

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 4: Will O' the Wisp
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It's not the heat, it's the humidity. And the crushing darkness. And the cocktail of digestive enzymes slowly breaking you down into your component parts.

Welcome to the Cryptonaturalist.

Welcome back, my listening friends,
It's full disclosure time
There is a snake whose venom lends
The mind compulsive rhyme.
I should, I guess, I have waited more
To begin this episode,
But I'm just so full of nature lore
I thought I might explode.
I suppose it's time to pause the show
And give myself some time
To lick my wounds here in the studio
And escape the grip of rhyme.
The Verse Snake is an irksome beast
To delay my schedule so,
But, I guess at least I'm not deceased
Inconvenienced though.
I'll pause and then metabolize
This venom in my veins.
I hope that you will empathize
With my convalescent aims.
Shouldn't be more than an hour or two,
Which, thanks to editing,
Will pass in mere moments for you
And we'll return to welcoming.

...

Alright. Welp, that did the trick. Time heals all wounds as the woefully inaccurate saying goes.

Ah, the Verse Snake. Who hasn't played that beloved childhood game of coaxing a verse snake's bite and then rap-battling your friends in the school yard. As wholesome as catching fire flies or listening to the whispered secrets of prophecy clover.

I made a rookie mistake. I left my boots next to my parachutes and, well, obviously I was just asking for a Verse Snake to come-a-callin'. The little rascal was curled up in my favorite footwear.

Now, let's see. Where was I before I was interrupted by a whimsical neurotoxin? As you can probably guess, Verse Snakes are a little too pedestrian to be the topic of this show.

Cassandra and I are on a long haul this week, winding our way around the globe in search of a destination that finds you before you find it, and it does so in its own time. So, there's nothing better on a long road trip than telling stories, and I've got a yarn to spin that's one part cautionary tale and one part profile of a rare and dangerous cryptid that roams the wilds on all twelve of earth's continents.

Truth be told, this is mostly my old friend Russell Van Atta's story, but he's given me all the details and his blessing to tell it.

See, when Ridgeway Shoes and Boots shut down its manufacturing plant near Parkersburg, West Virginia, Russell's long fight against retirement came to a definitive and unceremonious end. He had worked at the plant for nearly forty-five years. His father had worked there since it opened in 1932, right up until the day he keeled over at the stitching machine. Russell had long planned to follow his father's example, but management had other ideas. He bore the change with the quiet stoicism of a wet cat.

He wasn't the least surprised to find that having a surplus of free time was just as awful as he'd imagined. His tidy two-bedroom ranch, tucked down in a boggy valley hugging the Ohio River a few miles outside town, had always seemed a welcoming, restful place after a day of work. But, now the silence and seclusion conspired with his endless idleness to make the place feel like solitary confinement. He had no children or close friends and each time tires crunched past on the little gravel road, he felt a pang of jealousy. Those folks, he thought, had someplace to be.

One morning in June, after less than a month of retired life, Russell shook his head and announced, "I need a hobby." He had been avoiding the "h-word," and it stuck in his throat. Hobbies were for people with nothing useful to do. He stood at the kitchen sink looking down at his oatmeal bowl, the lone dish drying in the rack, and tried to think what other people did with leisure time. He had enjoyed reading the paper and drinking coffee before work, but that wasn't a hobby. He had a habit of watching the evening news, but he couldn't stand much more television than that. His father had never had anything you'd call a hobby. Nothing, unless...

Russell walked to the hall and pulled down the folding stairs that led to the cramped little attic. He climbed the narrow steps and returned a moment later carrying a dusty black case—his father's old Martin mandolin. He even found an old yellowed songbook full of bluegrass standards. He had almost forgotten that he owned it. He hadn't laid eyes on the instrument since his father died.

When he was younger, his father had taught him how to play. He'd bring out an old guitar and strum rhythm as Russell picked out the melody on the mandolin. Russell senior would tell his son stories of impromptu back porch concerts from a time when everyone knew

their neighbors. The way his father told it, Russell imagined that anyone within a ten-mile radius was practically family and hardly a night passed without a party or a dance or some other excuse to get together and celebrate something.

Russell had never seen any of these things in person, mind you. They belonged to a legendary past. But, that past suddenly seemed more appealing than it ever had before.

He opened the case and picked up the old mandolin. It was the color of scuffed leather, but with a glossy finish and an ebony fret board.

To his own surprise, Russell found that with the help of a pitch pipe that was still stowed in the case, he managed to get the mandolin in tune quicker than he would have thought possible. He was also shocked to find the memory of the song "Old Joe Clark" still haunting his fingers. It may have been a bit clumsy, but the bright sound filled up the little house and Russell found himself smiling so hard it hurt.

Days passed and Russell's fingers got faster and more confident. The repetition of practice felt wholesome and familiar. Before long, his work-hardened fingertips stamped down the pairs of strings without any real strain or soreness. The old songbook helped to fill in the gaps in his memory and after a few weeks he could play every song in the book like a natural.

Russell took to playing out on the back porch. He'd serenade the dark woods and imagine neighbors' footsteps coming through the trees to join him. He thought maybe, just maybe, some kindred spirit would hear him playing and think of it as an open invitation, just like the old days. Every once in a while he'd even stop to listen for a song in answer—the twang of a banjo or the whine of a fiddle. But, he never heard anything but the endless creaking drone of innumerable insects out in the marshy wetlands leading out west toward the river.

Long months went by and Russell started to be afraid. He began to worry that the shine was dulling on his newfound passion for music, and he hated the idea that his solitude and idleness would creep in and steal away the joy of playing so soon after he had rediscovered it. He began sitting out-back long into the night and playing so hard he half feared snapping a string.

He was nearly breaking his fingers pounding out "Whiskey Before Breakfast" late on an August night, with the last hope of his fantasies of musical kinship fading away, when he saw the light coming through the trees. "Flashlight," he said aloud, his pick missing the string and leaving the last note ringing out over the din of the bugs and frogs. He jumped to his feet and almost screamed a welcome to the visitor, but thought better of it.

In his usual fantasy, his visitor just seamlessly joined in on a song and took a seat on the porch just as if he'd been expected. So, as the little, bluish point of light bobbed closer, Russell planted himself back in his chair and racked his brain for what to play. Something classic, he thought. He started in on a basic version of "Cripple Creek" at what he thought was an approachable tempo and tried to control his excitement. The little light was almost to the edge of the woods.

The light stopped in the deep shadows of the tree line, just outside the yellow gleam cast by the porch light. Russell halted his playing and eyed the light. It didn't seem to throw much of a beam. One of those pocket LED lights, he thought. He frowned toward the visitor and tried to think of what to say.

"Come on up here," called Russell, "I won't shoot ya."

He grimaced. It sounded a lot friendly in his head.

"I mean, I've got an extra chair up here. You play?"

There was no answer. Russell slowly came to his feet and walked to the edge of his back porch, straining to see the visitor, but he couldn't make out anything but the little light. As he came forward, the light receded a few paces back toward the dark marsh.

"Well, hold on now," said Russell, "you came all this way, why don't you stay a bit." He struggled for something to say. "I'm Russell," he added, feeling increasingly awkward. An odd, electric desperation started buzzing through his limbs. He had to make a connection. He had to do something to stop the endless sameness that was constantly threatening to overtake him. He took a step forward. The light seemed to take a step backward.

"You want me to come with you?" he asked. "We don't have to play here."

He wasn't certain, but he thought the little light bobbed up and down in the affirmative.

"Alright then, just let me grab my case," he said.

He had a wild fear that the light would disappear and the moment would end. The fear surprised him.

He stuffed the mandolin into its case and snapped it shut. He whirled back towards the light and, when he saw that it hadn't moved, he took it for a final confirmation that he should follow.

Russell walked in a steady b-line toward the light; it moved away to the northwest, matching his speed. Soon, he found himself trudging through the deep leaf litter in the general direction of the marsh and the river. He had taken two spider webs in the face before he learned to keep one hand raised to intercept them. So, he walked along trying to keep an eye on the light and swaying a hand at eye-level like he was conducting a phantom orchestra.

He couldn't recall anyone living in that direction, but, until recently, he had never taken any particular interest in his neighbors or the geography of the place. He imagined that there were any number of footpaths down along the river and figured that they were making for one of them. After all, his visitor had gotten there somehow.

When the ground started to get soft, Russell began to wonder if his guide might have lost his way in the dark, but he couldn't think of anything to ask that didn't seem rude or outright insulting. He had always had a tough time making friends and he thought silence was probably the best policy in his case. The crunch of leaf litter under foot changed to a slosh and a splash, but Russell walked on, watching the little light bob on ahead of him. Something about it seemed strange, but he shrugged off the feeling. There wasn't much about the last few months that wasn't out of the ordinary. Ordinary was work at the factory.

He shot a glance over his shoulder, but he couldn't make out any sign of his porch light. Nothing but vague tree shapes and the almost physical sensation of the buzzsaw drone of insects that hemmed them round on all sides. All that thrumming noise and empty darkness threatened to add vertigo to Russell's growing list of discomforts, but he gritted his teeth against the feeling and forced one splashing foot in front of the other.

As he turned his attention back toward the light, he realized two things: First, that whoever was holding the light must have been walking backward all this time or he would have blocked the glow with his own body; and second, that despite the terrain, the only footsteps he could hear were his own. These two thoughts came with a cold, slippery feeling that started somewhere just beneath his stomach and spread out toward all his extremities, loosening joints and tendons.

He took another automatic step forward and found that the land had given up on bearing his weight. His forward leg sank up to the calf and the shift in weight sent him sprawling forward. The mandolin flew out into the darkness.

Russell tried to push himself up from the wet muck, but there was nothing to push against. He moved to stand, to get himself upright, but the shift in weight sunk both his legs up to the knees in mud. There was an acrid stink like rotten eggs. He made a move to throw himself backwards, toward the last firm land he had felt, but the mud held firm and when he stilled he noticed the water had reached his chest. He forced himself to still and tried to think. The cold water rose inch by inch as he sank into the swamp.

Hating to be still, terrified to move, Russell could do nothing but listen to the insects, feel the cool pressure of the mud drinking him downward, and watch the little bluish light hovering above its own reflection in the black water. He began to shake violently, but he didn't move a muscle. He thought about screaming for help, but no noise came out.

When the water was just above his collarbone, he noticed that the light was bobbing nearer. He stared at it with wide eyes. As the water reached his chin, a shape came into focus.

It was a small, bent looking thing, shining black like wet rubber. It was delicate. Doll-like. And its outstretched arm seemed to terminate in a ball of radiance. Behind it, in a horizontal hourglass shape, there was a sheen of iridescence like dragonfly wings, but impossibly silent. Its horrible, too-human face and milky white eyes were set in a look of profound sadness. Transfixed, Russell hardly noticed when the water rose to his open mouth. He sputtered and tried to cough. As if in reaction, the thing convulsed in midair and soundlessly vanished into a wisp of vapor. There was nothing left but the darkness and the taste of stagnant water. The incessant insect chatter bled into the frantic staccato of Russell's heart pounding in his ears as he sank beneath the surface.

As you might expect, Russell was certain that he was a goner, but he was wrong. A hand reached down, grabbed Russ by the collar and hauled him up out of that muck to find himself nose-to-nose with your humble narrator.

Until next time, remember: we're all strange animals, so act like it.

End.