



DON'T CALL IT A  
COMEBACK

D E R I C K L U G O

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BY DERICK LUGO

Biggie, I was almost killed by a snake!" I cry out as I reach our campsite with a camp towel and soap in hand.

I just finished giving myself a birdbath at a stream. As I walk back to my tent, I'm faced with my first real-life snake encounter and I'm all worked up.

"What's going on, Fabulous?" Big Foot says with a laugh.

"A snake just jumped out at me. I'm half-naked here. I could have died," I realize this sounds like an exaggeration, still, I felt threatened, sort of.

"What did it look like?"

"What? What do you mean, man? It was a snake! It hissed and took a deadly strike."

"No, what color?" he continues to laugh at my near-death experience.

"I don't know, I think it had yellow and dark green stripes, and maybe I spotted red spots, from its victim's blood. Why?"

"Ha, it's a garter snake. They're harmless. Is it close?" he asks with some excitement.

"Huh, a gardener snake? Yeah, it's right there," I point in the direction I came from, a couple of yards from camp.

"A garter snake, Fabulous. Let's get it. Come on I may need help," he says, then runs toward it.

"What? Wait," I groan, toss my towel and soap in my tent, put a shirt

on, and then reluctantly follow the psycho serpent hunter.

“I used to catch garter snakes all the time when I was a kid. Where did you see it?”

He moves to where I point and quickly finds the killer snake. I stand back, refusing to get any closer.

He has lost his mind. He’s on his own.

Big Foot gently lifts the snake, holding the front with a stick, its tail with his hand, and then walks it back into camp.

“I don’t think this is a good idea. Careful, its fangs just missed my neck. Ok, that didn’t happen but still.” I say dubiously.

“Look how beautiful it is, Mr. Fabulous. Come touch it,” Big Foot says as he brings it closer to my face.

I back away and a schoolgirl shriek threatens to escape from me, it’s all I can do to hold it back. Big Foot laughs at my refusal to have anything to do with what he claims to be a harmless creature.

“They aren’t poisonous. When I was a kid, we let them bite us for fun.”

This is his way of persuading me to touch the snake?

Apart from the pet in my childhood friend’s fish tank, I’ve never seen a snake this close up.

“Hey, look everyone, Biggie caught a snake,” I shout to the Moving Village and other campers nearby.

They come to see the deadly viper, including an 8-year-old girl named Erika, she’s here with her dad doing a section of the Appalachian Trail. She runs up to Big Foot and without hesitation she reaches out and touches the snake.

Oh man, I guess if she’s brave enough. Nah, never mind.

As the little girl continues to pet the venomous creature, she looks up at me.

“See, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” she says with a grin.

Is she mocking me?

“I’m not afraid. I just don’t know where that vermin has been. It could be carrying a disease.”

“He’s afraid, isn’t he?” she says to Big Foot.

This girl IS mocking me!

But, surely Big Foot has my back.

“He’s terrified,” he says, as he jerks the snake toward me.

“What the. I’m not. AAAAH!” I choke before I can finish my defensive statement.

“He sounds scared,” she adds.

Little girl, I’m not a punk.

I reach out to the snake for a quick touch. I’m surprised at its soft, smooth skin.

Incredible.

I stick my tongue out at the girl, then Big Foot jerks the snake in my direction as if to toss it on me. I leap backward, my reflex geared by the need to survive.

“Whoa-ha! Fudge, not cool, not cool. Maybe you should put it back?” I wave my arms as if doing the doggy paddle.

“All right, all right, Fab.”

“Not there! Go walk a quarter mile or so, then free it,” I demand.

Big Foot walks a few feet beyond our camp and gently releases the snake.

“See, they’re harmless,” taunts the cheeky girl.

“Listen,” I cup my hand behind my ear. “I think I hear your dad calling you.”

She skips away, “Whatever, Scaredy Cat.”

“I’m not a scaredy-cat!” I begin to yell after her but end it with a whisper to myself.

“Snake safely back and zero hikers dead,” Big Foot says as he emerges from the woods.

“Really? Did you see it slither away or is it lurking? You know we could be near its feeding ground.”

“Haha. It’s not like that with garter snakes. We’re fine, I promise.”

“Ok. I can’t believe I touched a snake.” I say amazed.

“You really are one of dem city folks, huh Fabulous? Gotta love it,” Big Foot says, smacking, then squeezing my shoulder, as we join the others at a freshly lit fire.

“Ouch, watch it, Lurch! You’ve got the strength of Lennie Small from Of Mice and Men,” I feign discomfort.

He laughs.

“How are you so gentle with wildlife, yet so rough with me, huh?”

He shrugs his shoulder and says, “I don’t know. You think there’s something to it?”

I look up at him and a smile joined by a burst of laughter pours out of him. I can never resist laughing along his Herman Munster guffawing.

Morning arrives and as I’m breaking down my tent, I hear, “Mr. Fabulous, I’m glad you’re still here.”

I turn and see Erika’s dad, Mark walking toward me. He’s extremely happy to see me or is it my hair?

He’s a fan of Rastafarianism and my dreadlocks have him feeling like he’s closer to Jah (Rastafarianism for God) or maybe he thinks I have ganja?

Oh no, not again!

“Good morning,” I reply, hoping he doesn’t want to run his fingers

through my long locks.

“Would you mind if we take a picture with you?” he asks.

Alright, this is better than touching my hair.

“Sure, why not? I love photos, especially of myself,” I say with a big grin and what I’m hoping was a twinkle in my eye.

“Great! Ok, come, Erika,” he calls for his daughter to join in the selfie.

“Oh hi, Erika,” I say with feigned distaste.

“Look, there’s a snake behind you,” she teases.

“Hardy har har,” I roll my eyes. “Stop being a pain and get over here before I change my mind,” I add.

She laughs, skips in front of us, and poses with her index, middle and pinky finger up on each hand.

“What are you, a gangster?” I ask.

“Homie, I’m down,” she says without taking her eyes away from the camera.

“Who are you?” I’m amused.

Holding out his camera, Erika’s dad extends his arm in front of us.

“My wife is not going to believe that I met a Rastafarian!”

What, wait, I’m not a Rasta-

I start to turn my head to face him, but instead, I keep my pose toward the camera as he takes the picture. He checks the photo. Erika’s forehead is the only part of her that is visible.

“Oh, Erika is cut off. Let’s try again,” he says.

“Nah, I think it’s perfect!” I jest.

“That’s ‘cause I have more beauty in my hairline than you have in your entire face,” she snaps and begins to laugh.

Ouch!

I lean my head back and give her a wide-eyed look as if trying to recog-

nize a long-forgotten foe.

“Feeling the burn, aren’t ya,” she adds.

I don’t have skilled comebacks for 8-year olds, so I surrender and give her the win.

“It stings a bit,” I say in a low sorrow tone.

We laugh, but I secretly wonder if a garter snake bite would have been less painful than her verbal attacks.

Once again, we pose for photo. This time I pull my hair over the front of my shoulder, so they can be seen in the picture. I figure since no matter what I say to this guy, he’s going to tell his wife that I’m a Rasta, so I can at least help his story along by showing what I got.

Or is it because I’m vain?

“Thanks, good luck, and one love,” Mark says with a fist to his chest.

Did he just say one love?

I hold back a laugh.

“Yeah, same to you buddy,” I say, sounding more like a country bumpkin than a Rastaman.

Erika looks up at me and says, “You’re weird.”

“And so are you,” I retort with a smile.

She smiles back and nods with acknowledgment.

“Bye, Mr. Fabulous.”

“Bye, Erika.”

I watch them leave camp and I wonder how many people she has shaken with her sarcasm. I was once that kid. I smile at the thought. Although my comeback skills were lacking, I love a good verbal jousting.



**DERICK LUGO** had never hiked or camped a day in his life. This Brooklyn-born, New York City urbanite hopped a train to Georgia, grabbed a taxi at the station, and told the cab driver to drop him off at the beginning of the Appalachian Trail. Then he did as he has always done — put one foot in front of the other and never looked back.

After hiking for more than 2,000 miles, he now feels invincible and plans to cross the Sahara barefoot. (Not really, but when an ambitious spirit is successful, it will strive for even greater accomplishments.)

Derick is a professional speaker, inspiring many to step away from their comfort zone and pursue their dreams. He continues write articles for magazines, blogs on his website and is working on a new book.

You can buy his debut memoir, *The Unlikely Thru-Hiker* at: [www.dericklugo.com/product/book](http://www.dericklugo.com/product/book)

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