

## My Neighbor the Rattlers

Word Count 855

One evening my son and I were hiking near my house when we heard—soon saw—a rattler raise itself in “strike” position.

“Whoa,” said Walter, “let's back off.”

We did. We hiked the other direction. Walter’s visit was a day off from five days of professional duty. Soon his wife and daughter would join us for a week’s vacation.

My home is just two years old. When Walter and family moved to Texas and I was relieved of grandparent duty, I sold my house in Cheyenne and settled on acreage fifty miles north. A share-cropping farmer used to raise winter wheat here, but climate change has put an end to that. The acreage is reverting to an earlier state. Prairie dogs build, badgers draw near, grassland birds make a living, coyotes sing their evening song. A praying mantis hides among the leaves of my tomato plants.

“We are going to have to kill that rattler,” said Walter as we headed back.

“Can’t we just let the snake be?”

“This rattler is big, and it’s too close to the house.”

I had built my home knowing I would encounter wild creatures. Recently I watched a pair of bald eagles swoop into the draw and up the mesa, then alight on a nearby utility pole. Antelope and mule deer wander off when they catch sight of my dog. Snakes, too, prefer to make themselves scarce, but they’ll hold their ground if curled in a warm spot.

“You have grandkids coming,” Walter reminded me for good measure.

He was right. His younger brother from California was due to arrive with children ages five and eight. So were Walter’s spouse and their twelve-year-old.

“Can’t we move the snake? Take it someplace where it’ll leave us alone?”

“Well.” Walter was thinking. “I can try.”

With a 4-pronged hand rake and a trash can he set off to where we’d seen the rattler but I hung back. Once he got there, he motioned that it was still around. Pretty soon he was hiking down the dirt road, holding the trash can. I knew then he’d been successful and went inside. He would take the snake into the field.

“In Africa a game warden told me he removes venomous snakes when he finds them near a visitors’ center,” he said on his return. “He says the move stresses them out; they won’t come back.”

It’s good to have a veterinarian in the family. A former Wyoming wildlife veterinarian with a PhD in epidemiology, Walter annually conducts a two-week summer course in South Africa, treating wildlife. The course is offered through Texas A&M’s College of Veterinary Medicine where he now teaches.

“We had an emergency operation on a water buffalo,” he said of his African time the month previous. “When it ate the hay, it also swallowed the plastic string that held the bale together.”

“Now that hemp is legal again,” I venture, “maybe the growers will revert to hemp string for hay. If the critters eat it, no harm done.” Along with a group of stake holders, I had lobbied for years that Wyoming legislators enact a hemp bill. Finally they relented—after the pertinent federal bill had taken effect.

When the rest of my family arrived, the kids went gaga over the toads and geckos in the window wells outside. “They’re so cute,” squealed the youngest. “I want to hold them.” The earth creatures, however, made themselves unreachable. We went boating on a nearby lake. We strolled around Turtle Rock at Vecauwoo. Before long the families were on their way again.

The snake problem, however, wasn’t solved with Walter’s charitable deed. Not quite, anyway. A week or two later my dog was barking furiously in the basement. Her sleeping quarters are down there, and sometimes she goes for a midday nap.

Since Abby wouldn’t quit her ruckus, I checked what was the matter. On the cement floor was a baby rattler, raising itself up and rattling its tiny appendage.

Once before, in the spring, I had found a baby snake in the basement. I thought it a garden snake, got a square bucket and a stick, scooped up the wriggling thing and took it outside.

Now I repeated the operation but carried the baby rattler to the field where Walter had left the adult snake. Soon after I was back, Abby was barking again downstairs. This time I saw a tiny snake head among the rafters. No way was I going to reach it up there. Two days later, however, it had ventured to the floor. I gathered and took it away like its sibling.

There may be a regular snake-family reunion down in that field. The adult rattler Walter removed must have been a mama rattler, which means a daddy rattler isn’t far off. I’m hoping the raptors undertake what I don’t have the heart to do, but that may be wishful thinking. What would my son say about baby rattlers in the basement? Keep your eyes peeled? Pray they don’t grow into mama and daddy rattlers? Oh yeah.