

James Jared Ford

Short Story for The Southern Quill 2019 (Revised)

Rattled

“Keeping all of them alive isn’t easy, Dad,” the gangly boy sighed. “Do you think there will be lots to catch at this spot?” The groans of the rickety pickup overwhelmed his words. A bulky cage fought to escape his arms, and he held it against his favorite dinosaur sweater until the blood pressed from his fingers. The diminutive snake within crashed against the sides, tumbled by sloshing water like a jetty in a hurricane. A sandstone platform he had placed inside as a refuge for his pet had long since begun to disintegrate, leaving the snake to swim ad nauseum in its transparent prison.

The nose of the lumbering pickup crested a barren hilltop. A wrinkle in the valley floor spanned the windshield, marking where a creek of pastel clays bound for the Snake River severed the trail. Long tools rattled off their rust in the bare truck bed as the heavy tires bounced from rock to rock down the scrubby slope. The Chevy kicked up bone white dust like a runaway wagon, choking the cab as it slowed in the gulch. A film of powder began to settle, outlining the kid’s rigid grip on his terrarium’s cool plastic sides. He risked one wipe with his sleeve smudging grainy, curved lines that glowed in the sun like ribs on an X-ray.

Shaded under a water-stained cowboy hat, the driver gestured ahead with calloused fingers. A tarnished sign crowned the last marble foothill, as distant clouds shone through bullet holes speckled throughout the plate. Across the dry road from the sign, a dust devil arose in the sage. The vortex spanned the path as they ascended, consuming what remained of the faded letters. The boy squinted as he daydreamed, seeing a raging imp just emerged from his foxhole hellmouth to sandblast the scrap devaluing his land. Long spears of light reached through the bullet holes, glowing as they pierced the miniature twister. His father tapped the switch to raise both windows with a muted grind.

“What does it say?”

“Bone.”

Young ears picked up the peculiar sound first. The man discerned a low, resonant thumping in the left rear wheel well. He leaned for a better angle with the side mirror until his hat pressed against the window, but could see nothing through the billowing dust. “Pray it isn’t the tire,” he said among tight-lipped curses, “We might not make it far on these rocks with a spare.” The Chevy grumbled to a stop. He hopped to the ground, boots shattering the thin shale, and he squinted through the cloud engulfing the truck. Shadows deepened in the haze, and he heard a chalky thud as a black shape slumped to the bare earth. He rested one knee on a flat chunk of limestone to squint a suspicious eye into the gloom. A moment later he rose to pull a shovel from the back, and signaled with a wave of a leather glove for his son to join him.

Sour water splashed through the slits of the cage lid onto the floormat as the boy rushed to stuff the carrier under the glovebox. Sunlight wormed through the settling powder as he sprung from the cab and rounded to the driver’s side. He froze as the milky rays caught the glimmer of dragon scales. A massive rattlesnake hung from the axle, still uncoiling its full length to the ground. Twitching and writhing with a chipped diamond hide, the snake drew mad shapes in the lunar sand as blood oozed from the corners of its maw.

“He must have been pulled up when we ran him over, but I don’t know how I didn’t see him...” The man’s voice softened as he turned to see his son’s eyes puffing at the thrashing beast. Hooking its body with the shovel lip, he dragged the broken snake from the wheel. He pressed the rusted edge against the base of its skull, and misshapen coils wrestled to escape the executioner’s block. One swift, booted stomp and a grotesque scraping sound left a lidless smile on the blade. The carcass fought harder. Blood pulsed over the smooth stones, and the snake’s tail buzzed like a drowning wasp.

“Look how big he was. Have you ever seen one this big, Dad?”

“I don’t think so, I count nine segments on the rattler. I think your grandpa has an heirloom with seven or eight, and he always said you could guess the number of molts that way. This fatty was probably a grandpa himself, many times over.”

“I wish he had made it to ten.”

The boy bent to grasp the faintly twitching tail, then strained to lift it high enough to appreciate the snake’s length. *It struck.* Blood sprayed across his favorite shirt from hip to shoulder. He recoiled, too startled to scream, and dropped the tensed body to the ground with a flop and a shudder. His jaw unhinged in horror.

One glimpse of his son’s tortured expression turned the man’s stomach to stone. “Sorry, kid,” he mumbled. He pinched his hat brim lower on his brow, beige felt shielding his face. He toed the pallid belly with his boot, and the snake sluggishly curled to strike again before falling limp across the tire track.

The boy watched the blurry form of his father shovel-toss the jaws into a gully on the roadside, and flinched at the wet slap of the mangled trophy flung into the bed. He stood in the breeze for some time after hearing his father’s creaky door yanked closed. Despite stretching his sweater bottom to the limit, the thickening splotches stuck to his chest. Two sharp honks snapped his eyes open. His shoulders sagged as he loosened his grip, letting each cold stain shock the skin as the fabric fell. Climbing into shotgun, he hugged the cage of his pet, smearing the side red.

“Can we go home, Dad?”

They drove the rest of the empty trail in silence. The young man stared at his shirt—a field of fallen dinosaurs lying in blood-soaked snow.