

*An inebriated narrator stands before a death certificate admits to killing someone. He shared the hell that was the deceased's life and suffering, and in a moment of compassion and guilt, he decides to tell Marc's unlikely story.*

## **A Serpent's Conscience**


By Claude Saayman

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# **A Serpent's Conscience**

**An unlikely biography**

A close-up photograph of a snake's head, showing its eyes and the intricate pattern of its scales. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin against a dark background.

**Claude Saayman**

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This book is based on the true-life exploits of  
Marc David Saayman.

While it is biographical in nature, this is first and foremost a story, and therefore events have been dramatized. The events told in this story took place between 1955 and 1976; it is impossible to remember the actual names of all the characters that crossed Marc's path, so many names are fictitious.

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	ix
The Confession .....	1
Marc.....	3
Lori .....	5
We are all God’s Children.....	12
Alf .....	21
The pedal car .....	26
Divorce.....	33
Holy Evil .....	38
The Bunny .....	45
The Accident.....	56
The Snake Pit.....	60
Bilharzia.....	71
Liar Liar .....	86
The Chicken Coop .....	92
Peachies .....	106
The Tiger’s Tail.....	122
First Love.....	133
Shooting Bart.....	136
Sugarman .....	140
The Air Force .....	150
Fugitive.....	177
Durban.....	197
The Jew.....	211
Lorraine .....	215
Escape From The Fort.....	229
Solitary.....	241

*Claude Saayman*

The Last Flight ..... 258  
The Court Martial ..... 265

## The Confession

From a palette of smog, the last rays of the dying day painted the sky drab and added a layer of murkiness to the room. On a plain wooden table, a half empty bottle of Rum stood guard over a death certificate.

In the distance, a church bell rang. Its evangelistic zeal resonated in my mind like hammer blows of divine condemnation. 'Yes, yes!' I shouted at the steeple. 'I killed him. It was me. I killed him. There was no alternative.' The confession escaped on a cloud of alcoholic vapour and died in the empty room. Saying it aloud brought home the finality and the irreversibility of what I had done. And it felt good.

The sound of the bell grew louder, more incessant.

'Yes, I killed him.' I slumped into a fake leather chair and let the words linger like a passionate kiss. 'God knows, there was no other way.'

I picked up my glass and contemplated my unshaven pathetic reflection captured in its crystal jail. For forty years I fought to escape his tortured mind, but now it's done. He's dead. There was nothing else I could do. My revelation must have appeased the church because that cursed ringing died.

I got up and stared out of the window at the city, now only a dark silhouette against the evening sky. Marc was dead, yet he was here in this room, his presence palpable and mocking. He was dead, but I wasn't rid of him. Frustration burned away my euphoria.

I drank another mouthful and pointed at the cold white document on the table. 'I shared that desolate hell that was your life, your moments of terror and your pathetic struggle to escape your destiny.' The spirit released the anger that had long fermented in my mind. I threw back the last of the liquid and refilled my glass. 'I cannot grieve your death because I hate you.'

Then I turned and looked at the monotonous symmetry of the dimly lit windows of the buildings outside, and at the oppressive darkness that surrounded them. The alcohol blurred my thoughts, but that scene somehow reminded me of Marc's struggle. Images of his turbulent life skipped through the fog of my nostalgia. He may be dead, but I was not rid of him.

I looked down at the street below. 'What guided his unfortunate destiny? How did he survive the complex tangle of psychological malaises that beset him?' I asked the nameless passers-by walking toward their destiny.

Compassion and guilt gnawed at my soul like a starving rat. I turned away from the window and the world outside. 'I must tell his story. Maybe then they will understand why I had to kill him.'

## Marc

Like the sun rising on a gloomy day, life crept into the pink little body as it hung motionless from the midwife's impassionate hand. A loud slap broke the sterile silence and coaxed the winter air into his virgin lungs, but he remained mute. The midwife clucked and smacked him again. Then, freed from their long sleep, his cries resonated in the cold grey halls like ravens chasing dreams.

The nurse swaddled the newborn child in a starched towel, then wiped the last residue of amniotic fluid from his face and laid him on a steel cot. His mother lay alone on the operating table. A blood pressure cuff hung loose from her white arm. A rubber mask covered her mouth, and two black pipes still connected her to the Dräger anaesthetic machine near her head. The room smelt of fresh placenta and disinfectant and expectation. Dry blood formed dark irregular stains on the green cloth under her, and bloodied surgical instruments lay strewn amongst red stained swabs and gauze pads.

Lori turned her head and tried to focus on the cot next to her. The remnants of the anaesthesia blurred her vision and her thoughts. As she drifted back into the cloud of chemical stupor, the gilded image of an angel floated across the darkness.



Doctor Lee Irvine pulled off his gloves and threw them in the waste bin, then walked over to a table on the far side of the operating room. He opened the birth register and scrawled in that unintelligible script common to medical men: ‘On this twenty-seventh day of July nineteen hundred and fifty-five, at two minutes past seven am, in the Krugersdorp Hospital in the province of Transvaal, South Africa, a male infant named Marc David, born by caesarean section to Laurretta and Alfred Saayman.’

E

One wheel of the crib chirped in rhythm to the squeak of the nurse’s rubber soles on the linoleum floor as she wheeled Marc down the long corridor to meet his family.

Marc’s father, Alf, and his maternal grandparents Mary and Gert crowded around the crib.

‘Oh, look he has his mother’s nose,’ said Mary.

‘How can you tell? He’s not even an hour old?’ Alf asked.

She ignored his question. ‘And your eyes.’

Grandpa leaned over the cot. ‘The boy has a weak chin.’

‘Oh, nonsense,’ said Mary, ‘he’s a beautiful child.’

‘Mark my words, the boy won’t have a strong character.’

Grandpa’s words fell on deaf ears. Like gipsies around a crystal ball, Alf and Mary continued to predict a future filled with success, love and happiness. Little did they know his birth was like a leaky boat leaving a harbour to navigate a stormy sea, and that it was destined to become a wreck on a lonely deserted shore.

## Lori

The luminescent glow of the bedside clock shone bright in the dark room. Lori stared at it for a moment while her mind caught up and she could make sense of their position. It showed five twenty-nine. 'Already?'

Without looking she reached out and pressed the button to deactivate the alarm. Alf stirred but made no sign of waking. She flung the blankets over him and stood up. The familiar giddiness from lack of sleep overpowered her and she grabbed the night table to steady herself. A dull throbbing at her temples announced the beginnings of another headache that would last all day.

'I don't know how long I can go on like this,' she said to herself while fumbling in the dark for her slippers. She put on the nylon nightdress that hung over the foot of the bed and staggered across the dark hall to Marc's room. 'God, I feel so tired. How will I get through another long day at work?' Her brain was still fighting for just a few more moments of sleep but her maternal instinct forced her to pick Marc up and change his wet nappy. 'Please my angel, don't cry now. I must go to work. I don't have time to make your bottle, but I love you more than anything in this world.' She kissed his forehead and laid him back in his cot. Then she went to the bathroom to

disguise the black rings and haggard complexion with a dash of Ponds beauty cream and loads of Yardley face powder.



The six-forty-five train to Johannesburg lay like a long reddish-brown mechanical serpent on its shiny rails. Impatient people pushed and shoved each other through the small doors at the ends of each carriage while a metallic voice echoed through the Tannoy speakers announcing the departure. Lori ran along the platform, unsteady on her stilettos, the pleats of her red polka dots dress twisting to-and-fro with the quick movement of her hips. A wide red patent leather belt drawn around her waist hid her tiny post pregnancy bulge. The conductor helped her to board the train, then with a blast from his whistle he signalled the departure.

The early morning commuters strained to keep their balance in the jerking movements. They fussed about the narrow aisle arranging briefcases and hats on the overhead racks. Lori elbowed her way through them to find a seat. She found one near the middle of the carriage and sat down, taking care not to crease her dress on the red vinyl seat.

She took a cigarette from its box but did not light it. This morning, pangs of nostalgia kept prodding her thoughts toward a conversation she had with her mother before getting married. *Mother thought I was much too young to get married and have children. I should have followed her advice and enjoy my youth and freedom. Now I regret not following her advice.* She shrugged off the thought. *Love is stronger than reason, I suppose. It breaks my heart to leave Marc with the maid, but we need the money.* She tapped the unlit cigarette end on the box, *I must make this work. I must show them I can be a good wife and mother.* Lori put the cigarette in her mouth and with trembling hands lit it. *Yes, I will be a good wife and mother, whatever it takes.*



Lori sat on a blue Formica kitchen chair and stared at her distorted reflection in the glass door of the kitchen cupboard. A cigarette burned in an ashtray; its long ash curved and rested amongst a dozen other butt's half buried in ash. Marc lay crying in his cot beside her. She ignored him. The rhythmic tapping of her patent leather shoe on the hardwood planks sounded like blows on a punching bag.

The front door opened and a few seconds later Alf appeared.

'Is this the time to come home? Where have you been?' Lori asked.

'What's for dinner?' His breath smelt of alcohol.

'I threw it in the rubbish.'

Alf smashed his fist on the table. A vase of carnations fell over and the water soaked into the crocheted doily giving it a green tinge.

'Look what you've done. You ruined my doily. My grandmother crocheted that with her own hands. Now it's ruined.'

'I want my dinner.'

'You ruined my grandmother's doily,' she shouted.

'I don't care about your grandmother's effing doily, I want my dinner.'

'How am I going to get the stains out? Tell me, how?'

'Where's my food?' His face was red with rage.

'My grandmother made it for my mother's wedding.'

'Dinner. Did you hear me? I want my dinner.'

Lori gathered up the flowers and put them back in the vase.

‘If I can’t get dinner here I will find it elsewhere,’ Alf shouted. The back door slammed, and the house became silent.

‘That’s right, go. I don’t need you, I can manage on my own. Who needs a man who is never home?’ She instantly regretted her words. ‘No, no, that’s not what I meant to say. Come back. Please Alf, come back, I’ll make you something to eat.’ Her words were lost in the noise of Alf’s car racing away. She paced to-and-fro in the small kitchen. Her feverish, bright eyes darted from window to door, ‘Please come back. Please.’

Then she remembered Marc. She picked him up out of his crib. ‘Don’t cry my darling, everything will be okay. Daddy will be back soon.’ She walked over to the window. ‘Don’t cry my darling, Mommy loves you so much.’ She kissed his forehead. ‘You’ll never leave me, will you?’

E

Lori sat on the sofa staring out of the bay window. The street was empty. The space where Alf usually parked his car had been empty for over a week. Regret and loneliness were eating away at her. She had tried to contact him several times, but nobody knew where he was. Nobody. All her seething frustrations were now building into a sweltering molten mass of emotional magma ready to erupt at the slightest provocation.

A familiar sound of a car pulling up in front of the house jerked her back to reality. She recognised his car. All her emotions in disarray, all she could do was light a cigarette. Her heart pounded in her chest. Alf appeared through the cloud of smoke holding an enormous bunch of red and white roses.

‘Are those meant to hide a guilty conscience?’

‘No, they’re for your birthday. Happy birthday darling.’

Her rage transformed into tenderness and the lava into sweet tears. She jumped to her feet and flung her arms around her husband. ‘Thank you. Thank you. I had such an awful day I even forgot it was my birthday.’

Alf put on a Nat King Cole record and pulled his wife close to him. She wrapped her arms around him and lay her head on his chest. Odours of sweat, engine oil, cigarettes and beer permeated his clothes, but in this moment of bliss, to Lori it had the same mesmerizing effect of Old Spice. She looked into his blue eyes. She wanted to apologize, to explain. She wanted to tell him how difficult it was to get up at the break of dawn to go to work... how much she loved him... how difficult it was to leave her baby at home... how the lack of money was driving her insane. Instead she pulled his face toward hers and kissed him.

Alf hugged her tighter and started to sway in rhythm with the music. Lori pressed her body to his. Alf nuzzled his nose in her hair and softly sang in tune to the music. 'Unforgettable, that's just what you are...' Her heart skipped a beat. 'You're unforgettable, near me or far...' Her breath stopped. 'Like a song of love that clings to me...' Her eyes filled with tears. 'How the thought of you does things to me...' Her legs became numb. 'Never before, has someone meant more...' She floated on his words. 'You're unforgettable in every way...And forever more, that's just how you'll stay...'

The words entered her ears and went straight to her heart. There they played havoc with her emotions. Happiness radiated through her numbed body. Alf's voice was velvet and soft. Goosebumps covered her like a mink cloak. His muscular body fused to hers, they moved around the small room, in rhythmic harmony. Now she felt safe, the fluttering in her stomach ceased, and she smiled.

'I love you,' She whispered.

'That's why, darling, it's incredible... that someone so unforgettable... thinks that I am unforgettable too.' He steered her toward the bedroom.

Marc slept peacefully in his crib.

The six-forty-five train to Johannesburg was crowded as usual, but Lori found a seat next to her aunt Val. It was the last work day before the Christmas break.

‘You missed work yesterday, is everything all right?’ Val asked.

‘I went to see the doctor, and he gave me some good news.’ Lori said.

‘What, what? Tell me.’

‘I’m three months pregnant.’

‘No. Really?’

‘Yes I am. I’m so happy.’

‘But you are struggling financially, how are you going to cope with another child?’

‘We will get by.’

‘Your mother tells me that things are not going well between you and Alf.’

‘She blows everything out of proportion. We have our little tiff’s, but it is nothing.’

‘She seemed worried. Said that you wanted to move back in with them.’

‘It was just a little argument, everything is back to normal.’

## E

Just over a year after Marc’s birth, Lori once again lay on an operating table. A nurse painted iodine soap on the bare stomach that protruded through the opening in the green sheets that covered her. The anaesthetist tweaked the machine that delivered the halothane gas to Lori’s lungs. He then touched her open eye to make sure the anaesthetic had taken effect and that the patient was under. Doctor Irvine made an incision across her lower

stomach. Then he inserted his hand into the wound, gripped the baby's legs and pulled him into the world of the living. He handed the child to the nurse and proceeded to stitch the wound. The entire procedure only took a few minutes.

Thus, came into Marc's life a brother named Clive.



## **We are all God's Children**

A chaotic chorus of exclamations and expletives fell like flint on steel, igniting the smouldering embers of angst within him. Sleep evaporated. He buried his head in his pillow, but the cocoon of soft feathers gave meagre protection from the suffocating anxiety that percolated from the commotion in the next room. A violent thud sent vibrations through the wall. He sat up, wide awake. The shouting got louder. Another crash. His stomach constricted, shoving the acidic residue of dinner into the back of his throat.

His brother crawled over to his side of the bed they shared.

‘What’s happening?’

‘They’re fighting again.’

‘Why are they fighting?’

‘Shush, I’m trying to listen.’

‘Why are they fighting?’

‘I don’t know. Go to sleep.’

‘But I’m scared.’

Marc hugged his little brother. ‘Don’t be scared, it will be over soon.’

They clung to each other in the darkness, trembling like the petals of an orchid in a midnight gale. Someone shuffled around in the living room, then the front door slammed and a staccato of agitated footsteps tapped across the tiny concrete porch. Moments later a car sped off into the night. An uneasy silence crept through the house. The storm was over. Marc released his brother and fell back on the thin mattress. Pent-up breath escaped from his lungs like air from a punctured tire. In its place raw tension. Tension that was already a constant companion.

He lay on his back in a semi-dreamlike state. Like a boxer recovering from an uppercut, every muscle in his body ached. His head pounded as his mental scars exuded their exquisite pain. These were wounds that never healed.

Wretched sobbing floated like a sonata of sadness through the darkness, conjuring painful images that flickered through his groggy brain like an old black and white movie. Marc wanted to console his mother, but he was afraid of what he might see. Instead he lay there staring into the claustrophobic darkness fighting to stay awake lest the nightmares start again.

### Ξ

Marc resisted leaving the sleep that overcame him in the early hours. When he opened his eyes, matted strands of blond hair caressed his face. The deep shadows could not hide the red puffy eyes that gazed down at him. He rubbed the sleep away with his palms, ‘Where’s Daddy?’

Lori kissed his forehead. ‘Daddy left.’

‘Why?’

She pulled his blanket away. ‘You must get dressed, we need to hurry.’

‘Why, where are we going?’ The question hung frozen in the unnatural atmosphere. ‘Where are we going, Mommy?’

She reached up and slid a battered brown cardboard suitcase from the top of the wardrobe and threw it on the bed. ‘Pack your clothes in there and make sure you don’t forget your new shirt.’

A queasy sensation stirred in the bottom of his stomach. Uncertainty grew like dark clouds on the horizon. ‘Why?’

‘You are going to Uncle Dirk and Auntie Joyce,’

‘Why?’

‘Because... because... -she looked at the ceiling and sighed- ‘because. Oh, you won’t understand.’

‘Understand what Mommy?’

‘Markey, please stop asking questions and get dressed.’

‘And me, Mommy?’ Clive asked, ‘am I also going to Auntie Joyce?’

‘No. You’ll stay here’-she turned to leave- ‘at least for now.’

Ξ

The jaded face that Marc saw reflected in the dirty window of the bus that took them to his aunt’s house was not his mother’s. The blue eyes looking out at the deserted streets were dull and distant, their usual sparkle faded by some deep vexation. Her mouth, pinched from frustration and anger, transformed her full lips into a thin red line. No, this woman sitting beside him was not his beautiful, happy mother.

‘Mommy?’

She sat motionless, except for one hand tapping her silver Ronson lighter on the box of Rembrandt van Rijn cigarettes that lay in her palm. The quicks of the fingers curled around the box bore red scars that stood out like tiny flames against her pale white skin.

‘Mommy? Are you giving me away?’

She sighed, took a cigarette out of the box and lit it. She drew hard until the end glowed red, then she sighed again and blew a cloud of smoke upwards. It hung like a blue and grey bruise against the grimy ceiling. Then as if carrying his spirit in its vaporous bosom it rolled forward and disappeared above the heads of the other passengers. The sharp pungent smell of second-hand tobacco it left behind clung to his hair and his clothes like a bad memory.

‘Mommy? Will Aunty Joyce and Uncle Dirk be my new Mommy and Daddy?’

With a tap of her forefinger, she flicked the ash of her cigarette onto the floor. Marc looked at her waiting for an answer, but she said nothing. ‘Will they?’ Her silence weighed on him like a death sentence. But even that was preferable to hearing the answer he so dreaded.

But he had to know.

‘Will they, Mommy?’

She blew another cloud of smoke up to the ceiling. ‘Always remember that Mommy loves you very much.’ Then she turned and stared out of the window.



Aunt Joyce ushered them into the living room. Drawn curtains kept out the hot African sun. It smelt musty and the oppressive murkiness made the room cave-like. His mother sat on the big sofa. Marc fell onto the dusty

imitation Persian rug at his mother's feet. He could not bring himself to be part of this conversation.

Uncle Dirk sat in his armchair by the window sucking on his pipe. Out of the corner of his eye Marc watched uncle Dirk, hoping for a sign, a hint at what his future held. Uncle Dirk seemed to be far away as he pressed down the hot tobacco with a calloused thumb stained black from the tar and nicotine. He did not invite Marc to sit on his lap as he always did. The gravity of the impending discussion weighed heavy on the adults in the room. Nobody was in the mood for games. Lori sat with her legs crossed at the ankles. One foot tapped relentlessly on the carpet. Her hands lay folded on her lap as if they were holding a mortal secret and her back seemed rounded by the burden of her weighty mission.

Marc could not follow the disordered and confused words falling from her dry monotone voice. His aunt ummed and nodded in agreement and stole an occasional glance in his direction. As the inevitability of it all sank in, Marc felt like a horse trapped in a burning stable. All he wanted at that moment was to escape that room, to gallop down the concrete path lined with tea roses and jump the green gate. He wanted to charge home to his brother, but the heat of the fire paralyzed him.

He was still wrestling with his decision to bolt when the conversation died. His mother turned and clasped his aunt's hand. 'Thank you so much for agreeing to look after him. With Alf away again, I can't manage but as soon as I am back on my feet I will come and fetch him. Thank you so much.' Then she looked at Marc. 'You be a good boy, now. Don't give your aunt any trouble.'

The blood drained from Marc's face. He jumped up and flung his arms around her leg. 'Don't leave me Mommy. Please, please don't go, I want to go home. Why can't I come home?'

She knelt in front of him, her breath smelt of tea and cigarettes and sorrow. She wiped his tears with her soft palm. 'I will come to fetch you soon.'

He put his arms around her neck and hugged her. 'Promise you will come fetch me.'

She undid his grip and took a step back, then walked out of the room. 'I promise.'

Marc never saw the tears that streamed down her face. He waved at her as she disappeared behind the wooden gate. *Why is she leaving me here? What did I do wrong?*

His aunt took his hand. 'Come Markey, I'll prepare juice and biscuits.'

The picture of his mother walking to the gate was still vivid in his mind. He could still see her floral dress floating around her slender waist as she walked down that wretched path. Her perfume still lingered in the air. No juice, biscuits, or even all the sweets in the world could compensate his loss.

## E

'Our father who art in heaven, please tell Mommy to come back and take me home' -Marc pressed his hands together and looked up at the ceiling- 'please, please, I promise that I will never, ever be naughty again. Amen.'

Because he believed in the all-powerful and merciful God, he thought if he asked, God would come to his rescue and deliver him from this turmoil. Hope warmed the cold white sheets as he waited for sleep to erase the hours. As soon as the first ray of sun illuminated his room, Marc scrambled out of bed. He packed all his clothes into his suitcase. Then he ran to the porch, his untied sandals flapping like stranded fish on the polished concrete. He chose the top step of the porch as his lookout post and for extra height he sat on his suitcase. Then he waited for his mother to open the gate and take him home.

‘Marc, staring at the gate won’t bring her back any sooner,’ Joyce called from the kitchen, ‘come inside and eat your breakfast.’

‘I want to go home.’ each word scaled the dry phlegm in his throat like a lizard scrambling up a dune.

‘Don’t worry, she will come to fetch you.’

‘When?’

‘Soon.’

That night Marc kneeled beside his bed and prayed. ‘Our father who art in heaven, please take me home. Yesterday I waited all day for you to send Mommy to fetch me, but she didn’t come. You must be very busy, but please, dear Jesus, please just take one minute to talk to Mommy. Tell her I am lonely. Tell her I love her. Thank you, dear Jesus. Amen.’ Marc slipped between the blankets, full of renewed hope.

His bare feet padded along a sandy footpath worn with the passage of a thousand other footsteps. It cut a straight line through the lush green meadows and disappeared into a foggy horizon. Then without warning the landscape turned into a ghostly swamp with wisps of grey mist swirling like cigarette smoke about his feet. The mist stole the sunlight, and everything became hazy. His legs grew heavy as his feet sucked deeper into the muddy molasses. Then the swamp spun around him, sucking him into a whirlpool of thick smog. He felt the wind brush his face as he fell through the cloud and into the ice-cold darkness. He thrashed like an upturned turtle trying to steady himself as he plummeted into the abyss. Marc grabbed out in the inky black void seeking a hold, anything to stop the terrifying fall. He called out to his mother, ‘Mommy, Mommy, Mommy please help me.’

‘Markey, Markey, where are you?’ her voice echoed from above the turmoil, ‘what are you doing in there? Where are you going?’

Marc tried to scream but his voice dissolved into the darkness. Then the air turned to water and his breath lay captive in his chest. The suffocating liquid filled his lungs and his brain. He gave up and rolled onto his back and floated like a feather on a breeze. A pinpoint of light grew bigger and bigger until it transformed into a pathway of light. He saw his mother walking away. He cried out, but she kept walking towards a green gate. Marc sobbed in the darkness until a light came on and a woman's face penetrated his tortured dream.

'Markey, it's all right. It's only a dream. Go back to sleep.'

Eventually his sobbing faded, and his tears dried. Joyce got up and started to go back to her room.

'Auntie Joyce?'

Her hand hovered over the light switch, 'Yes, what is it?'

'Does Jesus fight with his wife?'

'Jesus doesn't have a wife.'

'Does he have children?'

She turned out the light, 'We are all God's children.'

Tears flooded his eyes, 'I am not God's child.'

She came and sat on the edge of his bed and stroked the back of his head, 'Don't cry, Markey. Don't cry, everything will be all right. I promise.'

'I pray every night, but God won't listen.'

'Don't cry.'

'Why won't he listen?' -he grabbed her hand- 'I want him to listen to me.'



‘God does everything for a reason. You must be patient, he will answer your prayers.’

‘I want-’

‘Good night, Markey. Go to sleep now.’

E

Sleep overtook him, and soon he walked barefoot along the same sandy footpath worn with the passage of a thousand other footsteps. The one that cut like a knife through the green meadow.

Two weeks later his father came to fetch him. The family were once again reunited in love and apprehension.

## Alf

Marc gazed out of the side window of his father's old car, reliving memories of a happy day out with his family. He smiled at his reflection in the glass and then breathed on the window and drew a daisy in the condensation.

'Stop this car.' His mother's words sliced through his daydream. Marc swiped his hand across the window, transforming the foggy flower into a smudge of used vapor.

'Stop this car' -Lori drummed her fists on Alf's shoulder- 'I want to get out.' Her face flushed scarlet and tears streamed from behind her cats-eyes spectacles.

'Shut up.'

'I said stop this car,' she shouted and jerked the door handle. The sudden melee of wind and noise rushed into the car like a tornado.

Blood drained from Marc's face. 'No Mommy, no.'

'Stop this car now, or I'll jump out' -she stuck her leg out of the open door- 'Stop this effing car.'

Marc saw the street rushing by through the open door. 'No Mommy, no. Please don't. Please.'

Alf grabbed her arm. 'Don't be stupid.'

'Let go of my arm, you're hurting me.'

'Close the door.' The strength of his grip made deep white depressions on Lori's bare arm.

She tried to shake free. 'Let me go.'

Raw fear ripped through Marc. His heart pounded hard in his chest. He grabbed his mother's blouse. 'No, no, no.'

The rushing wind and the hum of the tires on the uneven tarmac amplified their cries and somehow intensified the madness in that car. Alf turned, his face red from frustration and anger. 'Shut up. All of you just shut up.'

'Daddy, please stop the car,' Marc shouted.

The small car rocked and weaved across the road as Lori fought to free herself and Alf tried to keep control.

'Stop this car. Dammit. I want to get out.'

Alf realised that there was no sense in continuing. He pulled over and cut the engine.

Lori jerked her arm free and scrambled out of the car. She slammed the door and without looking back, she ran down the street.

Alf held the cold steering wheel of the immobile car with both his hands. He stared at the spot where the road merged with the grey fog on the horizon. The place where she disappeared from view.

He turned to look at the empty seat next to him and the closed door. In that moment, he realised that she would not come back. He slumped onto the steering wheel and relinquished all control. Weariness rose like a flood and it battered him like waves driven against a pier by a storm wind. 'I need a drink.'

Marc sat motionless on the back seat. Distress crushed his gut like a python suffocating its prey. Finality and futility permeated the small car like a vile odour. She was gone, and all that was left was an empty seat in a stationary car. Marc felt as if his entire body was sedated, hovering between light and dark and his brain disconnected from reality. It was a familiar numbness that bore into the deepest recesses of his being.

Alf felt weary. The altercation drained him. He felt confused, sad, and dejected. He thought of running after her, to beg her forgiveness, but instead he sighed, shut the door and drove home.

The house was dark, and empty. As Alf pushed the door and stepped over the threshold, he felt the damp breath of desolation waft through the house. Her perfume hung in the air. He searched every room, but she was not there.

'Go to your room and pack your suitcases.'

The boys did as they were told. Alf went to the kitchen and he poured himself a stiff brandy. By the time the boys came back into the kitchen, Alf lay slouched over the table, a half empty bottle at his elbow. He looked up at the four pathetic eyes staring at him from the far end of the table. He cursed and stood up. The abrupt movement sent his chair clattering across the small kitchen. His body swayed for a moment and when he found his balance he lurched toward the door. Then he remembered the boys. He turned and tried to focus on them. 'Come.'

'Where are we going?' Clive asked.

'Dunno.'

'Daddy, shouldn't we wait for Mommy?' Marc asked.

‘What?’

‘Let’s wait for Mommy?’

‘Mommy left. Ran away. She’s not coming back.’

Alf tried to put his hand in his pocket, but the brandy robbed him of all coordination. ‘Where are my keys?’

‘Can’t we wait for Mommy?’

‘No. Mommy’s gone. Not coming back. Ran away. Dunno why.’

He found his keys and leaning on the walls for support, he made his way to the front door. ‘Come.’

Marc took his brother’s hand and followed his father to the car. Alf drove around the town centre without a destination in mind. His driving was erratic, swerving across the road and then back again. Marc curled up on the back seat and fell asleep. He awoke to the sound of shouting.

‘You’re drunk.’ A familiar voice called from outside the car.

Marc saw the shadow of his father on the drive, and realised they were at his grandmothers. ‘I’ve had a few, but I’m not drunk.’ Alf spread his arms and lifted his right leg. ‘Look I can stand on one leg.’ Then he lost his balance and fell against the car.

‘You’re drunk,’ Mary repeated, ‘where are the boys?’

Alf pointed towards the rear window with a shaky finger, ‘Boys here.’

‘How dare you drive with the kids in the state you are in?’

‘Not drunk. Only a few-’

‘Where’s Lori?’

'Lori gone. Ran away. Dunno why.'

Mary opened the door and ushered the boys out of the car. 'Thank God you are safe. You better come inside.'

Clive took his grandmother's hand. 'Gran, I'm tired.'

'Go to the spare room and get into bed. I will come soon.'

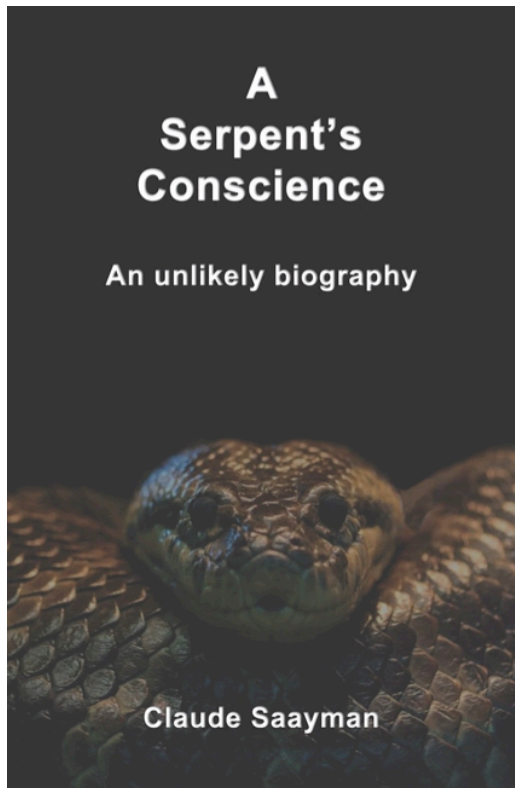
Alf took the suitcases out of the boot and staggered toward the front door. Mary grabbed his shirt. 'You are not coming into my house in that state.'

He threw the suitcases on the ground and stumbled back to his car. He cursed the key that would not fit in the ignition lock. After several attempts the car spluttered to life and roared away in a cloud of tire smoke and dust.

### E

Lori thought that she had finally escaped the molasses of married life, that she was free of the constant struggle to make ends meet, free of the constant arguing. But she did not realise that to be really free, a woman must break the bond she has with her children. The struggle between freedom and her children ripped her heart in two and spilled her blood on an uncertain future. And Alf? She loved him deeply, but she wanted more. She needed more, but she was not sure exactly what she wanted more of.

She went back to her mother. Mothers always have the answers.



*An inebriated narrator stands before a death certificate admits to killing someone. He shared the hell that was the deceased's life and suffering, and in a moment of compassion and guilt, he decides to tell Marc's unlikely story.*

## **A Serpent's Conscience**

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