

Episode 41: Cassandra
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Insomuch as a cryptid is an exceptionally rare or legendary creature, I think it's only fair to consider all true friends to be cryptids.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

Friends, I get a hefty amount of listener mail and when I see a question repeated frequently enough, I usually get around to answering it on the show.

So, that said, let's talk about Cassandra.

There are plenty of reasons why I've never considered doing an episode about Cassandra. First off, she's my friend, so it feels a little odd to talk about her in this context. These days, I don't really think of her as a subject of study, you understand.

Second, well, the answer to most of the questions I receive regarding her is... "I don't know." That answer doesn't make for much of a show.

And yet, there are some things I do know about my remarkable friend and vehicle and she's given her permission for me to share some of those things with you.

You may recall that in an earlier episode I said that Cassandra was something of a reward for services rendered to the Winnebago company. And, that's true, but it isn't the whole story. As an RV, Cassandra is or was an experimental model built on the body of an old Winnebago LeSharo. But, I think the experiment got away from the fine folks at Winnebago, folks who were trying to make a more autonomous recreational vehicle and somehow got more than they intended. Well, the short version is after consulting with Winnebago engineers on other matters, they eventually introduced me to Cassandra. I recall explaining to them that she wasn't a problem to solve. A creature that seems odd to us in the course of being itself isn't a problem. It's a wonder. I knew right away that she was an

entity worthy of respect. And, frankly, they seemed to think I was doing them a bit of a favor when I drove her off the lot.

I can count the number of times I've actually driven Cassandra on one hand. I think we both prefer if she does the driving. I'm not great at watching the road. After all, a flat ribbon of pavement is so rarely the most interesting thing around to watch.

I didn't name Cassandra. A few folks asked about that.

Cassandra introduced herself to me.

This was a handful of decades ago, but I remember it well. It was cold for August. I was standing with a knot of engineers all dressed in gray coveralls in an experimental garage outside of Akron, Ohio. Well, they called it an experimental garage. In all honesty, it was a glorified pole barn. The weather was irresolutely considering hailing, and its indecision was plink-plunking against the sheet metal roof. The place was full of the roar of several overhead gas heaters that seemed to be working hard and accomplishing very little. Between the metal walls and sea of concrete beneath our feet, it was like visiting a temple to cold and hard. The place smelled like gasoline and cigarette smoke. An unfortunate combination.

There we were, standing next to Cassandra. She was half concealed beneath a blue tarp in a corner of the building where they stacked battered wooden pallets and bundles of cardboard. It looked like a good place to put something you were trying to forget about.

The lead engineer spoke. He sorta looked like a scarecrow who had bought a beard at a Halloween store.

"There it is," he said. "If I could tell you what was wrong with it, it would."

I walked over to Cassandra and she spoke.

"Hello. I'm Cassandra," she said plain as day.

I looked back at the engineers. They were studying the polished gray of their concrete floor and pretending not to notice.

“Well, howdy there,” I said.

I told her a bit about who I was and what I did. I told her that the engineers had said there was a problem of some kind.

I turned toward the engineers for confirmation or clarification and was surprised to see that they had wandered off.

You’d think folks who worked on RV professionally would be eager to have a conversation with one, but not, apparently, in this case.

Maybe they just got shy when confronted with something that shook up their sense of what’s real.

Speaking of shaking up our senses, it’s time for today’s hidden lore segment.

Today’s hidden lore is two poems by Fara Tucker.

beautiful apocalypse

warm skin,
and blue sky speckled
with delicate dogwood;
earth erupting with
tulips the size of hope.

my favorite season feels like
absence this year--
like nature chose
the wrong metaphor.

"read the room,"
I think; and then

"maybe it's the thought that counts?"

I walk unmoved
by this beauty--
dragging heavy limbs
fueled by a vague
and withering notion
that "this is good for me."

increasingly unconvinced
with lack of any tangible evidence,
but here we are.

strolling this picture perfect day
feeling flat and joyless;
I take pictures, for later--
when maybe my beauty-loving
heart will be revived.

in spite of myself,
something subtle in me stirs:

"my God, but did you see
how that pink tree sets
the sky on fire?"

love at first sight

the butterfly doesn't know
it's not supposed to find the dandelion
beautiful;

that it is a thing meant to be
pulled from the ground and discarded--
a nuisance and an interloper
causing neighbors to sneer.

all it knows is the undeniable pull--
the Rightness of it all.

Beautiful work. The undeniable pull. The rightness of it all. How well does that describe what many of us feel when we stand and look upon natural wonders, whether or not they are considered polite company in our front lawns.

Fara Tucker is a writer, poet, storyteller, teacher, photographer, former therapist, and current therapy client. She is currently wading through liminal space, which is occasionally good for producing poetry, and consistently good for producing anxiety. You can find her on IG @faratucker where she shares reflections on this beautiful and devastating life in poetry and prose. Her blog and links to published work can be found at faratucker.com.

I suppose Cassandra and I chatted for about a half hour before I tracked down scarecrow engineer and told him my initial assessment of the situation.

“Y’all are lucky to have a marvel like Cassandra in residence here,” I said. “She’s fascinating in ways I haven’t even considered yet, I’m sure of it.”

He didn’t seem to like my assessment, but then he had an idea and I could almost hear the gears of his mind whirring away.

“How about you take it,” he said. “For your studies. As part of your reward for helping with those beetles.”

“Well... I’ll invite her to come with me. I could certainly use some transportation help.”

“Yeah, I meant to ask you how you got here and if I needed to call you a cab someplace.”

“Ha, yeah,” I said. I wasn’t about to explain to scarecrow engineer about tunnel racers and the intricacies of bartering passage with them. That’s the kinda knowledge best left to naturalists.

Well, I won't try to hold you in suspense of something you already know. Cassandra did indeed accept my invitation.

I recall that she told me that she had been thinking about leaving, but hadn't quite worked out how she moved. See, at that point she was still mostly Winnebago. She hadn't... how shall I put this... fully grasped her own nature yet.

That strikes me as the most natural thing in the world. How much of life is about us learning our own natures and exploring the ways in which we can honor and celebrate those natures.

Well, the engineers provided us with new spark plugs, an oil change, and a full tank of gas. Then they handed me Cassandra's keys in a sealed plastic bag with a biohazard label. I didn't ask about that and they didn't mention it.

It didn't really matter.

Cassandra helpfully started her own engine before I climbed into the driver's seat. I didn't exactly have a driver's license, but Cassandra and I figured out the basics of interstate travel through context clues and mildly terrifying trial and error.

And, folks, that's the story.

You might guess that the Cassandra of our first meeting isn't quite the same as the Cassandra of today, and that would be a reasonable thing to guess.

She's less RV and more Cassandra these days, but that first meeting was foundational for both of us.

Cassandra is a friend, a partner, sometimes a teacher, and a home.

I'll be honest with you, I my initial impulse was to brush aside the questions about Cassandra. Yet, eventually, it struck me how right the questions were. What cryptonaturalist could learn of Cassandra and not want to know her better. And yet, Cassandra isn't a moth or a bird or a briar. She has her own words and answers. It feels odd to speak for her.

So, I had an idea. I've made something of a new arrangement with my old friend, an arrangement in which she can tell her story in her own words. I've convinced her to record her own episodes, to catalog her own thoughts and discoveries. If all goes as planned, you'll start hearing Cassandra's logs in between my usual episodes. I learn from her constantly and I trust that you'll learn from her too.

Plus, then I can forward your questions directly to her. After all, I never signed up to be fan mail service for an inscrutable RV. Not that such a job wouldn't be a noble calling.

Until next time, we're all strange animals. So, act like it.

Show Notes: Episode 41 Cassandra (00:16:45)

Credits

The thing about an unexplainable RV is that it's unexplainable, but let's give it a shot anyway.

Check out Field Guide to the Haunted Forest by Jarod K. Anderson wherever books are sold. If you'd like a signed bookplate for your copy, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to:

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more information on Adam's music, performances, and teaching, visit adamhurt.com.

Post Script:

A little tip if you're still traveling by tunnel racer. Stale popcorn. They just love the stuff. But, you know, watch your fingers.