

Transcript

Welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great.

I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's story is for advanced learners. The name of the story is *What Makes a Snake*. You can find a transcript of the episode at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/MakeASnake. That's EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/MakeASnake. There, you can also download the episode as a PDF.

A content warning for this episode: this story contains rude language, sexual harassment and bullying. It is not suitable for children.

Today's story is what happened when I tried to write a story that uses lots of business vocabulary. In business, people often talk about 'buzzwords', which are words then become popular and then get used so much that they start to lose their meaning. I decided to make fun of buzzwords in this story, but then the story ended up being a lot more serious than I expected – as you can probably tell from the warning! Anyway, this is a long story, so let's get right into the vocabulary explanations.

Synergy is when two groups working together is more powerful than the two groups working separately. 'Synergy' has become a big buzzword in business, basically a word that everyone likes to say that doesn't mean very much. When two businesses working together produce good work, you could say they have good synergy.

A **line manager** is the manager who is directly above an employee in a company. If you work in a big company, there will be the big boss who runs the whole company, and then the little boss, the person directly above you, who is your line manager. So for most people, their line manager is usually their favourite or least favourite person at work, depending on said line manager's personality!

When you **touch base** with someone, you have a short conversation with them to check how a project is going. In business, people often touch base via email or short meetings. If you don't touch base with someone very often, you might think the project is going really well when it isn't, for example.

Drill down means to go into more detail about something. Imagine you're drilling into the ground to find a deeper layer of earth beneath. You might drill down on a website to find a specific piece of information, by clicking through lots of pages. Or you might drill down in a meeting by asking lots of questions and figuring out solutions to problems together.

A **filing cabinet** is a large grey box that you use to store documents. Filing cabinets are traditionally very heavy, and you pull out a big drawer with lots of folders hanging vertically from it. There are labels on the folders to tell you what's in them, and they're usually organised alphabetically. In the past, filing cabinets were a very efficient and important way of sorting documents. These days, many documents have gone digital, so filing cabinets are less important, although you still see them in a lot of offices.

A **memo** is a short note or message that is sent in a business context. There is also the idiom '**get the memo**', which means receiving a piece of information. Usually, it is to do with someone *not* getting the memo. For example, if there is a plan in the office that on Friday everyone will dress up as dinosaurs to raise money for charity, and on Friday Wendy comes in dressed as normal, then you could say she didn't get the memo about dressing up as dinosaurs. If you don't get the memo and everyone else does, it can be quite embarrassing!

When someone is **squeezed out**, they are pushed out of their position through intense pressure. For example, instead of firing someone, a company might squeeze out an employee by putting lots of pressure on them until they quit. Or if you're applying for a competitive job, you might squeeze out one of the other candidates by being really mean to them.

Minutes are a record of a meeting. Usually, when a company holds a meeting, one person takes the minutes. They write down what people said, what decisions were made and so on. Minute-taking is a very important job that is unfortunately often done badly. Well-written minutes can be very useful to look at later on to remind yourself of what happened in a meeting.

Dread is a feeling of intense fear and anxiety. When you feel dread, you know something horrible is going to happen. Even if you don't know exactly what will happen, you dread it, and it feels like a monster is eating away at your insides.

When you **scroll** on a computer, you move the screen up or down. On phones, you scroll by swiping your thumb or finger against the screen. On a computer, you scroll either by swiping your finger along a trackpad, or by using a wheel on a mouse. If a page is very long, you will have to scroll for a long time to reach the bottom.

Piss is the yellow liquid that we all make. 'Piss' is quite a rude word for this – we usually call it pee. When we need to get rid of pee, we go to the toilet. We can say we are 'going for a piss'. The formal name for piss and pee is 'urine'.

A **urinal** is similar to a toilet, but you can only piss in it. You can sit down on a toilet, but you can only use urinals standing up. So urinals are usually only found in men's toilets.

Sexual harassment is inappropriate sexual behaviour, usually in the workplace. For example, if you flirt with a colleague all the time and the colleague doesn't like, that's sexual harassment, and they could complain about it. Sexual harassment can become a serious problem in workplaces if nobody calls it out, if nobody discusses it. 'Harassment' more generally means bullying or trying to hurt someone.

OK, so listen and enjoy!

What Makes a Snake

Sam worked in marketing, and like most people who worked in marketing, he hated his job. At Corps Incorporated, a company which worked only on the most ridiculous marketing campaigns, he worked in the most ridiculous department: the **'synergy snakes'**.

All the departments at Corps Incorporated followed a similar theme: the publicity pigs, the management monkeys, the technology tigers, the strategy sharks... It was quite a risky naming system, but fortunately, all of the publicity pigs were fit and healthy, there weren't any black or Asian employees in the management monkeys or technology tigers, and the strategy sharks had never bitten anyone's legs off. So far.

Sam very much did not feel like a 'synergy snake'. He'd heard the name was chosen years ago, when the original team worked together like a 'family' and were the 'living face' of the company. And as exciting as that may sound to someone fresh out of business school, 'synergy' really just meant reading boring emails full of spelling mistakes and answering phone calls from your boss at 5am.

Still, as long as synergy didn't mean 'getting on with your colleagues', Sam was safe. If the rest of the team were snakes, he was a cardboard tube with eyes and a tongue painted on. He spent the first few months at the company feeling like he had just walked in on the

birthday party of someone he didn't know – every time he tried to make a funny comment or give an opinion, his coworkers looked at him like he had just sneezed on their salad.

Things only got worse at the annual Christmas party, when Sam made a joke to his boss Mr Krakow about their latest marketing campaign, and his boss looked at him strangely and replied, 'I don't see how that's funny. Dog make-up is a very important new industry, Sam. If you were a dog, I'd put make-up on you,' and then all the people around him sniggered. Sam was so embarrassed that he went and ate five slices of snake-shaped cake, not knowing it was filled with champagne cream. A few minutes later, his dinner of caviar pizza promptly decided that, while it had been nice to visit, it wanted to live outside of Sam's stomach rather than inside.

As Sam watched a mixture of food and blood disappear into the toilet, he realised something.

Snakes weren't into synergy. Snakes, real snakes, were cold-blooded killers. Snakes worked alone. So why not be the most snake-like of all?

When he came back to work in the new year, Sam walked into the office, looked at no-one, greeted no-one, and slid straight into his chair. His heart beat like a teenager smoking their first cigarette. He was sure that, at any moment, his line manager Wendy would come and have a 'tough chat' with him. 'A hello costs you nothing' was one of her favourite phrases, and last year they'd started doing a 'snake dance' before starting work each day.

But Wendy didn't talk to him. She walked straight past his desk. In fact, as long as he avoided making eye contact and saying hello, everyone more or less ignored him.

That was the best and worst day of Sam's life, the day he realised that nobody cared about him. Perhaps he had embarrassed himself so much at the Christmas party that he had simply turned invisible. Or perhaps he was the only one in the department doing any actual work and everyone recognised that it was better to leave him alone while they talked about the latest Netflix series and did afternoon 'snake yoga'. It was a thrilling feeling: yes, he could get hit by a car and nobody would notice until he missed a deadline, but at the same time, *he didn't have to take part in their stupid games.*

But after several months, the joy of the discovery wore off. Sam was certainly more relaxed now that he didn't have to pretend to be a synergy snake, but it was like spraying a toilet with Febreze and saying you'd cleaned it. At the end of the day, the place was still full of shit.

One particular Monday, a few years later in June, Sam slid into his chair as usual and saw that he had an email from his boss, Mr Krakow. He signed the email with 'Crack', the name he forced them to call him. Mr Krakow was Polish, although you wouldn't know from his perfect English, packed with all the awful business terms that came in and out of fashion like jeans. Sam doubted Krakow was his real name, because it was like an English person being called 'Mr Bristol', or a French person called 'Mme Marseilles', but given their interaction at the Christmas party, he thought it was best not to say this.

The email was short:

Emergency stand-up today 9:30 in the Forest

-Crack

'Stand-up' was one of those fashionable new terms. Sam opened a file called 'Snake-to-English Dictionary' to remind himself what it was: a kind of meeting where they weren't allowed to sit down. Wonderful. The idea was that the meetings were short and happened every day, but Krakow called a stand-up whenever he felt like it, and sometimes he talked for forty minutes or more, until even the yoga lovers were falling over.

Even worse, it was in the 'forest', the synergy snakes' private meeting room. There were cartoons of long grass and snakes painted on the wall, like in a children's hospital, and the air conditioning was broken, making it a sweaty jungle in summer. Sam **sighed**, grabbed his iced coffee and entered the forest.

Unfortunately, he was five minutes early, and the only other person there was his line manager, Wendy.

'Ah, Sam. Perfect,' she said joylessly. 'Just the man I wanted to see. We need to **touch base** later, yeah? Have a look at your latest achievements. Won't take five minutes.'

In a few sentences, Wendy had displayed all of her worst habits: she spoke in a low, rough voice, presumably because she thought it made people take her more seriously, she used just as many business words as Krakow, and she lied constantly. But none of that bothered Sam. What shocked him was that she was talking directly to him. Usually, when one of his colleagues wanted to say something to him, they emailed it, even if they were only one desk over. This could only be bad news.

'I'm free after lunch,' said Sam, panicking. His diary for the day was completely empty, but he knew Wendy loved to have meetings before, during and after lunch.

'Perfect. Can we do it during lunch? I have a meeting with the sharks this afternoon, and we're going to be **drilling down**.'

Even worse. Sam would probably spill food on himself like an idiot, if his anxiety even allowed him to eat. Before he could even reply, Wendy said 'Great' and went to bother someone else.

Just then, Krakow walked in.

'Right guys, thank you for coming. Always a pleasure to touch base with you all.'

Everyone quickly stopped leaning against the wall as Krakow launched into a long speech about how they needed to keep their energy levels up – 'Remember, guys, you're the synergy snakes! Ssss!' He also mentioned the meeting with the sharks in the afternoon. 'We're going to drill down until we find diamonds, and then *keep on going!* Oh, and I'm touching base with the tigers this morning. So, uh, I won't be answering any emails today. If you need anything, just shout at me over lunch.'

Sam wondered how these people communicated with their families at home. Were their children allowed to talk to them outside of dinner time? Did they read them bedtime stories, or just put on a personal development podcast? Did they even have children, or pets, or friends?

Thankfully, the meeting only lasted twenty minutes, as people were passing out from the heat. Sam slid back to his computer and put his feet in the ice bath he hid under his desk.

Finally, he could get to work. He wrote responses to a few emails that were actually important, and then scheduled them to send later in the day. In his experience, the quicker you worked, the more work people gave you. And whenever he finished all his work, something uncomfortable happened: people started talking to him. It was like some kind of magic spell. As long as a cloud of business floated around him, he was left alone, but if he *actually* worked hard, then his colleagues, on some level, started to realise that they were doing nothing, and more and more ridiculous tasks were created to punish him.

So once that was out of the way, he opened YouTube and started watching cat videos. If anyone asked him what he was doing, he would call it research – 'Cat makeup is *definitely* the next big thing.'

After an hour of that, Sam worked on a report Wendy had sent him. It was on the 'efficiency of remote working', except from the tone of Wendy's email it was clear that he was meant to write about the *inefficiency* of remote working, so he'd written a long essay about

how remote working would cause people to spend too much time with their friends and family, rest well and, horror of all horrors, *show up to meetings in their pyjamas*. He'd actually finished it a few days ago, but he heard Wendy complaining about the pyjamas during the stand-up and made sure to emphasise that part. He sent it off, and a suspiciously short time later Wendy replied with, 'Very good. And I totally agree that pyjamas kill company culture.'

Sam yawned and wondered if the meeting later had been linked to the report. Either way, it was great timing to send it in now – remind Wendy how hard he worked just before talking to her. He saw that it was eleven, so he got up for his daily cup of tea with Reesha in the break room. She was one of the technology tigers, and one of the few people in the company whose brain hadn't melted into business-flavoured soup.

'I thought you were touching base with Krakow this morning,' Sam said, handing Reesha her tea. He had his own personal mug from home that he kept hidden in his desk. Once, he'd left his mug in the kitchen and someone had 'accidentally' broken it.

'Yes, well, *somebody* has to fix the coffee machine,' said Reesha, taking the last chocolate bourbon from a big box of biscuits.

Sam knew that she had been here all morning, reading her magazine and working away at the chocolate bourbons. Reesha was like a ghost. She had worked at the company for years, and people genuinely seemed to have forgotten she existed.

'Terrible thing, isn't it? I guess it didn't **get the memo**.'

'Poor thing,' she said, stroking the coffee machine like a dog. 'We're going to have to **squeeze it out**. But let's give it a chance. This is an amazing place to work, after all. It probably just got too excited and passed out, like at one of Krakow's stand-ups. It'll get the memo eventually.'

She sat down and returned to her magazine. Sam sat across from her and sipped his tea. They often sat in silence. It was nice after being in the main office full of chatting snakes and tigers. Sam considered telling Reesha about his meeting with Wendy, but he didn't see the point. It was probably nothing. And he didn't want to break the peace.

He finished his tea.

'See you later.'

'Oh, I don't know if I'll be around. I might have to drill down with my friend here.'

She pointed at the box of biscuits. He laughed and left.

After replying to some more emails, Sam went on his favourite website, a forum where people complained about their jobs. There was a thread from someone saying they had just been squeezed out of their company for stealing sheets of paper. It was ridiculous, really, because everyone took office supplies every now and then. The secret was not to get caught. But still, sheets of *paper*?

Sam was fortunate he had Reesha, who had taught him all her best tricks. When he'd started the job, he always offered to take **minutes** at the meetings, because that way he didn't have to say anything, but Reesha taught him a better technique: ask one question every fifteen minutes, something boring and technical, like a grammar mistake. It showed that you were paying attention and made you look like a team player, but didn't require you to actually think. Sam had done this for long enough that he barely had to say anything now.

He finished reading the thread about being squeezed out, then got up to go sort the **filling cabinet**. It was amazing how messy the others left it. There were already a few new documents: the minutes of that morning's stand-up, as well as a report from one of the pigs who had just got back from a business trip. Funny, Sam didn't remember anyone taking minutes that morning. As he picked up the folder to move it into the correct place, a folded piece of paper fell out.

Curious, he bent down to pick it up. There was an 'S' written on it, long and round like a snake. He blinked and looked around. Everything looked normal. His colleagues were sitting at their desks throwing a ball of paper to each other and shouting out ideas for the next company trip.

Sam turned back to the filing cabinet and unfolded the paper.

W is trying to squeeze you out.

He froze. His heart beat faster and faster, until his chest shook like a tower in an earthquake. He was far too young to be having heart problems, but Sam had never had much of a choice in these things. His head went foggy as he tried to figure out what this could mean.

'W' obviously meant 'Wendy', but why would she be trying to squeeze him out? Cold sweat ran down his forehead as he thought back over everything he'd done in the past week. He couldn't think of any mistakes he'd made, and he got the report in on time. So what was the problem?

But she *did* want to touch base with him. He took a deep breath and chewed on a nail. Wendy and Krakow were drilling down with the strategy sharks that afternoon. The sharks were a department Sam *really* didn't understand. They never left their offices, and at company parties they stood in a tight circle, drinking whiskey and vodka and laughing loudly at whispered jokes.

Could the meeting with the sharks be about cutting people out of the company? The whole reason Sam got the job originally was because the company had fired a bunch of people and then realised they needed more. It came to be known as 'the squeezing'. But everyone acted like it would never happen again – the company had lost a lot of money. Except maybe things had changed, and maybe now was not the time to be keeping to oneself.

He turned the paper over, looking for a sign of who'd written it, but there was nothing aside from the 'S'. With shaking hands, he put it in his pocket and returned to his desk.

He couldn't lose this job, he *couldn't*. When he'd started, he was several months behind on bills, and had a loan to pay off for the year he spent after his sick mother. He was only now starting to feel financially secure. And he was hardly going to get a good letter of reference from Wendy if she was the one squeezing him out.

He went to the kitchen to try and find Reesha, but she was gone. Not even her magazine remained. He tried to make a coffee, forgetting that the machine was broken, and it sprayed hot water in his face.

'Fuck!' cried Sam.

He dried his face with a dirty tea towel, ate ten biscuits and returned to his desk. He took some painkillers, bit the inside of his mouth and forced himself to think. The atmosphere in the room had definitely changed. Many more people were doing actual work than before. The word was spreading.

By the sounds of it, the strategy sharks meeting was going to be big. So that must be where they were going to officially decide who was getting fired. In that case, Wendy's meeting with Sam was probably to help her decide whether he should get squeezed out, or someone else. Their department was small, less than thirty people, so it was unlikely they were getting rid of many.

That meant Wendy hadn't made her final decision. Sam felt a small ray of hope. He had one chance left. What could he do to convince Wendy he should stay? Clearly, hard work wasn't enough. He couldn't rely on a good personal relationship with her, either.

'Everything alright here, Sammy? Say, why's your hair wet?'

Sam jumped. It was Eric, his least favourite colleague.

'I'm great,' he said drily. 'I ran my head under some cold water. It's a great way to boost your energy. You should try it.'

'Great tip, Sammy. But you still look a bit sad. Sure there's nothing wrong?'

'I left my oven on this morning,' said Sam, staring at his computer and hoping Eric would leave him alone.

'Making croissants? Well maybe you can *leave early* and turn it off.'

Sam looked up. Eric was leaning against his desk, smiling like a shark.

'I'm just saying. I don't think they'll need you in for the whole day.'

He gave a snake-like smile and left.

A cold, icy **dread** wrapped around Sam's stomach. He looked around the office. Everyone was glued to their computer screens. But several people looked up at him, and when they saw he was watching, guiltily returned to their computer.

They knew. They *all* knew. He was going to be squeezed out. All this time, he thought they had forgotten he existed. But at a time like this, there was nowhere to hide. And he was the obvious target, the snake without teeth.

Well, not if he had a say in it.

Sam typed in Wendy's email address into the search bar and read through all their communication from the past year. He had been thinking in terms of positives: what he could do to make Wendy like him. But maybe he needed to do the opposite. She would find something, some small mistake he made, and blow it up into something huge. He just had to figure out what that was and rewrite the story.

Most of the messages were useless. He drowned in a sea of meaningless words, and suddenly he didn't understand how *anything* happened in this company. He **scrolled** faster and faster, holding the mouse so tightly his hand hurt. Stand-ups, sit-downs, drill-downs, sharks, snakes, wolves, crap, crap, crap, crap –

There. An email from six months ago. He almost missed it in his panic, but then he saw the words 'remote meeting' and scrolled back.

Six months ago, Wendy had asked him to join a remote meeting with their branch in America. They had identical copies of all the departments – the pigs, the tigers, the snakes – and to make international meetings 'easier', they were supposed to wear little hats that represented each of their departments. Sam was annoyed enough at having to stay until 8pm to join the meeting, so he refused to wear the snake hat, which gave him a headache, anyway. He had expected to be the only person from their branch of the company, but to his surprise, Wendy was there as well. She kept her camera and microphone off, watching him silently, and he only noticed her in the list of attendees halfway through. He considered putting the hat on, but nobody else had commented on it, so he didn't.

And now, that stupid little cardboard hat haunted him. He imagined Wendy speaking through it: *Thing is, Ssssam, you're jussst not a team player. Ssssometimes, we all have to do things we don't want to do, right? That'sss jussst life. It's only a hat, I know. But that'sss the point. If you won't wear a hat for the company, can we really trussst you to do the work?*

She would then say that one of the American managers complained about him not wearing it. Maybe he would even join their meeting remotely. That would be it. That would be enough to squeeze him out.

But what good was knowing that? He couldn't go back in time and put that stupid hat on. He needed something active, something that proved he *was* a team player, or at least made someone else look worse than him.

He took a big drink of his tea. Somehow, it tasted of cheap champagne. He looked around the room and examined each of his colleagues. Most had never been horrible to him, but they had no reason to like him, either. If he tried to get rid of someone who didn't deserve it, it would paint a target on his back, and Wendy would find another way to squeeze him out. No, he needed to choose someone who everyone hated.

He looked at Eric. The tall, green-eyed man was more like a model than an office worker, and he always wore tight suits that showed off how much he went to the gym. He spent the day walking around, drinking endless cups of coffee, making jokes and going to whatever meetings he could. He was one of those people who seemed to think work was just some big social club, but he was very popular with Wendy, so Sam had to keep his hatred of him secret.

Eric was the only person who Sam's magic didn't work on. Whenever they were alone in a room together, Eric's eyes shone like freshly-cut grass and he made comments that were so crazy nobody would ever believe them. Things like, 'You should go on a diet, Sammy. Your keyboard smells like butter,' or, 'I'm going to sleep with Wendy this weekend. If you lick the bottom of my shoes, I might let you watch.' Then, before Sam could reply, he left.

Sam tried his best to get Eric to ignore him, but it didn't work. Reesha had warned him that there was always at least one person who 'the magic' didn't work on. When Sam had asked what happened to the one in her department, she just smiled and said, 'If I tell you, I'll have to kill you.' So Sam had learned to avoid Eric, and tried to think about him as little as possible.

In truth, it had all started at that damn Christmas party, the one where Sam had embarrassed himself. Before the incident with the cake, Sam had watched as the strategy sharks invited Eric into their circle and fed him glass after glass of whiskey. He felt bitter and angry at men like Eric who could go around stepping on people's necks and get praised for it.

A while later, Sam went to the toilet. As he stood at the **urinal**, Eric came in.

'Ah, it's the new boy, Ssammy.'

There were five urinals, but Eric chose the one right next to Sam. And then, to Sam's horror, Eric looked down at his penis and laughed.

'Some snake you are. More like a worm.'

Sam went red. It was like being in school again. He tried to form a reply, but this was just after he had eaten his fifth slice of champagne-filled cake.

'Go on then,' said Eric. '**Piss**. Or am I making you nervous?'

Sam started to sweat. Now that Eric was there, he *couldn't* do it. He pushed and pushed, and felt like his stomach was going to explode, but nothing came out.

'Sssilly Sammy,' said Eric deeply.

He reached and grabbed Sam's penis.

'How about this? Does that help? Want me to rub it a bit?'

Sam saw white. The next thing he knew, his trousers were done up and he'd slapped Eric. The slap made a loud **sound in the empty bathroom**. Eric just laughed.

'You fight like a girl.'

Sam couldn't tell if he wanted to throw up or cry. Unfortunately for him, his body made the decision. He felt his stomach dancing and ran for one of the cubicles. Eric tripped him up and he slammed onto the floor, blood pouring from his chin. He would've got up and punched Eric, but the rage wanted to get *out*, so he crawled to the toilet and threw up his dinner.

Eric's laughs echoed behind Sam as he went back to join the party. The next day, the events turned around in Sam's head like clothes in a washing machine, and he pushed away the memories of Eric. He told no-one, and even when remembering the event, he focussed only on the food and the bad joke.

Now, as he remembered this, Sam bent over his desk and **panted wildly**. He had known it all along, of course. He had thrown up before the alcohol could completely wipe his memory. But this was the first time he'd played it back, hung up the dirty laundry, really seen what had happened.

And as much as he couldn't bear to think about it, Sam knew that this was his chance to survive.

It was a clear case of **sexual harassment**. If Wendy found out, Eric would *instantly* be fired. Sam slowed down his breathing. People were starting to look at him. He smiled weakly and said, 'Just doing some breath work! You know, like with the yoga...'

The problem was, aside from Reesha, there wasn't a single person in the company who would believe Sam. As far as he knew, Eric had never done something like that to anyone else, and he only made sexual comments when he and Sam were alone. If Sam had no proof, they would let Eric stay. And even if Sam didn't get squeezed out now, Eric would do everything in his power to get Sam fired.

So he had to find proof. There had to be something. He went to Google the name of the restaurant where they'd had the Christmas party, but he couldn't remember it. Just then, an email from Krakow popped up: *Can you quickly come to my office before lunch?* Sam glanced at the time – it was 11:34. Shit. Lunch was at 12. He didn't have much time.

'Hey, Linda!' he called across his desk.

Linda, who sat a few metres away from him, jumped so high that she almost hit the ceiling. Suddenly, everyone was staring at him. It was the first time he'd ever shouted across the office. He went bright red. He was just *giving* them more reasons to squeeze him out. But he didn't have time to play it safe.

'Do you remember the name of that restaurant where we had the Christmas party two years ago?'

She looked scared. 'Why?'

'It's for a report on spending.'

She went pale. Probably she was trying to figure out what this had to do with her, and whether it was related to the squeezing out.

'It's *Lanterne Rouge*,' said Eric, walking over to Sam's computer. 'Who's the report for?'

'Wendy,' said Sam, in a panic. Eric looked over his shoulder, clearly seeing that all he had open was Google and some cat videos. He looked at Sam for a while, smiled, nodded and left the room.

Whatever. Sam couldn't control what Eric did. A plan was starting to form in his mind, and it wasn't going to be easy.

He found the *Lanterne Rouge*'s phone number on their website, and got up to go to the toilet. He locked himself inside and rang the number.

For years, he had sat in the break room with Reesha and made fun of their bosses. Their stupid voices, their meaningless words. Now it was time to put that knowledge to use.

The other person picked up.

'Hello there,' said Sam, trying to sound as boring as possible. 'My name is Frederick Henckley, from Safebox Enterprises. We offer custom security packages, which can –'

'Not interested,' said the restaurant owner.

'Wait!' Sam gripped his phone so hard he thought it might break. 'Sir, did you know that 50% of restaurants have little to no security cameras? People worry about stealing, but the real danger is harassment. If one of your customers gets too drunk and decides to wander in to the wrong bathroom... Well, you could have a legal case on your hands. And if there's no security cameras there? Nobody will want to go to your restaurant again.'

'I know,' said the restaurant owner, sounding annoyed. 'We have security cameras already, thank you very much.'

He hung up. Sam **breathed a sigh of relief**. Although the man hadn't said directly, it was safe to assume they had security cameras in the bathrooms as well.

Sam walked back to his desk, locked his computer and headed for the lunch room. For the first time that day, he started to feel calm. There was a way out of this. He just had to phrase things carefully...

Wendy caught him in the corridor – literally caught his arm before he could get away. Every cell in his body wanted to move away from her, but he forced himself to smile and make eye contact.

'Let's talk in my office, actually,' said Wendy quickly. 'Do you have a packed lunch? Whatever, it won't take long.'

Sam's headache returned as he sat down and watched her pull out her lunchbox: a salmon salad. From the way she chewed on it, he could tell it was too late. Wendy usually ate like a wolf, and only chewed slowly when she was about to deliver bad news.

'I'm not sure how to put this, Samuel.'

Samuel. That did it. It was over.

'There's been talk of... harassment.'

Sam opened his mouth and held it there. He had been about to tell her that she didn't need to go through the whole talk, but now...

'Eric says you slapped him at the Christmas party. Two years ago. A bit ridiculous to bring it up after all these years, but you know we take these things seriously, and he has proof. Two people saw him walk out of the bathroom with a red face, and you followed soon after.'

Sam's stomach dropped. This was the last thing he expected. And clearly, Wendy hadn't expected it either. Her eyebrows moved up like she was waiting for him to tell her it wasn't true.

For a brief moment, Sam considered giving in. If he agreed with Eric's story, he could probably leave quietly. They wouldn't want the mess of a harassment case in the *synergy snakes* of all places. Wendy might even agree to write him a nice reference.

But Sam wasn't a child anymore. He would never lick a bathroom floor again.

'It's true,' he said coldly. 'I did slap him. But let me tell you why.'

As Sam spoke, the salad leaf on Wendy's fork shrank like a dying flower, and finally dropped to the floor.

The whole procedure took over a month. Restaurants didn't just show their security videos to anyone. That meant Sam survived the squeezing out. Reesha hadn't, he discovered later. He never even saw her leave. That month was awful, avoiding Eric in the office, hiding from others' stares. His magic didn't work like before. He was sure his colleagues had heard all sorts of stories, and if things ended badly, Eric would invent more. Sam came home so exhausted that he wasted all his money on takeaways, alcohol and online shopping, which only meant things would be worse if he didn't win this fight.

But if he did... Oh, if Sam won, then he would really *drill down*. He would make sure they really *got the memo*. He would pretend to work his way up to the top of this company if he had to, and he'd squeeze out every Eric there ever was.

Now, as he sat in the cramped back office of the restaurant, with Krakow and Eric on either side, staring at a dusty 90s television set, he didn't feel so confident. The restaurant had an old-fashioned security system that used video tapes, which was part of the reason it had taken so long to find the tape from the party. They had almost thrown it away, and Sam thanked God that they didn't. As the owner pushed the tape into the player, Sam spoke a silent prayer.

The quality was terrible. Sam couldn't remember the last time he'd watched a video tape, but he didn't remember it looking quite this bad. When he'd imagined this in his head, it was like a film, everything perfectly clear, but here they had to lean forward to see anything on the crappy old TV.

The camera faced towards the urinals. The urinal at the end was partly hidden by a wall. And of course, *that* was the one Sam chose when he walked in. He got mad at his past self for not having chosen the middle one.

Eric entered next. The Eric sat next to Sam went stiff like a statue. Krakow **took in a sharp breath**.

The scene continued. Without sound, it was like watching a school play, everything happening too slowly. For a while, it was just two guys going for a piss, chatting casually. But Sam knew what was coming, with a mixture of excitement and dread...

The problem was, when Eric grabbed him down there, it wasn't some big dramatic move. Their arms were thin black lines in the video, and their suits melted together. Eric *could* have been reaching down to touch Sam's penis, but if you didn't know that was happening, you might not notice anything unusual.

Then, video-Sam suddenly moved. He did up his trousers and slapped Eric. It looked... well, it looked pathetic, but the slap was clear. Eric even lifted his hand to his face and slowly turned to look at Sam, like he was a cheating husband in a bad movie.

Sam felt sick. It was over. He didn't need to turn to look at Eric to know the man was smiling. Eric's harassment was unclear, but Sam's was obvious, and Krakow was there as witness. Sam knew who he would choose.

'Well,' said Krakow, getting up and switching off the television. 'I think it's very clear what happened here.'

'Thank you,' said Eric, getting up and adjusting his tie. 'This whole thing has been rather painful to deal with.'

Sam put his head in his hands. He'd been beaten. Just like all those years ago at school.

Jack had pushed him to the bathroom floor, made him lick piss off it. He didn't even know whose piss it was. Jack and his friends had laughed, laughed so loud that Sam didn't dare use a public toilet again until he was eighteen and had moved away.

The next day at school, Sam tried to tell people about it. He thought it was so ridiculous, so awful, that people would hate Jack. But Jack had already told them his side of the story, where Sam had *wanted* to do the licking, and it wasn't the bathroom floor that he went for...

'This is a clear case of sexual harassment,' said Krakow, although his voice sounded a million miles away. 'Given the circumstances, I can see why Sam reacted the way he did.'

Time stood still. It took Sam a minute to process what Krakow had just said.

He... *believed* him?

'What?' said Eric. 'You believe him based on *that*? You couldn't see a thing! And why would I want to touch his *penis*, anyway? I'm married, I have two kids!'

Sam watched the two of them argue. He must be dreaming. There was no way this was happening.

'Come along now, Eric. The restaurant will be opening soon. We don't want to cause them any more trouble.'

Eric **snarled** and left, slamming the door behind him. Krakow went to thank the staff for their help. Sam felt like he might collapse if he stood up. But finally, he moved, floated outside. Even the cloud of Eric's cigarette smoke, mixed with the pollution from the nearby road, smelled sweet as roses.

Eric screamed something down the phone, but Sam didn't hear him. He stood a few metres away and watched as Krakow called a taxi.

It was odd. Krakow was the last person he expected to defend him. But his boss hadn't looked at him once during the whole event. It was like the magic was back in full force, but why now?

The taxi arrived, and the three of them sat in silence as the car crawled through traffic to get back to the office. Eric furiously typed on his phone. Krakow chatted to the taxi driver. Sam looked through the window and watched children playing, birds flying, fashionable women sitting outside cafés and laughing. He smiled.

The next day, Eric was gone. Nobody said anything, and silence weighed heavily in the room. Sam pushed through it like it was nothing, **whistling** to himself as he turned on his computer. He had no explanation for what had happened, but he didn't care. Maybe an angel was looking out for him.

He spent most of the day chatting to Reesha online, hearing all about her new job. It was the same shit, just a different flavour. This time, she couldn't hide inside the kitchen when she didn't want to work. So she walked up and down the stairs, pretending she was going to a thousand different meetings, while listening to an audiobook on her phone.

Good exercise, she wrote. Then, a minute later: *Miss you.*

Miss you, too. I'll try the stairs thing. The coffee machine's still broken, by the way.

Have you talked to Krakow yet? Maybe he wants something from you.

Sam hesitated and then replied. *No. I just have this feeling. I think it's better to keep quiet.*

You think the magic's coming back?

I don't know. Stupid as it sounds, right now I'm focussing on work.

But Reesha's words weighed on him. Although he had won, this whole experience had been exhausting. He wasn't sure if he could fight any more battles, especially not alone.

When he got up to sort the filing cabinet, he was so distracted he almost missed the note that fell out. Just like before, there was a snake-like 'S' written on it.

Sam held **his breath**. He had mostly forgotten about the note. It didn't seem important with everything else that was going on, and he never did find out who wrote it.

But here it was. Another one.

Sam opened it.

You and I are the only true snakes here. Meet me where it all happened, 8pm.

-C

Sam reread the note several times and then smiled to himself. There was an angel looking out for him. And all this time, it had been hiding in the grass.

THE END

Phew! That was a long one. I hope you enjoyed the story, and I'd love to hear what you think. This is much more adult than other stories I've done on the podcast, after all. Just go over to EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/MakeASnake and leave a comment at the bottom, or email me at Ariel@EasyStoriesInEnglish.com. Thank you for listening, and see you soon!