



2014 Second Place

The Family Snake Oil

by *Jerrie Hurd*

Snakes were Eliza's family fortune. Big, poison-fanged, diamondback rattlesnakes. Lots of them. Maybe that wasn't the same as owning a gold mine but it wasn't that different either. Eliza figured there was a little snake oil behind every exchange of money.

In that sense, her family was as respectable as any. Only she couldn't get her son, William, to understand that. He was thirty-one years old, and he still hadn't developed good snake sense.

Four o'clock one morning, he pounded on the side of Eliza's trailer house and shouted that he wanted some of Granddaddy's famous snake oil hooch. Startled out of a deep sleep, Eliza could hardly make out what he was saying. His words were slurred. Nevertheless, he was her son, her only child. For him she got up and stumbled down the hall to the bathroom. She checked herself in the mirror. Early in the morning, at her age, minus make-up, she couldn't exactly call herself a beauty. She ran a brush through her red hair, smeared on orange-red lipstick, and used the toilet. Then, when she was good and ready, she opened the outside door.

The first thing she noticed was William's old Dodge pickup. Then his friends came into focus. They weren't local. A couple of Irish red-necks, itinerant construction workers, she guessed. The taller one steadied his elbows against the hood of the pickup and was trying to roll a cigarette without much success. The other one, shorter and stockier, was pissing behind the truck.

The scene explained itself. William had been drinking, had hooked up with this pair of ne'er-do-wells, and the three of them had shut down all the bars in town. Then they had driven out to her place hoping to get some homemade hooch to top off their night—a plan that depended on her generosity.

William's shouting stopped. He stumbled through her junipers waving the string of rattlesnake skulls that usually hung from the awning over her bedroom window—a charm against night spirits. Catching sight of her, he stopped and just stood there. His lavender cowboy shirt was half out of his pants.

"You boys need some coffee," she said matter-of-factly.

"Coffee?" the shorter one asked. "We was told we could get us

some drink, something really special."

Eliza grunted. Even the local sheriff sipped her granddaddy's snake oil remedy only when he was ailing and only after muttering that he never, ever, wanted to know what was in it. She didn't share the old family recipe with every Tom, Dick, or Harry who showed up on her doorstep. William knew that. He was still standing there, looking silly, with that string of snake bones dangling from his outstretched arm.

"Coffee's all I got," she answered and went inside to put the pot on the stove.

She heard some heated discussion, but it was brief. Before the pot had begun to warm, the three boys stumbled into her kitchen and sat around her Formica-topped table.

Inside, William's friends became Dan, the tall one, and Jerry, the stout one. Jerry seemed the drunkest. He collapsed onto one of her chairs and stared wide-eyed around the room. Eliza's decor could do strange things to a drunk.

Her trailer was parked behind her livelihood—an old log cabin she had turned into a roadside museum featuring Granddaddy's old medicine show wagon. In the gift shop she sold snake-skin belts, wallets, and purses; snake charms and potions; snake posters and knickknacks. Some of her collection had spilled into her trailer and now decorated its environs. Snake decals were stuck to the tabletop. Snake magnets clustered on the refrigerator. Carved green-colored snake handles twisted up her cupboards. She had an assortment of ceramic snakes on the windowsill and a row of rattlesnake skins hanging like a curtain around the underside of her sink.



While Jerry continued to stare, Dan said, "Interesting kitchen."

"I like it." She poured coffee into green mugs with snake handles and set them in front of Dan and Jerry.

William leaned against the counter. Whenever he thought she wasn't looking, he opened a cupboard or a drawer, checking places he thought she might have stashed money.

"What brings you boys to these parts?" Eliza asked.

"We're working on that new hotel," Dan answered and thumbed south, indicating the direction of the building site.

Eliza nodded. "I sold them the land for that hotel. That nice, rocky bluff overlooking the river."

Dan glanced over at William, as if to confirm that fact, but William was fussing with the sugar jar, trying to feel all the way to the bottom with his middle two fingers.

Getting no help from him, Dan shrugged. "No kidding? That must have been some deal."

Eliza nodded. "That rocky bluff made my Old Granddaddy a fortune. He sold it four times, and, counting this deal, I've sold it three times."

Dan shook his head. "How'd you mean that? If you've sold something, it's sold. You can't sell it again."

Eliza stole a glance at William who had found ten dollars. "Most-wise, I guess you can't sell something you've already sold," she explained. "But that bluff up there is different. It's ours. The rocks are ours, every seam, vent and crevice. The warm spring on the backside is ours. We always buy it back, so we can sell it again."

"You can have that hot spring," Jerry said, suddenly coming alive. "I had to lay some drainage back there. That hot spring stinks of sulfur like the bottom rung of hell. Some of them hotshot hotel boys were worried about what would happen if the wind blew wrong ways." He fell silent for a couple of seconds. Then he wet his lips and added, "Dan, there are snakes all over this room. Did you notice that?"

Dan laughed and nodded.

Eliza glanced at William, who was now feeling along the underside of the breadbox. "I'm fond of snakes," she said. "My mother danced with a python, and Old Granddaddy—my mother's father—sold snake oil medicine. They were a traveling medicine show until my mother's snake died. It died right here, and they stopped traveling right here. Just like that, which was a fine piece of luck, you see, because this is where the snakes come. Right here. Every winter."

Dan looked from Eliza to William and then back again. "What do you mean about the snakes coming right here?"

"They're everywhere," Jerry piped up again. "Ain't you noticed? On the walls, on the furniture, on everything."

"Yeah, sure," Dan said. "Drink your coffee." He pushed the cup at

Jerry but looked at William.

William twirled his finger beside his head, the universal sign for a crazy person.

She wasn't crazy. It was William who needed straightening out. She went to the bedroom and returned with a photograph. She handed the picture to Dan.

He took it, studied it, and then he leaned back slowly checking under the table.

The photo was of a trailer house—Eliza's, when it was newer—with the skirting removed to reveal masses of rattlesnakes coiled in piles nearly filling the space between the ground and the floor. There were three men, also pictured in the photograph, wearing high boots and carrying long sticks. The photo was about eighteen years old.

"That was the first time I sold the bluff and the quickest turnaround of all the deals so far," Eliza said. "The people were from California. They came up here looking for a place to retire, and they loved the view of the Snake River. They figured being on the main east-west highway to Yellowstone Park and halfway between Jackson Hole and Sun Valley put them right where they wanted to be to hunt

and fish and ski—all the same reasons them hotel people liked the site. Anyway, the California folks bought this here trailer and set it up to use until they

got a house built. Then they went back to California to settle their affairs. It was getting toward late autumn, so they left the heat on. They didn't want any pipes to freeze. That's what they found when they returned. I offered those California folks a third what

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they'd paid me and got the trailer in the deal. The man's wife was so hysterical, he was just glad to get her out of here while she still possessed some slim degree of sanity."

"What did you do about the snakes?"

"Ah, they's no problem if you know snakes. I hired those guys in the picture to pull off the skirting and pull out those snakes. Then I hauled the trailer house down here, and I've been living in it ever since. This part of the riverbank is too low and damp. I hardly ever see a rattler down here."

Dan studied the photo again and shook his head. He passed it over to Jerry who tipped his head to one side, and said, "More snakes."

Eliza shrugged. "It's that warm spring. It keeps the rocks warm, and so about this time of year, the snakes start coming. Rattle-snakes have probably been wintering on that bluff so long it's in their genes. That's not the interesting part. I mean, ain't it purely amazing how my Old Granddaddy, who appreciated snakes more than anyone I know, who dragged his wagon and his daughter and a python all over six states for going on twenty years, should have stopped and took up homesteading in exactly this spot?"

Dan didn't answer. He sat as if puzzling something.

William cleared his throat. "Well, now you've heard the whole damned story from the very lips of the crazy woman who thinks she's going to buy back a five-story hotel from a New York corporation the way she bought back a trailer house from a couple of snake-scared Californians. I mean, what's she going to do with that hotel, for Christ's sake? Drag it down here and live in it, too?"

"I'll tear it down and sell the salvage," Eliza snapped. "I made damned good off the house the next guy built up there, didn't I?"

"We're talking about a twenty-million-dollar hotel, for Christ's sake. They're not going to sell it back for less than the land cost no matter how many snakes show up in their swimming pool."

Eliza turned the back of her shoulder to him.

William came around the table and said to Dan. "Do you want to hear the real story?"

Dan made a wry face, but, before he could say anything, William began in a voice too loud for the room, "She's already made a fortune off that land. She's crazy, but she's shrewd. Half the people around here can't believe what that hotel company paid for that piece of rock out there, but what's she done with the money? Nothing! It ain't invested. It ain't anything. It's just sitting in her checking account."

"I don't know how much I'll need for the buy-back," Eliza said.

"And do you think I've seen even so much as a dime of it?" William asked, pressing his face close to Dan's.

"I don't know how much I'll need for the buy-back," Eliza repeated.

William let his fist crash into the table. "Do I come from a crazy

family or what?"

Eliza wondered why William didn't appreciate his snake oil heritage.

Again William slammed his fist into the table. "Is that crazy or what?"

Dan glanced at Eliza. "I'm guessing that hotel has more to worry about than which way the wind blows off that stinking sulfur spring."

Eliza gave Dan a thumbs-up. She liked a man who could see the beauty of her situation.

William didn't. He whirled around and stomped out of the trailer. When Dan heard the pickup motor come to life, he started to his feet, but Eliza motioned him to sit down again.

"I'll drive you into town after you've had some breakfast," she said. "You boys like waffles? I make good waffles."

Dan nodded, but Jerry had rested his head on the table. He was asleep.

After breakfast Eliza poured a little of Old Granddaddy's snake oil hooch into Dan's third cup of coffee. He purred its praises.

A couple of weeks later, William showed up at Eliza's gift shop with a girl who was too young for him. Her name was Samantha, and she hoped to get hired by the new hotel. She gushed about how fancy and up-to-date it was going to be. "It's unlike anything else around here," she repeated several times. Eliza couldn't imagine why her son hadn't explained to the poor dear that this grand hotel wasn't going to be in business very long exactly because it had up-to-date heated sidewalks and hot tubs—all the warm things snakes liked.

The girl was broad in the hips, not fat—just tending toward it. Eliza thought one pregnancy would settle her permanently southward. Worse, there was nothing to suggest she

could rise out of the ordinary, meaning Eliza didn't see her wrapping a snake around her neck and wiggling those hips. In other words, Eliza couldn't see her becoming part of the family.

William and Samantha were on their way to Jackpot, Nevada, to play the slots. The reason for stopping was to wrangle some money and some hooch, but the girl didn't seem to know that. She was buying William's solicitous son routine. He was pretending to worry about Eliza being alone the whole weekend. He excused himself to check something in the back room, which really meant he wanted to see if Eliza had squirreled any money back there.

When he was gone, the girl looked around and said. "This is all so very quaint. I mean, where else could anyone see such a unique collection?" Eliza kept quiet. Old Granddaddy, being the huckster he was, had taught her that any human could look stupid with very little prodding.

"You know, I've never been scared of snakes," Samantha said. "I was telling Bill" (she meant William) "that my brothers used to try to tease me with garter snakes. I squealed, but I was never really scared."

Eliza reached into a box behind the counter. She pulled out a slender foot-long snake, bright green—known as a ribbon. Some people liked them as pets.

The girl's chatter ceased. She took the snake and held it at arm's length while it flipped and folded nearly in half. To her credit, she didn't drop it.

While she stood there hanging onto the writhing serpent, Eliza asked, "Heard of any snakes up at the hotel where you interviewed?"

By that time, the girl's mouth had parted enough to show her tongue moving with the snake's twists. "Nothing I'm going to believe," she said.

William returned. He grabbed the snake, thrust it back into the box and breathed, "Mother, how could you?"

Before he could say more, Eliza said, "I believe there's half a bottle of Old Granddaddy's stuff under the cushion of the couch."

His eyebrows shot up, and he left again.

"You've heard stories of snakes at the hotel?"

"They're just stories, I think."

"Tell me," Eliza said. "I like a good snake story."

"Well, they say there were snakes in the swimming pool one morning and more the next. One pool man was supposed to have quit because of it."

"Is that all? Just snakes in the pool?"

"Well the other thing is really too bizarre . . ."

"What is?"

"They say the vents for the dryers in the laundry room keep getting clogged up, and it wasn't lint or anything like that. They say snakes were filling up all the tubes and sometimes falling into the

dryers, but I don't believe it. I think some of the people who work nights down in the basement like to make up things like that. People who work the graveyard shift get kind of weird, if you know what I mean."

"The laundry room is in the basement?" Eliza asked.

"Yeah, it's called the dungeon. Nobody wants to slave down there. I don't want to. I told them, I'm a waitress."

"I think I'd want to work the upper floors," Eliza commented. "Let me show you something."

She took the girl to the back of the museum. Hanging on the wall was a framed page from Old Granddaddy's journal. It was a sketch of a wooden barrel wedged into a crevice and full to overflowing with snakes. The top of the page was labeled, "The Snake Trap."

As the girl bent to look closer, William came in again and shouted, "It wasn't there, Old Woman. What kind of tricks are you trying to pull?"

Her customers looked up, but Eliza didn't care about them. Tourists were worse than Samantha for being too ordinary—riding across the West

in their RVs, looking for something to remember. They didn't fool her. Anyone who didn't have snake oil in his blood was a chump, plain and simple.

She shouted back, "Try looking behind

the refrigerator."

William left again.

Eliza turned to the girl. "There's a story goes with that picture. You want to hear it?"

Samantha nodded, even though it was obvious she was reaching her

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snake limit and would really rather go.

Eliza began, "Old Granddaddy built this log cabin on the bluff where the hotel is now, but about this time of year, late fall, he started having some snake trouble."

The girl shivered.

Eliza paused. She hadn't gotten to the good part yet.

She cleared her throat. "Well, Old Granddaddy thought he knew what to do about those snakes, but he needed a barrel. So he asked around, and somebody said there was this old muleskinner working for the army at Fort Hall who had a barrel the size Granddaddy needed, but it wasn't likely that the guy would sell it because he needed it for his tanning business. To make a long story short, Granddaddy goes down to Fort Hall and pretty soon Granddaddy has this old muleskinner thinking that there's money to be had in snake skins. So they come up here and they find the warm crevice that the snakes are following up to my granddaddy's house, and they set this barrel on its side into that crevice and mound dirt around it. Then they go off and have themselves a weeklong drunk. Meanwhile, the snakes follow that crevice up to the barrel and when they can't get past the barrel, they just stop and begin to pile up. The trap was working like a charm."

Samantha bit her lower lip.

"Granddaddy and the muleskinner waited until the cool of one morning when they knew the snakes would be slow. Then they took their shovels and went out to see what the barrel had caught. Boy, were they amazed. There was a huge mound of snakes in front of the barrel. At first, Granddaddy thought the snakes hadn't gone inside the barrel, so they put their shovels behind the pile and tried to slide the snakes inside. That's when they realized the whole barrel was also full of snakes."

Samantha's eyes widened.

"Now, they should have been glad for their good success, but mostly they couldn't believe it. They stood around speculating on how many snakes they'd caught. The muleskinner knew he couldn't tan anywhere near that many snakes even if he worked all winter, and Granddaddy figured no one would believe them, even if all those skins got tanned. The real truth was that neither my granddaddy nor that old muleskinner much wanted to dig out that barrel no matter how cold and slow those snakes might be.

"So after a while, my granddaddy got a can of kerosene. He threw it on the barrel and set it afire—barrel, snakes, and all. That muleskinner about cried seeing his best barrel burn, but what else could they do? You see, Granddaddy hadn't figured out yet how those snakes were going to make his fortune."

"What's she telling you?" William asked, showing up again. He had found the bottle and was grinning from ear to ear. "Don't believe it, whatever it is." He tried to kiss Samantha on her neck.

She pulled away. "Are you saying the snakes in the dryer vents

could be real?"

"Don't know," Eliza answered. "I'm just telling you what happened a long time ago. My Old Granddaddy had to move this here house. He couldn't live up there, and he was a real snake charmer."

"She makes up these stories for the tourists," William said, and tried to kiss the other side of the girl's neck.

"They moved this house?" she asked.

"Took every team of oxen and every horse for twenty miles around. I think it makes a fine museum and gift shop. Don't you agree?"

"Come on, honey," William said, taking her arm and pulling. "It's a long drive to Jackpot."

Samantha slapped playfully at him and giggled. "That's an interesting story, Miss Eliza."

Five minutes later she was back. "William says he forgot to ask you for his pay."

"His pay?"

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "He says you owe him two hundred and ten dollars back pay."

She owed him no such thing but decided to play along. "Of course. How could I forget something like that?" Eliza took the money from the cash register.

"And ma'am," the girl looked at the floor, "I can probably keep my old job. Truth is, I'm really afraid of snakes."

"You fooled me."

"Well, that little one weren't no rattler, if you know what I mean."

Eliza nodded. "I'd keep my old job if I was you. Oh, and would you tell my son something for me?"

"What?" she asked.

"Tell him that I think you have good snake sense."

She brightened. "I will."

Eliza smiled back. William would

hate hearing that. Being with a girl he thought his mother liked would probably ruin his whole weekend.

She never saw the girl again. She didn't see William for almost a month. Then one afternoon, when she was down in the cellar stirring up a new batch of snake oil hooch, William yelled down the stairs. Next thing she knew he was introducing her to a salt-and-pepper-haired German named Stan Fliegelmann. The name sounded familiar. She couldn't remember why.

William said he was a friend, but Eliza knew he was too high class to be one of William's regular riffraff. Her first thought was that he might be a cop—maybe a fed. He started immediately looking over the still, feeling along the gooseneck, examining the worm, checking the vent and where it hooked into the furnace. He wasn't trying to be subtle.

Eliza had never had any particular problems with the law. Home-made hooch was legal as long as she never sold it, and she never did. The opium drops were another matter, but even William didn't know that secret ingredient, although he had been trying to wheedle the recipe out of her since he was fourteen.

While Fliegelmann continued to poke around, William was telling him all about her. "She has this large brown and green snakeskin that was once the python her mother danced with. It hangs above the door in the museum and when we go back up there, you look, and you'll see a little row of candles arranged under it, like in a church or something. Mama still lights them candles sometimes. I seen her do it. She lives entirely in the past, I tell you, a real crazy past, too."

Fliegelmann set down a jar of dried herbs he had shaken and examined. By that time, he had fingered all her funnels and flanges. "Miss Eliza, do you light candles for a snake?"

"Sure do," Eliza replied. It had taken her five minutes, but she'd figured out who Stan Fliegelmann was, and that if William had paid this lawyer to prove she was crazy, she ought to see he got his money's worth.

"Why do you light candles for a snake?" he asked.

"Because of the pretty colors."

"The pretty colors?"

Eliza set her chopping knife down and wiped her hands on her long skirt. "You ever seen snakeskin in candlelight?"

"No," Fliegelmann said.

"Well, you ought to. It's purely one of the wonders of the world. The scales are all in rows and the edges are silvery, and when the light flickers, the colors change."

"That's why you light candles under a snakeskin—to see the colors?"

Eliza nodded.

"Any other reason?" he asked.

There was. It was because that was the only thing she could re-

member about her mother. Milly, the Snake Lady, had run away when Eliza was four years old, but Eliza could remember being in her mother's arms one time as her mother held her and a candle up to that snakeskin and told her something she couldn't remember. What she remembered was seeing the colors shift and sparkle in the flickering candlelight, and then her mother was gone.

Eliza looked the lawyer in the eye. "I can't think of any other reason to hold a candle up to a snakeskin, can you?"

He didn't answer, but she could tell, by the way his eyes flicked away, that he had ticked off some point inside his head that he wanted to remember later.

Meanwhile, William was going on. "Did I tell you about the snake bones? Mama uses them like dice. She never makes a decision without checking her snake bones, and she does consultations and healings. She practically practices medicine without a license."

Eliza wished she remembered what her mother had tried to tell her. It must have been important. She'd tried to tell William important things, not once, but over and over, hoping to teach him the family ways, but it hadn't worked. He kept missing the message. Maybe, in the end, she hadn't been any better at this mother thing than Milly. However, she never imagined that she'd failed William to such a degree that he would want her out of his life, committed, put away. It was almost enough to make her hesitate. That is, until she saw the lawyer stirring in her bitters bowl.

Nobody stirred her bitters.

She reached behind and took down a yellow gourd. It rattled like rushing water as she shook it in the lawyer's face. Then she tipped the gourd and

spilled a handful of snake bones, tiny vertebrae, onto the table.

"Want me to tell you your fortune?"

He looked over at William who gestured with an open hand for him to go ahead and see what this was all about.

"Sure."

Eliza couldn't really read fortunes from snake bones—except maybe her own family's fortune—but she gave the vertebrae a prolonged examination, looking at them from one side of the table and then another.

At last, she said, "you are going to handle a very profitable lawsuit concerning a wealthy Chicago woman whose silver-haired poodle was bitten by a rattlesnake in the parking lot of that new hotel."

The lawyer cocked his head.

She knew why. He had just taken such a case. Eliza had read about it in the local newspaper and finally made the connection. That's why his name sounded familiar.

"The poodle survived, seemingly none the worse for wear, so you plan to settle for a modest sum. The snake bones advise you not to do that. The rattlesnake problem at the hotel is more serious than they've admitted. Ask the bellboys. They have instructions to check ground-floor rooms for snakes. Talk to the hot-tub attendant who recently quit. Poke around. You'll discover that they have a parking lot attendant whose job description is 'snake removal.' You might also discover that one basement laundry room is closed permanently. Then check the airport. Five hotel-owned Lear jets have logged in and out of there in the past two weeks. Three of those flights brought in well-known herpetologists from top universities. Why? The bones predict that if you answer those questions, you will discover that you have stumbled onto the means of embarrassing the world's second largest chain of luxury hotels. If that doesn't translate into money, these aren't snake bones, and I must be crazy."

Fliegelmann studied Eliza for half a minute. Then he picked up the gourd and swept the snake bones back into it. "I don't believe in hocus-pocus," he said. "But I have heard rumors about that hotel."

Out of the corner of her eye, Eliza saw William slump against the cellar door frame. To the lawyer, she said, "I usually get a hundred dollars for a fortune telling."

Fliegelmann took out his wallet.

Ten days later William strode into the shop. Without saying a word, he dumped a satchel of money onto the counter. "That's my snake money. I went to the bank and got cash because I wanted you to see it, Old Woman, all fourteen thousand dollars. I'm a high-paid snake consultant. That hotel paid me to show them every crack and crevice on that bluff. Then they pumped them full of cement. If there's a snake left up there, it's cast in concrete. Let's see you do something about that!"

Eliza couldn't keep herself from smiling. Deep down she'd always known it would come to this. He was an Osgood. He had snake oil in his blood.

She patted his money, palming a hundred off the top as she pulled her hand back. Then she looked up at her William and said, "You did good. You did real fine. Yes, indeed, that's a good start. Before you and I and those snakes get through with that hotel . . ."

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