

THE KA BEETLE

By Dan Armstrong

Almost everyone at some time in his or her life has entertained the idea of an encounter with the supernatural. For most, these are just passing fancies—a glance at the astrology column in the local newspaper or an evening of fun with a Ouija board. For myself, it has always been more than that. Since my childhood I have wanted to witness something from beyond the pale—to observe a demonstration of telekinesis or see a UFO—anything that would allow me a peek behind the veil of ordinary reality. And yet, despite my willingness to believe in something more, until I actually had hard evidence of the other side, I could be no more than a hopeful skeptic.

And so I remained until last spring when I witnessed the remarkable flight of the Ka Beetle.

Fellow university biologist Laverne Cummings and I drove from Northern California to the Olympic Peninsula in western Washington during spring break last year. The trip was as much vacation as casual adventure for a couple of scientists who spend too much time staring into computer monitors and writing grants. We were also anxious to experience the largest temperate rainforest in North America firsthand.

Like many biologists, we'd become concerned about the environment, so we decided to collect insects, small animal carcasses, and specimens of scat as we explored the peninsula. We would take the samples back to our lab at the university where we taught and analyze them for man-made toxins. Out in the mostly untamed Olympic Peninsula, we hoped to find a relatively high degree of purity.

Because of a little ego thing that stressed between Laverne and myself, whether in our publications, our students, or our racquetball games, we decided to heighten our purpose by

adding a friendly wager to our trip.

We both made a hobby of sighting eagles. Long before we'd met, we each kept logs of dates, locations, and the number of eagle sightings we'd made. Oddly enough, after years of this, our totals were very close, and whenever either of us happened to see an eagle in our travels, it would invariably be one of the first things mentioned upon return. As it stood, I'd seen a mere two more eagles in the wild than Laverne. So we made a bet. Whoever spotted the most eagles during the trip won a bottle of cognac from the other.

After twelve hours of driving the first day, we arrived at our destination late the next afternoon. We claimed a campsite and pitched a tent on the highest ground we could find in a densely wooded glen, located in the rainforest bottomlands on the westernmost side of the peninsula. It was wet, very wet, but to a couple of wide-eyed biologists accustomed to hiking in California, the vegetation was as stunning as it was otherworldly. A thick, spongy coat of bright green moss covered everything—the ground, the boulders, the trunks of red alders, vine maples, and a single towering Sitka spruce at the far end of the glen. Where there wasn't moss there was salal or lovely maiden hair ferns, giant sword ferns, deer ferns, or skunk cabbage, pluming out in every direction as far as you could see.

We spent the remaining hours of daylight venturing with child-like fascination into the alien ecosystem. We broke out our set of vials and found several viable specimens right away. To my chagrin, Laverne also spotted two large bald eagles. Then it was time to forage for some dry wood and get a campfire going before nightfall.

No sooner had we built ourselves a small fire and finished off a dinner of freeze-dried chicken noodle soup and stick-toasted French bread than it began to rain. It was in the forecast and we'd come prepared. We climbed into our tent, lit a Coleman lantern, and spent the rest of the evening passing Laverne's bottle of Wild Turkey, cursing the heavy hand of corporate money in university policy, and arguing the extent of reality.

"Man, sometimes you are so full of it," muttered Laverne after I'd expressed my interest in the supernatural.

"Come on, Laverne, admit it," I laughed as I handed him the bottle of whiskey. "There has to be more to reality than what the ordinary human mind perceives."

Laverne took a healthy swallow from the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his

hand. “Like the old line *we only use three percent of our brain. What might we know if we used it all?* I wouldn’t make too much of that.” Although a few years short of fifty, Laverne’s hair was entirely silver, a bit long, and swept off to one side of his rather narrow face. He tilted the bottle over his head and again took in a frightful amount of whiskey. “What are you driving at?”

“That we’re just children in this process we call civilization. That our consciousness has just begun to open. That we have a long way to go before we’ll achieve the true potential of the human animal.”

“So what? The more we learn the more we can learn.”

“And that’s extraordinary! That’s my point.”

“But it ain’t supernatural.” Laverne turned away from me to open his sleeping bag.

“Think of the mind as a house,” I continued. “We’re entirely accustomed to dwelling on the main floor of ordinary consciousness. And we are also quite comfortable with the ebb and flow of our subconscious in dreams—like periodic trips to the basement. But isn’t there also an attic? With capabilities not yet realized? Telepathy. Clairvoyance. Telekinesis. Shouldn’t we expect some emergent properties with the evolution of the human mind?”

“Emergent properties of the human mind,” he repeated thoughtfully. He opened up his bedroll and took another swig of Wild Turkey. “Reminds me of those two beautiful baldies I spotted today flying side by side.” He offered me the bottle with a smirk. “It was practically a religious experience.”

“Up yours,” I sneered, taking the bottle. “One day you’ll wake up from this dream we call life.” I took one last swallow. “And you’ll wonder how you could have been so blind to it all.”

“All what?” he mumbled, sliding into his sleeping bag.

I just grinned at him. The moment of silence amplified the forgotten rain, beating on the dome of our tent like the skin of a drum.

“You’ve had too much to drink,” he said suddenly, snuggling deeper into his bag and turning his back to me.

“We both have,” I said instead of kicking him. I pulled on my boots and slipped out the zippered tent door to relieve myself. As I stood there in the pouring rain, buzzing on alcohol, I became aware of the depth of the forest around me. Mixed in with the steady hiss of the falling rain was the croaking of a thousand tree frogs. Within that, I heard the hoot of a distant owl. And farther out, something more, a hollow stillness that echoed in my ears like the sound of the ocean

in a seashell, the spirit of the wood confiding in the night—or, as Laverne might have said, the Wild Turkey gobbling in my head.

The next morning greeted me with nausea. The taste of stale whiskey encased my mouth, and the thick sweet smell of liquored perspiration filled the tent. I quickly exited from the closeness of our little nylon home, took a deep breath, and stretched my arms over my head. The rain had stopped, but water still dripped from the tree branches and hanging mosses, and a steamy fog rose off the forest floor to meet the clouds that had settled down on the treetops from above. I felt as if I were in some Gothic swamp in a land that time forgot. And even through the glaze of a hangover it was strangely quieting.

Laverne came out of the tent behind me. His eyes betrayed the same spinning thickness that queezed within me. Speaking seemed more than either of us could muster, so as zombies, we set about the task of building a fire.

About the time I was putting a match to the kindling, Laverne spoke the first words of the morning, calling me to look at something he'd found. I went over to where Laverne knelt on the ground.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

I stooped to inspect the object he pointed out. Compressed into the soft moss by one of our footprints was a small, very colorful beetle corpse. Though it had suffered the fatal consequences of a boot heel, the body was hardly damaged. It was about the size of the last section of my little finger, with a small bead head of hunter green and a nasturtium-orange, hard-shell body.

Laverne pried the beetle delicately from the impression with the blade of his pocket knife and lifted it for closer examination.

“That’s a new one to me, Laverne,” I said, still struggling to focus my eyes. “But it’s no surprise we should see something new to us up here.”

He nodded, still captivated by the beautiful beetle. “Perhaps. But this bug strikes me as particularly unusual.”

“Don’t get too excited,” I said with a chuckle. “It might be nice to identify a new insect for the world, but neither of us has studied entomology. Between the both of us, we’ve seen, at best, a thousandth of the world’s beetles. Let’s just find a vial for it. When we get back to the university, we can see if it’s been catalogued or not.”

“I thought I was the realist,” he frowned. “But you’re right. It’ll probably turn out to be the most common bug you can find on the peninsula.”

Despite the shroud of mist that engulfed our camp, a large breakfast of pancakes and eggs brightened us from the inside out. A pot of coffee and fragile consciousness gave way to viscous thought, and the hike we’d planned for the day seemed almost feasible.

As we nursed our last half-cups of Colombian Supremo, the sun made its first appearance, emerging like a full moon from behind a drifting gauze of clouds. Shortly afterward, thick beams of sunlight, delineated clearly by the tiny drops of moisture in the air, broke through the trees. One ray of light shone squarely on the table where our now empty dishes were spread. I was marveling at the crystalline clarity of those ordinary things in the morning light—when a small green and orange beetle crawled from beneath my plate, headed directly at me.

“Laverne,” I said softly, as much for his head as my own. “It looks like your rare find isn’t quite as rare as you’d hoped.”

He followed my eyes to the beautiful beetle and edged closer to my end of the table. “Ah,” he chuckled, “now we might bring one back alive.” He headed to the tent to get a vial.

I took a nearby clear plastic cup and set it gently over the slow-moving insect. I had hardly given the capture a thought, when I looked down and saw that the bug was no longer imprisoned beneath the cup. Wondering if I hadn’t quite put the cup over the beetle or that maybe it had squeezed under the lip, I again placed the cup—and with a little more care—over the determined little creature.

I looked up as Laverne returned and sat down. His eyes hardened. “Watch out, you’ve let the little bugger free,” he said, just as I noticed it also. The beetle was not beneath the cup and was again headed directly at me.

With my absolute full attention, I placed the clear cup over the crawling insect without any diversion of my eye. Laverne with equal attention observed my care. And right before our eyes, the tiny bug moved without the slightest resistance directly through the side of the plastic cup, continuing on its way.

I looked up at Laverne.

“Having a little trouble there?” he asked, implying he trusted me less than his eyes.

A little undone by his tone, I sat back to give him a try. He got up close and placed the glass

vial's open end directly before the beetle's advance. As simply as that, the bug crawled through the opening and down the length of the tube. Laverne stood up to cap the vial and inspect his prize, then let go a hushed, "What?" He stared into an empty vial. "Where's that damn bug?"

I looked down at the table. The little critter was ambling along merrily, unruffled by our attempts to catch it.

Now Laverne was as puzzled as I, and we both leaned over the table to watch the progress of our elusive friend as closely as possible. I placed the plastic cup lengthwise in its path, and as before, it crawled fearlessly into the dead end. I turned the cup upright as it reached the bottom, and the beetle seemed to be ensnared. Yet again, right before our eyes, it proceeded out the side of the cup—as through thin air.

"We've got to catch that bug," exclaimed Laverne.

I looked at him in disbelief. "But what are we going to keep it in?"

A vague pale of impossibility washed over Laverne's face. His eyes sought mine. "Could we be dreaming?" he whispered hesitantly.

"It may be that either one of us is dreaming, but together—simultaneously? Should I pinch you and you pinch me?"

Though I'd meant it as a joke, Laverne reached over and pinched me hard on the bicep. I whacked him in the shoulder. Again our eyes met in question, weighing, however abstractly, our reality.

"Would you say that bug looks harmless, Laverne? No large mandibles, no obvious stinging device?"

Laverne eyed the beetle, now halfway across the table's length. He nodded in agreement.

I allowed the mysterious insect to crawl into my hand, then closed it delicately into my palm. We both watched incredulously as it exited out the back of my hand.

"Pinch me again, Laverne," was all the response I could muster. Equally lost, Laverne delivered a pliers-like pinch to my forearm.

"Ouch!" I wailed—to which *our dream* dissolved not!

Laverne turned away from the table abruptly. "Let me get my camera before this thing gets away."

I grabbed his arm before he could take a step. "Don't waste your time. Get my shaving mirror. It's hanging on the tent pole."

By the time Laverne returned with the three-by-five mirror, the little beetle was just a few inches from the table's edge. Shaking ever so slightly with disquiet, I stood the mirror between the bug and the edge. As I feared, the bug had no reflection. "It's not there," I said, uncertain what I meant.

In dumb silence, we watched the bug proceed to the mirrored surface, then into the reflection, as though the image of the table within the speculum were real—and what was real was not!

I snatched up the mirror, wondering if somehow I might have found the trick to capturing this immaterial figment. Half expecting to see the beetle caught between the silver and the glass, I was sadly disappointed to be confronted by my wide-eyed face. And there below on the table teetered the beetle, its two front legs feeling for the table's edge!

"Maybe it was bad whiskey? Or maybe we're still drunk?" Laverne, the scientist, was more comfortable denying what his brain could not accept.

I shook my head as I looked him firmly in the eye. "We're not drunk. We're not asleep. And we're not dreaming."

"Then what?" he practically screamed.

"I don't know."

Our eyes turned once again to the green and orange beetle, that in my own mind I'd dubbed the "Ka," an ancient Egyptian term for the astral body or spirit. Fumbling blindly for the edge of the table, the bug tumbled to the ground as any material insect might. On hands and knees, we followed the beetle as it fixedly headed in the direction of our tent.

Its progress was slow, stumbling and struggling over every little chunk of dirt, each skinny little twig. Throughout the ordeal, which seemed so long and yet we feared would end too soon, Laverne proposed ways we might entrap the bug. Each time I would count them out.

His frustration boiling out in beads of sweat, he stood and, staring down at me, declared, "We will bring this one back alive. We will. *We will.*"

I looked up at him from my knees, knowing he had not understood some of the subtler implications of this strange creature whose spell we were now under.

"Just think what this could mean to our careers!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what this queer little bug is, but it means something big—something big with dollar signs attached to it."

I redirected my eyes to the funny little beetle, fumbling its way over a maple leaf, driven by some inner force like a returning salmon.

“Laverne, there’s an understood law about these kinds of things. You can’t make money off them. For some reason or another—like photographs of UFOs—they just don’t work out.”

“God! Do you think a photograph would work? Just because the image didn’t show up in the mirror doesn’t mean it wouldn’t record digitally. Wasn’t there a moment or two when the bug seemed to be in the mirror?”

I didn’t answer.

He dashed to the tent and returned with his camera. I let him snap a few shots before trying to explain his foolishness. “Even if the bug appears as pixels, the extraordinary nature of it won’t.”

He stopped and glared at me. “But what if I got one with him halfway through the side of a cup? Or partially submerged in your palm?”

“Couldn’t we fake those? Just cut the dead one in half and glue it to my hand or the side of the cup?”

“Goddamn it, I’m the pragmatist here, not you!” He stomped off. Then he came back, grinning evilly. “I have it.”

He knelt down beside me and carefully placed his hand in the path of the beetle. It crawled into his hand, but he didn’t close it. Instead, as the bug neared the far side of his palm, he put his other hand beside the first, and the beetle simply continued onto the second hand. He continued this process, placing one hand beside the other, and the bug crawled from one hand to the next without making any ground-wise progress. He looked up at me. “Let’s get going. I’ll carry this little fellow to the truck and take the passenger’s seat. You drive. I’ll keep him occupied all the way back to California.”

As I watched him switching hands, around and around, I thought to myself, *this guy is nuts*. “What about sleep? You’re talking about nearly eighteen hours if we don’t stop. And some of that will be in the dark. You really think you can manage that?”

“We could take turns.”

I shook my head. “No way.” We both stood anyway.

Laverne continued with the deft handwork. “Start taking down the tent.”

For an instant I thought this crazy idea had a chance, but as soon as Laverne turned away from what seemed the predestined path of the bug, the Ka Beetle fell through his hands like a feather through air. It hit the ground and returned to its course like a needle on a compass.

Laverne’s whole body sagged. Then something clicked in me. He saw it in my eyes. “What is

it?’ he demanded. “What?”

Ever since I’d mentioned the fact that we might as well be taking pictures of the dead beetle specimen, something had been turning in my head. Without a word, I went to our collection box and selected the vial of interest. Yes, the beetle corpse was still there—and it was identical. My plan was still just a vague inkling until I realized the beetle’s path led straight as an arrow to where I stood.

My initial intention had been to examine the materiality of the dead specimen, so I opened the vial and allowed the lifeless insect to slide into my hand. I gave it a prod with my finger. There was no doubt about its solid existence. I stepped five feet to one side. The Ka Beetle altered its direction to coincide with my change.

As Laverne gradually put together what was going through my mind, I moved sideways again, ten feet this time. Again the beetle adjusted its reckoning as though I held true north in the palm of my hand.

When I stepped forward to meet the beetle’s advance, Laverne assumed we had the same plan. We’d use the corpse to lure the astral presence all the way to California. But his eyes just about popped from their sockets when I laid the specimen directly in the beetle’s path. Before he could move, the Ka had entered the lifeless body—its goal all along. Then, with life renewed, its orange shell parted and lace wings lifted it into the air.

Laverne made a futile lunge at the flying bug, but it soared beyond his grasp.

Laverne did not speak to me—without vulgarities—for the remainder of our trip, except to claim the bottle of cognac he’d won—three eagles to two. I let it go as best I could, but was actually pretty upset by his behavior.

Two days after we returned to the university, Laverne stopped by my office to tell me he’d found the beetle in a catalogue. As he stood up to my desk, he placed his unopened bottle of cognac in front of me.

“What’s this for?”

“For first understanding the real nature of the Ka Beetle. For that you deserve credit for an additional eagle sighting. I say we split the bottle between us.”

“That’s not necessary, Laverne. The beetle was not an eagle. You won fair and square.”

But he wouldn’t have it. “We record our eagle sightings because of the noble spirit they

define—and instill in us as we watch.” He paused and our eyes met. “I had a similar feeling watching that beetle.”

I had to smile, then nod in agreement. He picked up the bottle of cognac and twisted off the cap. “To the Ka Beetle,” he said, taking a ceremonial taste, then handing the bottle to me.

“To the Ka Beetle,” I said, taking a swig. “And the day we awaken from this dream we call life.”

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