of his buddies looked down at his leg. Wow, he said. What happened there? This was Scotty, who'd been his roommate for a few months when they'd both had non-paying summer internships. They rented a gritty apartment in town and walked down to The Sink every night for beers while the heat licked the sidewalks.

Snake bite, he answered. Hey, remember that time you got hammered and you got into that fight? And those cops tried to take you in for public drunkenness? And I talked them out of it?

Scotty laughed. Oh yea. Good times, he said to his date, who smiled into her cleavage.

I'm glad you remember that, the guy said. Because I could really use some help here.

Looks it. You want us to call someone for you? All three whipped out cell phones like weapons. Who can we call? The girls were not impressed.

It's too late for that. What I really need, the guy said, what I

really need is someone to suck out the poison. I promise it's easy. You spit it out right after. His vision was melting. It was getting hard to tell his buddies apart.

They glanced at each other uneasily. He should've known. He should've fucking known. They straightened up, pulled on their jackets, and the girls' hands moved slowly across their shirt fronts like tongues. He felt them drifting off, towards the elevators, and wanted to reach out and shake them. Listen, Scotty said, I'm going to call 911 right now, and you'll be on your feet in no time. Come up to the top floor when you're ready, ok? There's a band.

Does he even have a left leg anymore? He isn't sure, but whatever is still attached to him is so numb, he wonders if he's going to turn into a man of petrified wood. In ten more minutes, he'll be a sprawling sculpture in this lobby. Man Contemplating Underside of Chair.

His phone lays flat in his palm. A container of people he's been avoiding for years now. A thin shiny box of apologies he has yet to make.

His thoughts are loose and unraveled. There's lots of stuff slipping through that he wants to remember to do.

Minty breath in his ear wakes him back up. The concierge is kneeling beside him.

Help is on the way, he's saying. I want you to know I've called animal control and they have someone coming. This isn't as uncommon as you'd think.

Too late, the young guy knows. Everything is too late. Please, he says to the concierge. Take my phone.

The concierge rubs his knuckles over the bulb of his chin. His eyes are gray and his face is wan up close. He looks sad. First he glances guiltily around the lobby. There's the waterfall of laughter as couples pass.

I want to help, the concierge whispers. He lays three fingers on the guy's chest, leaving them there to rise and fall with each short, buckling breath. I want to. Even though I shouldn't. We have very specific rules about things like this.

The young guy is ready to tell the concierge that he really has the power now. This thin, angular man can, if he chooses,



suck the poison out of his body, take it all in and purify him. Please. He looks up and wants to cry because this hotel concierge is now the most important person to thank in the whole entire world.

I didn't realize how bad, the concierge says in a sort of lonely, tunnel-like voice.

The hotel lobby tilts and lifts, until the guy realizes he's the one moving. His concierge has him by the armpits, hefting him until he's sitting up, precariously.

He feels the concierge's small hands warm on his back, gently pushing him, curling him forward until he hears his own spine start to click. Close, the concierge says. Closer.

This is pain like nothing else, the guy realizes. It is entirely new.

You're almost there.

When his nose taps his knees, he's never been so grateful. The concierge's voice is forgiving. You're so close, sweetheart.