

Matthew Grass is a new writer who has here come up with a classically simple little story subject to such a variety of interpretations that we think it best to offer no further introductions whatsoever. . . .

THE SNAKE IN THE CLOSET

by Matthew Grass

IT WAS MARCH 21, THE FIRST day of spring, and his birthday, when he discovered the snake in the closet.

The sky was overcast and, despite the vernal equinox, it had snowed the evening before, turned to a fine drizzle during the night, and the morning was chill and damp. It wasn't a very nice day for a birthday but he didn't really mind for he had forgotten all about it. Besides, he was thirty-two that day, not an important natal date in most people's mind; certainly not having the implications of a twenty-first, or fortieth, or any even-numbered birthday that begins anew the arithmetical progression. Yesterday he was thirty-one, today he was thirty-two, next year he would be thirty-three: it was all and the same to him.

Had he left his apartment the

first time he started out he might not have made the discovery until weeks later, or, as he later reasoned, maybe not at all. But as he was half-way down the stairs he decided that perhaps he should wear his lined raincoat rather than his overcoat, so he turned back and re-entered his apartment.

Since he had been wearing his overcoat nearly every day that winter, it hung in the same closet with his suits. His raincoat hung in his second closet, the one near the front door. He didn't use this closet much except as an extra storage space. Actually, the closet was practically empty; he wasn't a collector of "things"—golf clubs, tennis rackets, card tables, suitcases . . . articles that spend most of their days in storage.

He had stepped into the closet—it was a deep, walk-in closet—taken his raincoat off the hanger,

put his overcoat on the same hanger, and was just about to step back and close the door when he saw it.

Although it was coiled in the back left hand corner of the closet it covered the floor entirely on the left side; in fact, its tail was only inches from his feet.

He stood there transfixed; the usual first impulse supposedly felt in situations like this—to flee—didn't occur to him. He just stood there, mouth half open, staring at the beast, which placidly regarded him through dull membrane-covered eyes.

Suddenly becoming conscious of his fear, he stepped quickly back and slammed the closet door. He stood before the door for a moment, trembling, and then sank to the floor like a boneless lump of flesh.

When he awakened a few minutes later, he sat up with his back against the closet door. Then he leaped to his feet, his raincoat still under his arm, and ran from the apartment leaving the front door ajar.

He hurried to the corner and waited impatiently for the bus. He was behind schedule now and would probably be late for work; he had never been late in the eight years he had been employed at the firm.

He walked into the office exactly at nine: his record for punctuality was sustained. A few people mentioned to him that morning that he

wasn't looking well, and he noticed himself that he had difficulty focusing on the columns of figures he was checking. Though he tried to blot out his mind's eye picture of it, he nevertheless clearly recalled the snake in the closet.

By lunchtime he had regained his outward composure. He mentioned the snake in the closet to no one.

When he returned to his apartment that evening, his first thought was how to keep the snake from getting out of the closet. As long as the door was closed there was no chance of its getting out; the space between the floor and the bottom of the door was too narrow for the snake to squeeze through. Of course, he realized that sooner or later he would have to open the door, but he would have to face that contingency when it arrived. For the moment he would just have to remember not to open the door.

Later that evening, however, he decided to look into the closet. Some means, though, would have to be devised so that he could open the closet door and see what was to be seen without endangering himself.

He finally figured out a method to effect this: a mirror would be so placed to allow him to see into the closet from six or eight feet away. He would place an oversized armchair so that he could kneel behind it. The final prob-

lem to overcome was how to open the door—a rope would be needed. He would have to fasten a rope on the door knob so that he could turn the knob while kneeling safely behind the chair, and also be able to close the door from the same position. Since he had no rope, he would have to wait until the next day.

The next day was Friday, his shopping day. Living alone and being rather close with his money, he found that cooking his own meals was less costly than dining out. Every Friday he bought his week's provisions at a near-by super-market.

It wasn't until his purchases were being tallied that he remembered the rope. The most suitable that he could find was clothesline rope, although he hated to buy a whole length of it—thirty feet—since he needed only ten or twelve.

When he got home, he carefully put away his groceries and set about building his contrivance. He had also bought some eyelet screws to fasten into the door to obtain a sort of pulley effect, to give him leverage to open and close the door more easily.

He wasn't too adept with his hands and his knowledge of the simple principles governing pullies and levers was vague; so that he made an evening's chore of what should have been fifteen minutes work.

It was after ten before he com-

pleted his apparatus. It had evolved from an originally simple plan of merely a rope tied to the door handle, to a complex maze of screws and ropes.

He felt that his machine had to work properly the first time; if not, there might be no second chance to test it. He found himself becoming quite nervous as he settled into position behind the chair. He decided a cold glass of water would help to calm him. As he crossed in front of the closet door, he tripped over the tangle of ropes which he hadn't yet pulled taut. As he pitched forward he turned his head and saw the closet door slowly swing open.

He tried to lunge forward to push the door closed but a sharp pain in his ankle stopped him in mid-motion. He fell back on his elbow, his face contorting with pain from his throbbing ankle. Then the awareness of the now open closet door caused him to forget his ankle and peer anxiously into the semi-dark recesses of the closet. The snake was there, coil upon coil of it.

He had heard that by staring firmly at a snake one could master it; or at least keep it at bay. Fighting the rising panic within him, and mindful of his temporary crippled condition, he stared fixedly, and, he thought, to be fearlessly, at the snake in the closet.

The snake seemed uninterested in him and his stare. It regarded

him for a moment and then looked aside. He lay there a moment, perplexed. The snake's reaction, or lack of reaction, baffled him. He hadn't really known what to expect, but this complete ignoring of him by the snake considerably nonplussed him; he didn't know what to do.

Finally, his poise returning, he realized the futility of the situation; he would have to do something. Cautiously he moved his good leg toward the door. The snake paid no attention to him. He grew bold and with one hearty kick he slammed the door shut.

After he had crawled to a chair and taken off his shoe and sock, he massaged his tender ankle; nothing seemed to be broken. Later that evening when he tested his ankle he found that although it pained him a little when he put his full weight on that foot, it wasn't really a serious injury and would probably be better the next day.

Late the next afternoon, before going to a friend's home for dinner, he squatted behind the chair, the bureau mirror in place before the closet door, to test his door-opening machine. After a little preliminary confusion assorting the ropes so that he knew exactly which one was to be pulled to obtain the particular desired results, he made a last check of the angle of the mirror and returned to his operational point behind the chair. He pulled on one rope and the

door knob turned; holding the first taut, with the other hand he pulled a second rope and the door swung open.

In the mirror he saw the snake; its position hadn't perceptibly altered since he had last seen it. As before, the snake made no movement toward the open door, and although it seemed to be looking directly at the mirror, it gave no indication of surprise, or even awareness, that it was gazing at his likeness.

He sat and watched the snake for a few minutes. Then, realizing that he would be late for his dinner engagement if he didn't leave immediately, he gave a tug at the third of his ropes and the door swung smoothly back, the latch clicking into place.

At his newly married friend's home that evening, his host and hostess noticed nothing different about him. He was quiet all evening, but then he had always been rather quiet; in fact, he seemed to get quieter with each passing year. When he was in college he was animated enough so that he was socially acceptable. In those days, however, his interests had been quite varied; if he wasn't working in the university's newspaper office, he was practicing on the basketball court or rehearsing for a play with the dramatic society. He was always busy, he was always involved with some project. His friends had been displeased

when he wasn't voted "Man Most Likely To Succeed" by his graduating class, but he accepted it good-naturedly.

Now, of course, he did nothing. He existed. As the years passed and each year took on an aura of sameness, he turned more and more inward. He lost touch with his friends one by one, until his only friend—though more an acquaintance than a friend—was one of his co-workers. And now that he had recently married, their contacts were fewer; an invitation to dinner every month or so was the extent of their socializing.

So, he sat quietly at dinner and then quietly through the evening and finally left to return to his apartment and the snake in the closet.

As the days passed he spent more and more of his time watching the snake. At first, he would look to see if the snake was still there when he returned from work in the evenings. Then he began to look at the snake again before going to bed. After a while these cursory examinations became half-hour studies. By the end of a month he was spending nearly the whole of his evenings crouched behind the chair, gazing into the mirror. He found it impossible to read—he had seldom gone out before, spending most of his time at home, reading—he couldn't concentrate for more than a few minutes. Finally, he became impa-

tient for the time to pass when at work. Now, he watched the clock, fidgeted at his desk, and even made occasional mistakes in his ledgers; a few times, when the waiting became intolerable to him, he left early—unprecedented in his years of employment.

These manifestations of discontent didn't go unnoticed by his employers. When they had hired him, eight years before, they had anticipated his rapid rise; they had looked forward to his success, for they felt the addition of some young vibrant blood would resuscitate their solid, but stagnant, practice. They had soon seen, however, that although he was steady, although he was meticulously thorough, his abilities were limited to functions of rote, not to endeavors requiring aggressiveness or imagination. Regularly, they increased his salary as they did with all their employees, but they paid him no special notice. He became just another worker, one of many who did the inevitable minutiae in the office, a necessary adjunct to their firm as long as he competently performed his duties.

But now, with his recent remissness, they began to eye him with disdain. He had certainly never been invaluable; he was adequate, that was all. At the moment, he was less than adequate, and therefore, no longer desirable to the firm.

When he was informed of his

dismissal, he received the information with complete equanimity. He left at noon, pleased at the unexpected boon of the extra hours to spend before the closet door. Of late, he had taken to placing a chair directly in front of the closet—his rope device falling into disuse—and sitting staring at the creature for hours.

Now, he would not have to leave his apartment for days at a time, and then only to buy food. He ate even less now, so that his trips to the food market were less frequent than they had been.

He now left the closet door always open. The snake never ventured forth, nor even seemed conscious of the door being open. He began to place bowls of food on the floor just inside the closet, but they weren't touched. He couldn't understand how the snake could exist without food; he thought that perhaps it foraged for itself in the walls of the house during the night. One night he sat up and watched, but the snake didn't leave its spot.

The snake in the closet remained unchanged, but he grew thin from insufficient food and sleepless nights. He seldom even bothered to go to bed; when he did, he would lie in bed still watching the snake. He arranged a lamp so that its light filled the dusky corners of the closet revealing the snake in all its unblinking torpor. His entire existence seemed

to depend on the snake—the snake that did nothing but lie quietly coiled in the corner of his closet.

One morning at the end of the summer he awakened from a restless sleep. His eyes turned to the open closet. The lamp had gone out and the dull day didn't penetrate the dark confines of the closet; he couldn't see the snake from his bed. He walked to the closet and, squinting, made out the motionless form of the snake. He felt that something had changed.

The snake had all its immensity; but there was something different about it. The snake's head was resting on its body; the eyes were sightlessly glassy rather than dully alive. He reached out and touched the snake: it was lifeless.

He sat quietly before the closet door gazing at the dead snake. After an hour he closed the door and removed the ropes. He cut a three-foot piece of rope and inexpertly fashioned a noose. Walking to the center of the room, he stood on a chair and passed the rope through the grating of a hot-air ventilator in the ceiling.

Standing on the chair after testing the strength of the grating, he placed the noose around his neck, tightened it, checked the knot fastening the rope to the grating, and with a smooth motion swung off the chair, toppling it with his feet.