

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 6: Your Basement

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Eight out of ten entomologists agree that the other two are just ambitious ant colonies disguised in lab coats. Don't let them know we've figured it out, or they could become aggressive.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Howdy, Listeners. Today is the kind of show I love. The kind that breaks down the imaginary barriers between what we think of as nature, and what we arbitrarily categorize as domestic space, human space, our space.

Such an odd concept if ya think about it. As if there were some kinda alchemical process that takes places when four walls and a roof are nailed together that creates a new dimension called the "indoors." An absurd idea that does nothing but build illusory distinctions between the natural world and the places we think of as home. Friends, home IS the natural world.

Consider this. Scientists estimate that there are over 10,000 different species of microorganism living on and in the average human body. And that doesn't even count crypto-bacteria.

In fact, if a census of YOU were taken today, there would be fewer human cells than those of the creatures sharing your warmth right now. Every human being walking the earth is like a person-shaped coral reef of microscopic wonder. You are a living web of life, teeming with biodiversity, and yet we think our airconditioned boxes put us at arm's length from the miraculous, beautiful chaos of the wild.

By the double-barreled jumping jiminetty, I don't know why we bother cultivatin' such fictions.

With that in mind, this week we set a course for the wildest place in your home. You know the place I mean. The place where the dead flies drift like autumn leaves. The place you can trust to provide a spiderweb to the face, a phantom-feel of damp soil, the fine, complex scent of mildew and decaying wood.

I'm talkin' about your basement.

Don't have a basement? Well, that's what the things that live there call it. Don't ask me why. Maybe you just haven't found the door yet. Or, you might call it a crawl space, cellar, attic, garage, hall closet, stained cardboard box beneath your bed.

It doesn't matter. It's yours or it was or it will be. Time is yellowed and brittle there, but the place knows it's yours. Your comin' and goin' is written in enduring letters that hang in the dim air.

It's your basement.

I parked my Winnebago Cassandra not too far from your basement, gathered my gear, and made for that beautiful indoor wilderness. As I so often have, I aimed to see what could be seen through wandering in dark places.

Hey, speaking of wandering in dark places, how about a little fiction? It's time for today's Hidden Lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is a flash fiction story called "Nothing Less Rare, Nor Precious" by Evan Dicken.

Hidden Lore Segment:

The sparrows left my chest the day I brought you home from the hospital. At first, I thought it was the crying—you were a loud, red-faced little thing—but they didn't come back even after you quieted down. I began to miss the brush of wings against my ribs, the soft prick of little beaks and claws as they hopped around inside me.

It wasn't that the sparrows were a point of pride or anything—I'd kept them for the same reasons as the electric guitar gathering dust in my bedroom closet or that half-finished screenplay I'd always meant to get back to. Those derelict dreams held, if not hope, then at least nostalgia. I thought I wanted to keep you, too, but maybe I was wrong.

"It's almost winter, hon," Alec said. "Maybe they flew south?"

I told him my sparrows didn't migrate, but he just gave the little straight-faced nod that meant he was agreeing to agree. Still, I did feel colder. It made me wonder if you'd done something to me, somehow turned the aimless roil of clouds in my chest to sleet and snow.

"They're just birds, love," said my mother when I called her raw-eyed and sniffing in the middle of the night. "You can't expect them to be supportive. Babies change your life, but things will get better, you'll see."

They didn't, though.

Alec's paternity leave ran out. The firm had given me months off, so it was just you and me alone in the house for most of the day. You slept while I watched Netflix until the edges of the flatscreen lingered in my vision when I looked away. Sometimes, we went for walks, stopping at the small park at the end of Haite Street to search for movement in the barren trees—squirrels, cardinals, even great murmuring swirls of starlings. I don't know what I expected; everyone knew sparrows only lived in people, now.

“It doesn’t mean you stop being you,” Haruka said over curry and drinks at Café Mumbai. She had two babies, children now, I suppose, and still managed to land gallery shows now and again. “Just make space for what’s important and let everything else fall away.”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t done anything with my life—Alec was wonderful, I loved my house, my friends, the hot, sweet burn of bourbon on my tongue after a long day at work. I even still got that little, fluttery thrill every time I marched into a courtroom, brief in hand. How much was me and how much was just filling time?

I went home and reread my screenplay. It was terrible. You seemed to enjoy the guitar, though. The chords were more than a little blurry and I couldn’t hit the high notes, but “Changes” made you smile for the first time. We laid down on the couch after that, you sleeping tight against my chest, warm and soft. For some reason, I cried.

I filled all the feeders in a mute offering. I even tried swallowing some bird seed.

It rained almost every day, but I didn’t mind. I loved watching them come—goldfinches, chickadees, robins, and blue jays, bright points of color in a world of muted grays and browns. Alec bought you a fleece-lined poncho so we could sit out on the porch together. I would point out a bird, then say its name slow like I was telling a campfire story. You would laugh and babble, pressing your hands against the porch screen like you wanted to flutter out to join them. Once, I thought I saw tiny shapes flit through the trees, brown on dappled brown, but they were probably just starlings.

That night, I coughed up a nest, flecks of mud and tiny twigs clicking against my teeth as I hugged the bathroom garbage can. You started screaming in another room. I didn’t know what to do, but Alec changed your diaper, and everything quieted down.

When it was over, I tossed the garbage bag, stopping to sweep my screenplay in for good measure. It was never going to be anything, anyway. I brushed my teeth then sat in the shower for a while, head down and arms around my knees like people always do on TV when they’re sad about something. Even after I’d toweled off, water bled from the little knot holes between my ribs to leave dark spots on my bathrobe.

You were in your crib, asleep. You’d rolled onto your stomach, but when I turned you over, my fingers curled into empty space. Barely daring to breathe, I unbuttoned your onesie to see the hole that hadn’t been there before. Your chest was open, warm and soft, and inside, a little nest with three brown-flecked eggs.

Yawning, you opened your eyes to smile up at me.

For the first time, I smiled back.

What a lovely story that was. Sorta a combination of body-horror and magical realism. Based on what I’ve heard, that mix of genres seems like a pretty good representation of parenthood. I like the way in which dreams deferred become dreams transplanted in this story. Not kicked to the curb, but pressed down into fertile soil. And, well, you know I love the idea of framing the

body as a home for things wild, and fragile, and inscrutable. Many of the best things in life are wild, fragile, and inscrutable.

By Day, Evan Dicken studies old Japanese Maps and crunches data for all manner of fascinating medical research at "The" Ohio State University. By night, he does neither of these things. His fiction has most recently appeared in: Analog, Strange Horizons, and Apex, and he has stories forthcoming from publishers such as: The Black Library and Tales to Terrify. Visit Evan's website at www.evandicken.com

The dark in your basement was different from the dark under the trees or under the sea. Certainly, the dark was more complete. No moon or stars, just a razor thin strip of light under a door at the top of the stairs. That light did nothin' but emphasize the dark.

I sat on the cold concrete and waited. I hope you don't mind. You didn't seem to be at home and, well, I felt like I was being called.

I nestled myself in between old holiday decorations and water-damaged shoeboxes, listening to the monochromatic wall of sound all around me, the buzz of wires and the breath of the air ducts. Have you ever noticed that darkness itself seems to have a sound? It's an expectant sound. The sound of something holding its breath and waiting. I don't think it's the sorta sound we hear as vibrations in the air. But, we hear it just the same. Like a heart that beats only in the absence of light.

I think it'd been about an hour before I felt the hand on my shoulder. You know the hand. We've all sat in the dark long enough to feel the hand, and its touch made me nostalgic for the sleepover parties of my youth and taking turns sitting in the shed waiting for the hand on our shoulders.

That little childhood rhyme we all learned in kindergarten ran though my head.

Little one waiting in pitch dark

Five little fingers find their mark

Will it pull you through its hidden doors

Not if you hurry and make it yours

Reach out and find your shoulder there

Give it a squeeze and say a prayer.

Heh. Kid stuff. I reached out and found my own shoulder in the blind darkness in front of me, gave it a squeeze, felt the squeeze on my own shoulder, and so knew that the hand had to be mine. So, I let go of my shoulder and felt my hand let go in return. Just a funny trick of the dark.

I figured I had waited long enough for the creatures in the basement to acclimate to my presence, so I tipped my head back and applied two drops of owl tears to each of my eyes. The

effect was instantaneous. The darkness was replaced by a gray-gold landscape of pure wonderment.

How can I describe this?

It was like drinking in the landscape while taking a hot air balloon ride over the Serengeti. There were inch-tall creatures like eyeless elk grazing on mildew down on the basement floor. They were cream-white and walked in a sideways scuttle like a video of crabs played at triple speed.

I watched a house centipede, a tiny predator that looks sorta like an escaped eyebrow, dart from a crack in the floor and chase down one of the elks like a lioness attacking a gazelle.

I'd never seen or heard of such creatures, so I tentatively named them Fairy Elk, because their delicate, semi-translucent bodies reminded me a bit of fairy shrimp.

I looked up from the grazing herds and found a Gap Hog sitting on his haunches five feet away staring right at me. Gap Hogs are sorta like Ground Hogs, except they don't burrow through the ground, they burrow through... uh... I guess spacetime is the easiest way to put it.

I'd read about them in Jake Threepwood's seminal text "Transdimensional Critters of North America," but I'd never seen one up close. It was a short, round thing like a cross between a pug and a beaver, but with gunmetal gray fur and eyes like cigarette burns, red-rimmed holes in nothing.

I reached out a hand to the little guy and triggered his defense mechanism. He cocked his head, swayed a bit, then fell forward like a paper cut-out, revealing himself to be two-dimensional. For a second, I could see his silhouette against the concrete and then it blurred and was gone.

Adorable little critter, but a real nuisance to physicists. They keep a team of CryptoNaturalists on staff at the large hadron collider just to chase them out of the gullyworks.

I can't say why, but when the Gap Hog bolted, all the creatures around me ran for it too. I was disappointed, but I wouldn't call my visit to your basement disappointing.

Well, you're not going to believe this... but speak of the devil, we got us a priority transmission from Jake Threepwood coming in hot over the CryptoNaturalist radio. I wouldn't normally interrupt the show for a transmission, but old Jake is an icon in the field and he wouldn't use that priority signal lightly. Let's listen.

Field Report Script

Jake Threepwood transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1 with a... let's call it a conditional cry for help.

Well, kids, I done did it. Old Jake's got a yarn to spin and I hope y'all are listenin'.

I expect you're well-acquainted with the Colossal Cashmere Possums that roam Appalachia, grazin' on cottonwood trees. Soft as chinchillas. Big as garbage trucks.

You folks know I was fixin' to determine if the fluffy critters were true marsupials or a separate order of mammal. Case closed on that one, friends.

I got too close to a sleeping female and spooked the big critter.

Now, these possums are gentle giants, but I was maybe five feet away when I startled her and... well... a paw flashed out of that cloud-like fur and the next thing I knew I was stuffed into a velvety pouch on the possum's belly.

So, yeah, we're dealing with a marsupial here. A marsupial that has a hitherto unobserved defense mechanism. I'd describe the comfort level in here as grim. Dire even.

I am disturbingly at ease.

On the bright side, it is an ideal recording environment and my gyroscopic overalls are keeping me from suffering motion sickness, but, I've been in here for about two days by my reckoning and I haven't been hungry or thirsty or had the fist impulse to leave.

Yeah, so, I'm figurin' that maybe one of y'all should come get me. I ain't escapin' on my own.

You'll pick up my 'shave and a haircut' homing-beacon once you're within five hundred miles.

Thanks in advance.

Threepwood out.

Aw, heck. I'm not exactly close by, but I'm going to help. Jake Threepwood is a mentor of mine, so I ain't riskin' that nobody will rescue him. This just goes to show you, even the true professionals can get into trouble out there, so don't get complacent.

A final note about your basement as Casandra's reactors come on line.

Don't take the wilderness around you for granted. When you think of the wonders of nature, your mind might conjure up images of misty rainforests, undulating kelp, eagles diving for fish in mountain rivers. That's all well and good, but don't let the enormity of what's out there in the big beyond blind you to the magic and mystery in your own home. Your own backyard. Your basement.

I'll leave you with this fact. Modern spiders are tiny miracles that predated dinosaurs and I bet there's one within ten feet of you right now. Take a little time to appreciate it.

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

End.

Episode 6: Your Basement (00:19:28)

Show Notes

This episode explores the wildest parts of your home. Featuring a guest voice by podcasting icon and journalist Justin McElroy. You can hear Justin on the podcasts *My Brother, My Brother and Me*; *The Adventure Zone*; and *Sawbones*. For more information on Justin's work, visit www.McElroyShows.com

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