

# Ecdysis

a short story by Karin Luisa Badt

I tried for seven years to get pregnant with my husband, while he was, unknown to me, sleeping with my best friend, who consoled me when she was pregnant that it would happen to me too.

My husband was not a particularly attractive man, and I had never thought so, even when we first went out. I was attracted to his belly, which was large, and the way his chin bobbed with reassuring layers of fat for the winter months. I came from a family of skinny people, and a man who could walk heavy on his feet signified the center of the earth for me. My parents warned me not to marry him, but they had warned me of many things. I had begun to suspect that they wanted nothing more for me than the prospect of watching them get skinnier and skinnier as they came closer to finishing off their mortgage. So when I turned twenty-one, I married Job.

My husband attracted me because he laughed often. I did not know why he laughed, but sometimes even in his sleep, a rupture of sound would come from his lips and I would see his eyes shoot open, gleaming green. Then he would roll over to himself and clutch his stomach, and I would feel his quaking.

I myself never laughed. I can't remember a single time when I really let myself open up and roar out in a bellyquaking laugh, nor can I remember giggling as a child, or holding hands with a friend and laughing. Of course, everyone would say I laughed, because I was aware of having the same gestures as most other humans, in that I could open my mouth, air could come in and out, and my lips would form a big triangle, and you could see my face mold in an expression of happiness, but I knew that my laughter was merely my version of a nod of the head, agreement.

My husband had another fascinating habit, which in the 10 years we have been married, I have never completely understood. Perhaps it came from having grown up as the only son of a single mother, and the way he had learned to keep his distance, his own unusual habits.

His habit was to keep a king cobra snake in our bathtub.

It was okay with me, as I have always since youth preferred taking showers. I like the feeling of clean quick spring drops of light on my skin, and associate hot soaks with death and other such experiences that thank God my life has been free of. No one I know has ever died, and aside from a grim thanksgiving dinner with my thin aging parents, I can't say I have had any deep grief in my life.

That Job wanted to keep a cobra in our bathtub was fine; I could use the shower next to the bedroom. After work, he went straight to the garage, gathered a few mice from their cages in a big metal pail, and then went right upstairs. I heard him sing

sometimes: **Elapidae, Elapidae, Tell me the Way and I'll be there Today, Elapidae, Elapidae!**

I had my own solitary habits after work. I liked to fold flour and water together and knead bread; I enjoyed watching the bubbles seize power in the center of the dough, and then I would flatten the creation with a long towel.

In the meantime, I would put loaves in the oven, from the kneading of the day before, and would create a roast for our dinner.

My husband Job would come down with a grinning expression on his face and say, All done! All done! He ate all four mice, swallowed them, and spit out the ears this time.

I set the table with flat blue plates, that I had had from our wedding presents, from my best friend Shiva. Shiva astonished me, as did my husband, as having much enthusiasm for life. Shiva woke up each morning at five to watch the sun rise, and then would take a walk to the river, where she would eat her breakfast, a roll of bread with imported hams. She had given us the flat blue plates because she said they reminded her of my eyes, and how steady they were.

I watched Shiva and Job grow closer to each other over the years. I often invited Shiva to dinner, as she had never married, and probably would not, as she had a stern beauty to her that frightened people. She was one of the few people who did not work at the computer industry. She did not work, and seemed to

live off some mysterious inheritance, although she had never mentioned a member of her family to me.

I had never met anyone like Shiva before, who by herself would make a decision to go to a city and set up house, and not for any particular reason, except an uncle, who turned out not to be an uncle, as she contradicted herself in a later story, but a man she had met in a petrol station in New Jersey one evening when she had been driving to Canada.

I had an impression of Shiva as someone who had always been alone, and had no needs that she in her own body could not find the answer to. She was strong and fierce, with her golden legs that seemed like a god's to travel across the earth. It was surprising to me that she was pregnant.

My husband was sick one day, and decided to stay home alone. I decided to surprise him with a soup I would pick up in downtown Toledo, at this special French shop, where real French people pureed the vegetables.

I came back home and heard singing coming from the bathroom.

I stood outside the bathroom, and heard my husband sing, **Elapidae! Elapidae! Show me the Way!**

I had never seen my husband with the snake. I had always walked by the bathroom door, which was always closed, and had

never opened it, although I knew what it sounded like, all the scratching sounds.

I assumed this was my husband's, and like his laughter, I must not question too much, as we all had our secrets.

I too had secretive thoughts and fantasies, about a man I had once met who had come for six months to work with us, a younger man, with a great enthusiasm to his face.

I also had had fantasies about Shiva. I had imagined one day kissing her while we sat at a park bench and she shone forth her feelings about the deer she had seen in the morning in the forest while she sat and watched them.

But I knew these secrets were okay. It seemed all television shows now showed things like this, kisses between women, and different ages together. I never wanted to make too big a deal about it, as I knew that my strength in life was simply not making life more dramatic than it was.

I knew I enjoyed making bread, and I liked being with my husband in the morning and in the evening.

These simple pleasures were enough to me to feel my life was a blessing, unlike other people who I had heard suffered pain and discontents and feelings of frustration; I could say I was—if not a great laugher—mildly entertained by my life.

I liked saying that about myself, that I was mildly entertained, it made me feel like a stronger character than I suspected I actually was, and so I thought, and why not be even more entertained! Why not see my husband with the snake?

There was an obvious way to do that. Simply take a ladder and pose it outside the house, and climb the steps.

As I climbed the steps, I felt silly, and began to giggle to myself, thinking wouldn't my husband be surprised.

This was so unlike me; he would see a new me. He would be surprised and look at my blue eyes with the same awe and admiration with which I looked at his laughing self.

It began to occur to me that for the ten years of our marriage, I had been watching him like a thief watches the silver he has robbed, without ever once using it to make a cup of tea.

I greeted my husband with joy every morning and every evening, and slept next to him, staring at him, and woke up, staring at him, not obsessively, but with the fondness of a thief with his silver.

I never understood why he laughed, or even what he thought about as he went to work each morning, ambitious to work through circuit problems.

I liked seeing the flecks of green scatter in his brown eyes, and the way he could not look straight at me, but preferred to

hunch a little over an object. Either his plate of food, or a computer, or his snake.

I wondered what my husband looked like as he fondled a live object. I had seen him with the mice in the mails, but he jostled the bucket about as if it were not full of live beating hearted mice, but rather just a bucket of toys.

As I came up the last rung, I saw that the window was open, and a piece of the white curtain was flying outside in the air. My husband's voice was rich and loud, and carried out into the spring air like something that did not belong there, an exotic plant in a clean Ohio lawn. I did not like the sound of his voice.

I became afraid. What if he saw me, and pushed me down the ladder in a rush? What if I slipped on the last rung, and called out to him to help me, and he pushed his head out the window and by mistake let me fall and crash my head to the ground?

What if these were indeed my last steps on earth, on a rickety steel rusted ladder, going to a bathroom window to look at my husband with a snake?

I felt a strange sense of disappointment in my stomach that was as strong as the smell that came from my husband's bathroom.

This was not the majestic ladder to heaven, this was not the altar at the throne of gods.

I trembled, the ladder was tilting, I leaped forward and put my whole torso through the bedroom window at once.

There was my husband singing, singing, but there was no snake!

There were hundreds of live mice crawling about everywhere, on his arms, and legs, he was sitting there in the middle of the mice, and letting them crawl up and down his body, and he was naked, singing, singing, Elapidae, Elapidae!

He saw me.

Judith! he said. Judith!

I could not say anything, the tiny gray rodents crawling on my husband's fat body was too much.

He began to laugh and laugh and laugh.

Oh Judith, he said. Oh Judith! See, I have always wanted you to see.

He stood up clumsily, so his body seemed fatter than I had ever remembered, and I remembered I had not seen it naked in years, the groin hanging so reddened and yellowed, as if from disuse, and the flaps on his chin sinking into his chest. His baldness seemed his greatest source of health.

His scalp literally beamed, and I saw that my husband was a happy man, a profoundly happy man, with his family of mice.

My laughter made the ladder vibrate, and begin to shake and with a sudden sliding motion, the whole thing toppled, and— as I was told later-- I landed on my back on the ground.

It was only months later that I came out of the coma. My husband and the house were gone; my friend Shiva had left with him, after their child was born.

I was alone. The sun was on the sheet on my body in the hospital room, making the sheet look whiter than the actual color white. Outside I heard the sound of a cricket, that seemed to come from a far off place, where cobras came from too.