

THE
PHOENIX
THE SHOOTER & THE SNAKE



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The Phoenix, The Shooter and The Snake

(Based on a true story of Betrayal, Hypergamy and Rebirth)

Hypergamy:

A term in social science used to refer to the phenomenon of women prioritizing wealth or social status in their selection of a mate.

In this memoir I use this term loosely to describe a heterosexual woman's tendency to lose attraction for any man that she perceives as having lower value (in the sexual market place) than herself.

Chapter 1 – Dragons and Snakes

As she walks towards him with a sexy feline type stride, just like a model on a catwalk, he thinks to himself: *“My god she’s the most beautiful woman in the world. We’ve been married for over a decade and I’m falling in love all over again.”*

It would seem that there is nothing that could tear them apart...

It was a coldish winter evening but nobody seemed to care much for the unpleasant breeze in the air. Good company and enough money to enjoy the yearly beer festival at their local pub was more than enough to mitigate any dreariness the weather could dish up.

It had been a long journey for the two lovers. Amongst other things, Ethan and Lisa recently immigrated and finally found themselves building relationships with new friends in a foreign country. It was a great relief for the both of them but especially for Lisa who fell at the extreme end of the continuum of extroversion. The new season had blown in an array of interesting people and Lisa was ecstatically floating between the air pockets of fresh connections... an exciting change of scenery after their one year journey through the dry, motionless desert of solitude. Lisa was absolutely in her element. Utter euphoria coursed through her veins as she conversed and danced and flirted.

Ethan never minded much when Lisa would “strut her stuff” for the world to see. He had learned the hard way that the fruits stemmed from the barren emotion of jealousy were nothing but black and bitter. He also accepted that she was a “born-performer” and he would never ask her to be something that she was not. However that night was different. The flirtatiousness had somehow surpassed some unspoken boundary of their marital contract. It was difficult to put his finger on why her level of undirected exhilaration could be damaging to their relationship until... out of the corner of his eye he caught a glance of the dragon...

Ryan was safe to say one of the coolest guys they had ever met. Successful in pretty much all areas of life, he came across as a confident middle aged man who struck you as the type of person that had it all figured out.

The first encounter between Ethan and Ryan was like magic. As if twins separated at birth were suddenly reunited after about half a century, they connected instantly and within seconds realized that a lasting friendship had been forged... a rare occasion indeed and not to be taken for granted by either of them. In the two years that followed they strengthened their bond by engaging in various philosophical discussions ranging from religion to science. It was a ‘dream come true’ for Ethan who was much more of an introvert and preferred to spend his energy on a few individuals at a time rather than partying in large crowds. A strong brotherhood had been welded by the universe and Ryan now formed part of the handful of close friends that Ethan considered his family. *“What a blessing this is!”* Ethan thought.

And then... in the blink of an eye... trust is broken. In his peripheral vision Ethan notices the typical mannerisms of a girl flirting with a boy. But the girl is his wife and the boy is Ryan. It’s difficult for Ethan to explain to people who have never gone through trauma how exactly a person can sometimes predict a relationship catastrophe, ages before it actually occurs. But this is something Ethan had always been quite good at: connecting the dots and avoiding train-wrecks. This useful cognitive ability is sadly a symptom of hyper-vigilance... a “gift” accredited to mangled relationship model demonstrated to him by his parents. However; this time he was unable to redirect the storming ‘locomotive of lust’ away from the foundations of trust in his marriage. As if in slow motion, Ethan witnesses the crash:

She smiles and flirts and stands over Ryan like a prize to be won. His left hand moves out towards her and finds its place on her right thigh. And then; nothing! *“She allowed it?”* Ethan whispers to himself with a newly found fracture in his heart. Painful memories of past betrayals by past girlfriends come rushing in but are instantly replaced by strategic planning on how to divert this destructive force from running over the lives of everyone connected to the two “innocent” flirts. Reason kicks in and the strategizing begins. Ethan’s focus turns to what he perceives is the true problem. His attention has been completely captured by the dragon while in the clear daylight, his real enemy slithers past him without him taking the slightest bit of notice. A misguided voice rises up deep within Ethan’s soul exclaiming; *“You can’t lose your wife to the dragon.... you need to become a dragon tamer before it’s too late.”*

It was as if Ethan could physically feel the sword of betrayal puncture his heart but there was no time to enter into a victim type frame of mind. He knew he had to act wisely. Anger would only have exacerbated the situation and blame had proven futile in the past. A Buddhist-like compassion and understanding was the first lens through which he decided to look and a stoic approach to this potential cluster-fuck seemed like the best way out of trouble at the time.

Chapter 2 – Natasha is born

“If we go down then we go down together. It’s you and me against the world, babe.” Ethan sang their song as he looked into Lisa’s eyes and knew that they were able to surmount any obstacle...

*The Romeo and Juliet effect: the tendency of relationship partners, usually adolescents, to feel greater affection for their partners when they perceive others (e.g., parents) to be interfering with the relationship.

If there were ever to be referred to one specific event that initiated 'the affair', it would be the evening that Natasha was born... an innocent pebble of playfulness cast into a lake of friendship, creating unforeseen ripple effects and a devastating tear between this inseparable pair of lovers. 'Twas an epic night of bliss and fun indeed; yet unfortunately it also turned out to be a social gathering where the seeds of mistrust would be sown. And the sprouting of sorrows was soon to follow. It will forever go down in history as 'Russian Night'...

Ethan and Lisa had by now managed to accumulate a crew of new mutual friends from various countries; a group of expats who also had the strong need to fit in and form social bonds in a new strange land. The difficulty of slotting into the local culture can be quite daunting but Ethan and Lisa could not complain by any means. They found themselves surrounded by great company more often than not. Laughing uncontrollably was almost guaranteed when getting together at the local bar where the group of "amigos" would meet up at least once a week and share an abundance of jokes, the hottest new gossip as well as relevant philosophical musings. It was heaven for both Ethan and Lisa because they were accepted, understood and loved by these seemingly amazing people from random corners of the globe. And then the invites started going out. It was to be the dress-up party of the year. The theme: Russia. In short... absolutely fabulous! Just as Ethan and Lisa thought that this Eastern European celebration couldn't get any better, the hosts introduced an interactive game where all the guests needed to act out specific roles and had to pretend to be arbitrary characters in a murder mystery of some sorts. In retrospect it was hard for Ethan to believe that the role of Natasha (a dirty Russian prostitute) had been assigned to Lisa by mere coincidence. The hosts must have known that she would flourish in making this character come to life... and that she did. As she wandered around pouting her lips and shaking her hips she soon became the life of the party. One person especially took notice of Natasha's flirtatious and debauchorous nature. As she played the game and took the spotlight it was clear to see that Ryan was hooked. It was for him as if a long lost forbidden fantasy had come to life in front of his very eyes and because of the playful nature of the event, none of the guests would come to notice anything awry. Yet Ethan had seen this type of "innocent" exchange of sexual teasing before, and even though inebriated well beyond the point of legal driving intoxication level, his oversensitivity to these non-verbal cues over-rode his state of drunkenness. Natasha was hot. Screaming hot! And any man that denied not having felt the burn of her glowing sexuality was either homosexual or not a target of hers. *"What a lucky guy I used to be"*, Ethan thought: *"Lisa used to only look at me in that way"* But now Lisa had become Natasha. And Natasha had become everyone's girl. It was like heroin to both Lisa and Ryan. One could live out the cabaret dancing character she had always dreamed of playing in a Hollywood production. The other could live out a dark and forbidden fantasy possibly suppressed for years in his life of overwhelming responsibility and mundane routine.

What followed Russian Night were many more moments of "innocent" banter between Ryan and Natasha. He somehow seemed incapable of letting Natasha go. At every encounter he would seek an opportunity to throw coals on the fire in order to keep this Russian fantasy burning. For weeks on end this little whorish game continued in various controlled environments. And then one night at that yearly beer fest... after one too many... Ryan takes one step closer...

In an instant, verbal exchange transforms into physical touch. With the placement of Ryan's hand on Lisa's thigh one could almost physically hear the proverbial penny drop in Ethan's mind. *"Holy shit, I need to intervene,"* He thought to himself and started considering all possible approaches and outcomes...

He waits for her to return to the crowd of friends and finds a brief moment to talk to her alone: *"Babe, I think I want to go home and I think you need to come with me."* With the immediate confusion and resistance evinced in her eyes he realises that dragging her out of the bar kicking and screaming would only worsen things. History has shown that the Romeo and Juliet effect almost always has the opposite outcome than initially intended so he once again gives her the freedom she "deserves" and says goodbye with a light warning... the same warning he gave her about seven years ago when he saw her sexual attention drift a bit too far towards their good-looking Swedish friend: *"Be careful there, babe."*

It seems like an especially long walk home for Ethan tonight. A crack had appeared on the surface of the supposed unbreakable foundation of his marriage and he begins to wonder as he puffs out a sigh of gloom: *“Where do we go from here?”*

Chapter 3 – The sudden death of Natasha

Ethan rolls onto his right side for the twentieth time in search of a thought... any thought that could possibly calm the raging storm blasting through his mind. *"I can do this"*, he thinks. *"We can do this"*. The Buddhist-Mindfulness training begins to show gains as he drifts off into sleep only to be woken up by a half-inebriated wife climbing into bed whom he struggles not to judge for being, according to him, wilfully blind and selfish. In the past a massive fight would have erupted but they have learned their lesson by now. *"The time for teaching one another is not while drunk or hungry. Tomorrow we tackle this problem,"* he recites to himself. *"Sweet dreams my love"*, he whispers in her ear.

Morning arises and on the menu for the day is written and underlined: *Clear the air before lunch.* As they sit down by the bar area of the restaurant from which they had ordered beer the previous night, Ethan takes a deep breath and makes a point of speaking calmly while making sure that empathy is conveyed at all times. He knows from experience that this could go very wrong so he paces himself as he voices his frustration: *"Babe, I am going to explain to you how I feel about some things. These things that are not easy to talk about and it is necessary that we both remain aware of our emotional state in order to not have this turn into an unproductive fight where we cannot move forward with the conversation. You need to understand that this is the way I see it... By being so extremely flirtatious with my friends and..."* he pauses... *"by not changing your behaviour towards Ryan after he clearly made a move on you; I really feel that you have entered onto the continuum of infidelity. And the truth is that it hurt me. You hurt me."*

The surprise on Lisa's face is sincere and Ethan can tell that she is more or less oblivious to the intense sexual energy that she has been transmitting towards the male friends in the group. It is as if she is immediately exonerated by her ignorance and rendered completely innocent. *"I don't mean to hurt you my love and I realise in hindsight that I have been pushing the boundaries too far lately. And you are right; this needs to stop."*

Ethan and Lisa manage to talk through their predicament for more than an hour without their emotions getting the best of them. It is clear to see from afar that these two star-crossed lovers have grown into rational minded adults. Rarely can couples so effortlessly relay their thoughts and feelings to one another without taking any offense. This truly beautiful moment of reconciliation could serve as valuable lecture material for any psychology couples therapy course. It is as if the night before never even happened. A verbal contract is put into effect and an agreement is reached quite rapidly. Lisa admits that pulling back a bit would be a good idea and Ethan sincerely just wants her to feel free and loved. The death certificate of Natasha is signed and there is nothing but rejoicing over the Russian whore's grave. In addition Lisa admits that she was getting bored with the act anyway and that Ryan would just have to get over it. Ethan and Lisa are back on track in the blink of an eye and once again this romantic duo has nothing to worry about. Just like that... poof! Fixed...

Chapter 4 – Chasm

"You are fucking this up marvellously!"

Lisa is startled by Ethan's sudden outburst at the table in the coffee shop that afternoon. He very rarely loses his cool in public. This type of dramatic display is something that he utterly despised of his parents' destructive relationship. They would often fight in public places and poignantly embarrass themselves as his father would throw his hands in the air like a child who lacked any conflict resolution abilities. It was always a strange sight for Ethan who noticed the clearly marked 'disarm button' on the bomb of bickering as the heated arguments escalated between his parents. But somehow his father had never learned the skill of redirecting a fiery debate away from detonation and guiding a disagreement toward peaceful common ground. Ethan had vowed to do things differently. He wanted to be a better husband and not repeat his dad's mistakes. But that day in the half-busy coffee shop he failed to maintain his usual composed self as his anger suddenly smacked away the stoic hand on the steering wheel of his emotions. The "mild" deceit from Lisa was enough to flip his switch of rage. Apart from lying, not many things get Ethan to the point of losing perspective and soiling his canvas of serenity with oozing sludge of rage.

He slams his fist on the table. His eyes radiate with immense anger and for a brief moment Lisa catches a glimpse of the bulldozing prick that Ethan could have become had he surrendered to the behaviours modelled by his parents. *"You are fucking! ..."* He pauses and notices himself gravitating towards a toxic mental state. The volume of his voice returns to an acceptable level as he restarts his initial statement: *"You are fucking this up marvellously. What happened last night is nothing other than deception. Deception! You agree? Yes?"* Lisa concurs with teary eyes but it is unclear whether her emotions are arising from a place of guilt, shame or fear.

"So let's recapitulate..." Ethan says with clenched fingers and an outstretched thumb as he starts counting through the past few months' events.

"First of all I was under the impression that we both agreed months ago that you were to pull back a bit in terms of your flirtatious behaviour especially in the presence of Ryan. "

"But I did!" Lisa interjects only to be silenced by Ethan.

"I know you have restrained yourself in certain contexts but let me finish... The past few months you were indeed more discrete most of the time and I thank you for that. It is, however, mind-blowing to me that you could be this oblivious to the sexual energy that you radiate when making certain movements, gestures and jokes in the presence of my male friends... Jesus Christ it's like you are deliberately trying to hurt me..."

As Ethan goes on to carefully retell the story from his little subjective corner of the universe he becomes increasingly frustrated with the fact that Lisa doesn't notice her constant pushing of boundaries and the proximity between her and Ryan that was ever dangerously tightening...

It was another evening of physical and emotional closeness between Lisa and Ryan as they laughed at one another's "innocent" sex jokes while sitting at arm's length away from each other. The final straw for Ethan was when she started telling the story about the outdoor female toilets they encountered in Belgium that required women to stand upright while urinating. As she stood over Ryan signalling towards her vagina and laughing uncontrollably she failed to notice the contemptuous look in Ethan's eyes. This was the type of look that was normally present in failing relationships. He had seen this near evil gaze arise many times before in the midst of his parents' immature fights. And he was not at all ignorant to the danger this type of look posed to a relationship. But he meant it. She caught his resentful stare just as he got up to say goodbye to all the friends at the table and she knew that Ethan was leaving because of something she had done, yet uncertain as to what exactly the problem was. She managed to catch him just before he rode off on his bicycle and was met with utter contempt. *"I am fucking done! I am done with you handling yourself in this manner. We have talked about this ad nauseam and I am done."* Ethan was not in the mood to discuss the matter outside the same bar where Ryan initially made a move on Lisa and with a burdened heart he pedalled off home. Confused and confounded, Lisa returned to the party. Her non-verbal communication was crystal clear; all was not well and when her friends, Ryan included, inquired about her upset state she refrained from giving

too much detail. *"I am fine, it's fine. We are just working through something."* She left soon after and prepared herself for the imminent arguments that were to unfold as she got home. It took a discussion or two but within a few days they were close to their baseline interactions with one another. It would seem that Ethan and Lisa were indestructible and their resilience was surpassed by none.

But then... a snakebite...

The very next Saturday a pale skinned serpent would peek through all the tangled uncertainties of the past few months. With lightning speed it would strike the hand of trust (one of the most treasured core values in their relationship). Lisa would not realise this at the time but the venom would slowly start to poison their marriage and start turning her heart into stone from the inside out. A tiny crack would appear deep within the foundation of their supposed unbreakable trust... a crack that would soon widen into an unscalable chasm. She would never truly understand how this specific event could have such detrimental effects on their relationship. She would merely shrug her shoulders at the whispering voice of the snake slowly appearing behind her:

"Why is Ethan so sensitive to a little white lie?"

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