

# Della and Snake

by Dawn Stein

I have always been the kind of person who wonders about people and things, and I have some neighbors who have kept me pretty busy with plenty to wonder about. It's not real important how or where Snake and Della met, the main thing is they had been married nine years when I got to know them. At first, because of the way the world looks at things, they seemed an unlikely, funny couple. He was short, five feet or so, 125 pounds, while Della was five feet seven or so, and 207 pounds. You pictured them making love, and in your mind it was real funny, but you shouldn't do that — picturing stuff making love — real love is never funny.

Anyway, Snake was a feisty, loudmouthed, bragging, aggressive little man. Always trying to outtalk or outdo some taller man. But, Della loved him even beyond the love-is-blind thing. Anything Snake did was all right with Della. I mean even the way she cooked his meals; he had so many things he disliked, and his food had to be just right. I mean JUST RIGHT. He was the kind of man who even liked gravy on his lamb chops. Very few vegetables, hardly any fruit and all that. All of which made Della gain more weight, because, of course, she had to taste it to be sure it was just right. She could make homemade bread that would make you kill yourself. She did everything. Wash, cook, clean, garden, shop, chauffeur, watch football games, listen to him lie, pet, massage and make love too. Maybe more, you know, I don't know everything.

I know he was proud of Della. He was always bragging down there at the pool hall and at work about her, but he never told her, thinking just staying with her was enough. Well, after nine years, maybe he was right. Their marriage musta been strong, because they got over some real big hurdles, which made me wonder at the way it all turned out. Like one night I ran over to their house. They had a nice little house, sitting all by itself on a neat little lot, that they rented. Anyway, I went over there, and he was standing on a box directing her how to tie a rope over a beam so he could hang her. Shouting, "I am the Man, you gonna have to do what I say. I ain't taking no shit." Della was just a crying. She was trying to tie the rope like he was telling her. I told her later, "You are a fool. Big as you is, you gonna let that little man kill you? Help him kill you?" That's when I found out it wasn't the first time. Anyway, she jus said, "I don't think he was really gonna do it." And, smiling, went on about cooking him something special. I just really want you to know she thought he was special, that he had power, black and otherwise. Whatever he said, she believed him. I mean, that man had him a woman.

Now, there's always a little hell waiting around paradise, and Della's hell was that every once in a while Snake would hit her, abused her. It hurt and it didn't hurt. But, it seemed to do so much for him, being so small and all, hitting a woman so large, she never tried

to hit him back. He would tell everyone down at the pool hall and work (again), "I know I am boss." He pranced as he told them, his chest stuck out in pride, (he had a lot of that). He had whipped his woman, all 207 pounds of her. All those pounds that loved him. Then this thing happened that made me wonder at them, because they had been through such big things and this seemed little to me, you might say.

It was a day that Della had not been feeling well, maybe lost a baby or something almost as important; she was always trying to make one. Also her special cake for Snake had burned while she was trying to untangle something in the washing machine, and when she put the cake on the sink she burnt her hand, and in flinging her arm out she hit the filled dish drainer rack. It fell to the floor, and dishes and glass flew everywhere. She was barefoot and cut her foot tripping across the floor. She burst into loud, dreadful tears and ran into the hall past the sign that read GOD BLESS THIS HOME through the pink door she had painted because pink made her feel like a woman going into a romantic bedroom. She flung herself across the bed onto the spread she had crocheted painstakingly to laugh and love on. She cried herself to sleep.

When Snake came home, he did his lion's roar at the door, and receiving no answer he went through the house and found Della asleep and he got mad. He started stomping around and shouting at her about the dirt (there was no dirt), the filthy kitchen (just broken dishes, that's all), no dinner (well, there was none, but my lord), the messed up favorite cake (as if it was on purpose), and anything else his little mind could come up with. He never did ask her what was wrong. He kept shouting, "A man this and a man that."

Della swung her legs around and sat on the edge of the bed and tried to smile and explain. She was still trying to smile and explain when Snake came rushing up and slapped her twice. One way and then back the other. Her arm must have shot out in reflex. She caught him solid and he flew all the way across the room, through the door and hit the wall in the hall and blacked out. Della went and picked him up and placed him in bed. That Della was strong. When he woke up an hour or so later, he looked around him and cried.

"I can't never live with you no more. You always gonna think you bettern me. That's what you want, to be the man. Well, I ain't staying nowhere I can't be the man. You get yourself and your stuff together and get out of my house as soon as you get some money. I'm takin all we got now cause I done made it all while you sat there on your butt. You the man now, you can get you some more." Della reached for him, "Please Snake, please Daddy, I'm begging you not to leave." She stood there with tears pouring down. He left, leaving the door open so she could watch him leaving, wobbling away dragging that suitcase, taking the car. She finally shut the door and went to bed, for two weeks.

I tended her and checked on her, but she wouldn't eat nothing or talk, and usually she's a big talker. Time takes care of everything and time took care of her. Pretty soon she got up and went to find work.

She was still grieving, but with everything bad there's good, and she was losing weight like thunder. Snake had got him a room somewhere and was busy telling everybody everywhere that he done left Della. "Della didn't know how to treat a man," so he said and she would have to learn before he would set foot in that house again. But, every day when he came out of that door at work, lunch and quitting time, he seemed to be looking for somebody. Pretty soon, he would go to the windows and peer out all through the day, but nobody was there, least not Della. He let everybody know where he lived, but she didn't go there either.

There was a church social coming up, and I talked two days to get her to go and even helped her to buy some new things to wear that fit her. I can tell you honestly that Della at 135 pounds was a whole new better Della than she was at 207 pounds. She was good looking. She danced every dance once I got her started, and laughed and laughed and laughed with happiness. Snake wasn't there; he was probably at the pool hall bragging about his hold on her. There was a nice man there named Charles, and he took to Della like white on rice. Soon they was going out together, being seen a lot. Snake heard about it. He wanted to come around and save his ego at the same time, so he began to come around the house and tell her she had to move out, he needed a place. I know he wanted her to say "Come home, Snake" but she didn't. Instead she said, "Give me a month to see what I'm gonna do and how, then I be gone." He didn't really want that house, he wanted Della, but his pride and ego kept him from telling her. I don't really know what would have happened if he had told her, but anyway Charles told her to move in with him; he was buying his own house. She just said she would think about it.

One day Snake came by to check on his house and Charles was there. Snake said, blustering, "Well, I'm here now, and you better go. This is a husband talkin' to his wife and you oughta leave." Charles answered softly, "Well, Snake, I didn't come to see you at your invitation. I came to see Della at her invitation, so you can't tell me to go, only Della can do that." Snake said, taken aback, "This is my house. I say what goes on here and this is my wife." Della said softly, "This is the landlord's house and I been paying the rent, Snake, so it's not you house." She looked neat and clean and pretty, and you could smell the food cooking. Snake repeated, stubborn, "I want to talk to my wife. Charlie said, just as stubborn, "When she tells me to go, I will." Della said, "I invited him to supper, Snake. I can't tell my company to go." Snake said, "I'm your man, invite me to supper." Della said back, "No, you said you wasn't my man, that I was the man. Charlie don't think I'm a man."

Now, all the time I been knowing Della, she always said how Snake didn't remember no birthday presents or Valentine's Day or nothing. She always gave him things, but when Snake came back he was dressed up and had a bag of candy in his right hand and some flowers in his left hand. But he came in fussing, "Ain't you gonna offer me no dinner or cake or nothin? Are you just gonna give some to that Charles that don't want nothin but to go to bed with you? Then he

gonna be gone, just like he done all them other women I done heard of." Della jumped up and went to get some cake, and don't think Snake didn't take heart from that. "Sure," she said, "I got plenty of cake. You want some coffee?" Snake leaned back, smiling, "Yes, I would like some coffee too."

As he ate the cake Della was quiet, but he talked a lot about how well he was doing. "And I been thinking about a trip, like a vacation." Della sighed; he went on talking. "Maybe putting some money in this house to make it look a little better." Della looked around the room and nodded. He smiled and went on, "Might even go head and try to get one of my own." Della's eyes opened wide and she said, "It must be nice to own you own house." That encouraged him, his chest came out, and he decided to play his ace card and hit Della with something that would wake her up and make her realize she didn't want to lose him. "Della," he said, serious like in a new deep voice, as he wiped the last cake crumb from the corner of his mouth, "Della, we gonna have to do something now, or I'm going to get a divorce." The room was real quiet while Della stared at Snake, her man for so long. "You done found somebody else you love, Snake?"

He laughed. "No, I don't want none of these women that keep running after me. They worry me to death." He waited for her to cry out, "I don't want no divorce, Snake." But she didn't. She just sat there staring down at the floor, and pretty soon tears came slowly down her cheeks. Snake saw this and felt his point was won. He stood up and stuck out his chest, saying, "Well, Della, we can't go on like this. I'm a man." Della looked up and the tears stopped and dried. "I need a woman. And if it's gonna be you, then say so; if it ain't, then I better get on about my business and get my divorce." He waited a moment for her to say the word that would give him his old good life back, but there was only silence, Della looking at the floor again. He straightened up and looked around the home toward the bedroom, where he really wanted to go and lay his big pride down. He tried to think of a way to stretch his visit out, but had played his ace too soon, so he cleared his throat and gave himself the next invitation. "I'll be by in a few days to get your answer, and I'm gonna come with my bags, Della."

Della started crying, and he went to put his arms around her and rub her back. "Della, you know I'm your man, now act like you got some sense, girl, and cut out all this dating and stuff. You my wife and you lucky I didn't kick ass this day." She stepped back from his arms. He continued, "Go wash your face and go to bed; no more company tonight. I'll be back in a few days, Friday, with my bags and get you life back together again cause you acting like a fool." She let him kiss her and then led him to the door, and he left feeling good about being a man about the whole thing.

Della didn't sleep much that night and got up saying she might as well get this over with, and went downtown and got a lawyer and filed for a divorce, which takes 30 days in this town, then came back home and moved most of her stuff in my house. When Friday came she went over and sat on a chair right in front of the door and waited for

Snake. He came grinning in with his suitcase without knocking, and she handed him the papers saying, "This what you want, Snake. If you want it, it must be right. But, I like married life, so I'm gonna be marrying up with Charles when this is final. I done moved, so here is your house, now I'll be going." He cussed her again, but didn't try to hit her, and he told her, "I don't want this house; ain't nothin in it." She left first, then he did, and the next day she moved all her stuff back in it.

She was true to her word. When the divorce was final, the marriage plans were made. I wondered about all that, so I ask her, "Don't you think you rushin into one marriage after another?" She always takes her time to answer. "No," she said, "I really done learned a lot in these few months when I been working on a job and workin this stuff out with Snake. I know about cookin and not havin your own money or waiting for somebody to bring you some, and sleepin alone, or with a husband. My life ain't never gonna be like it was before, ever again. But I like havin a husband, I want a man of my own." So the marriage plans went on.

I was sitting at home sewing and wondering about people when about two days before the little wedding, Della came running and screaming over to my house, tears streaming down, she was what you call hysterical. She couldn't say a word, just screaming, "Snake," so I followed her over to her house. Snake was hanging from that same rafter he was always going to hang Della from; looked like he had kicked the chair over. Me, I believe it was an accident and that chair fell over. I think he was trying to fix it so Della would catch him in time to stop him and realize she loved him, or he was fixin it for her and the chair fell over. Anyway, he was hanging there dead. I took her home and called Charles, and he took care of everything, like a man. She didn't have to do anything except sign some papers for the insurance. She wanted to put the wedding off, but Charles wouldn't have none of that. And all those arrangements made too.

They got married, and she moved into her new home. It's been a year or so now, and they seem happy and peaceful, and Della is gainin' her weight back, up to 200 pounds and just as happy as she can be. Sometimes when she gets to thinking about Snake, she says "I still believe if I had been there, he wouldn't have done that. He would have used me instead, and we'd all be alive today." I tell her, "Better for that fool to accidentally kill hisself like a fool than for you to be a fool and let him kill you." Sometimes I wonder about Della.