

Excerpt from "20 Years"  
By Jamie Sims Coakley

When he came across a harmless snake in his adventures patrolling the property, it was not unusual for us to look out over the chest high, grass field in front of the house and see a large snake sail into the air, head over tail, turning somersaults. The first time it happened, we were standing at the window trying to figure out what in the world was going on. Then just as the snake was approaching the top of the grass on its earthbound plunge, Boss would jump up and grab the snake in his mouth, careful not to injure it, and then, whipping his head just so and into the air, he would send the snake sailing upward in another round of "toss the serpent"!

Poisonous snakes were handled quite differently. For them, a perimeter was to be made and an alarm sounded for all to hear. If we were home and a rattlesnake happened to get too near the house, Boss would run around the snake in a circle, just out of striking range, and bark his head off. My new dad would hear the ruckus and say "Boss has got himself another rattler." then he would take the 22 he carried for work and head out to take care of the problem.

One lovely autumn day, my sister and I were home from school and decided to play a game of kickball in the front yard. The grass was mowed short and there were a few landmarks that could be used as bases. It was just the two of us, which didn't make for much of a game, but we did the best we could. Third base was a big bush that grew just to the left of the front porch and was an important landmark as it was the final base to tag before heading into home and hopefully scoring. That particular day I was in good form. I got a solid foot on the ball, which went sailing past my sister. When she began her pursuit, I took up the job of running the bases.

First base—piece of cake, second base—she was headed back, third base—trouble. Just as I approached the bush, Boss jumped in front of me and began snarling and barking and carrying on so that I couldn't get close enough to touch the base. I tried to maneuver around him, however he kept up his tirade until I was so scared and frustrated I almost started to cry. My sister came back with the ball and forgot that she should be trying to tag me out, instead preoccupied with calming down Boss and I. Then, in a moment of quiet, my sister and I heard it: the tell-tale warning of a very upset and angry rattlesnake which had curled up inside our third base bush and was ready to strike. Boss hadn't lost his mind, he had saved me. We immediately ran around the outside of the house and went in through the sliding door off the porch and called our new dad. "Dad! There's a rattler in the bush by the front porch and Boss saved us!" We were instructed to stay clear of the bush and wait for him to come home. When he did, the rattler was still there and met the same fate they all did, a bullet from my new dad's 22 pistol. I remember feeling a bit sad when they cut the rattle and the head off the rather large snake and coiled the remaining carcass in the vegetable crisper. I believe the intention was to make it a meal, although I don't remember if that ever happened. I do recall Kayla, our fancy dog who was purebred and had been purchased from a store, jumped up and stole the rattle from the kitchen counter and ate it. She wasn't as smart as Boss but really, none of us were.

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It's funny how some memories come back to us in soft warm light, the edges blurred. Not all of my childhood memories are warm when remembered, but all of them from our time at the Brick House are golden. There were endless hours spent exploring the river and the forest. Our new dad hung a tire swing from the tree out back that provided hours of fun until that one spring when I jumped on to ride it and found a nest of hornets inside. Or shall I say they found

me, and then stung me so many times I got sick from the poison. Then there was the winter we trudged out in the snow in our coats and boots and cut down our Christmas tree and dragged it home. There were endless adventures canoeing the Buffalo and exploring caves, learning to swim and being so proud to make it from one side of the river to the other for the first time. There were long serene walks home from the bus stop through all kinds of weather, meeting deer and the occasional snake along the way. We got good at telling the poisonous from the non poisonous too, just like Boss and there were the thunder and lightning storms and also, the tornados.

My big sister was so deathly afraid of tornadoes that when the weather turned bad, she would make a fort in our closet and sit inside with a book and read for hours. One time, while coming down the mountain in the school bus, we spotted a tornado in the distant valley and the driver pulled over and evacuated us into a ditch. One time, while driving us to school on the icy winter roads, Mom's car lost traction on some black ice and we began to slide toward the edge of the road and a steep drop off. She yelled, "Hold on!" so my sister clutched her gym clothes tighter and grabbed ahold of me. Luckily my mom was able to redirect the car before we plunged to our deaths.

My mother didn't believe in television but she loved to listen to music on the radio and my first memories of music were in the car with her. Barry Manilow's "Copacabana" and Steve Miller Band's "Space Cowboy" come to mind as two on heavy rotation. My sister and I loved to listen to Casey Kasem's "America's Top 40" and knew the words to all the popular songs of the late 70's and early 80's. Linda Carter was on TV as Wonder Woman and somehow I knew this and was obsessed. The closest I ever came to pretending I was a princess was when I pretended to be Wonder Woman. I had a record of her adventures that I would listen to and spin around and block bullets with my bracelets. At 5 years old I was already a fierce Amazon warrior princess, kicking ass and saving the world!

I remember being told once, after an old lady on her porch grabbed her shot gun and shot at us while we were exploring a back road in my new dad's work truck, that a lot of the local hill people weren't too happy about the National Park or its park rangers and them "stealing" their families' land to make the park. One evening at dinner, just after dark, we smelled fire. The gate to our property was a quarter mile up the dirt road from our house and the grass field where Boss played with snakes was on fire. I remember standing at the window in my bedroom and watching the flames light the sky as they moved towards our house. I can't remember how the fire got put out, but it never reached the house. I do remember overhearing my new dad tell my mom it had been intentionally set. Shortly after that incident we moved closer to town, to the suburbs, and our warm golden time on the river was gone. We packed everything but Boss into the moving van and took off down the dirt road with the intention of coming back for him the next day, but when we did, he was gone. He wouldn't have wanted to be a suburban dog anyway.