

INVOLUTION

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When she first discovers the thing, she reacts with fright. It isn't just its outlandish appearance but also its proximity. Why, considering all the suitable nooks and crannies, the possible hidey holes in the vicinity, has it chosen her? In truth she might not have noticed it if it wasn't for the itch. At first, barely noticeable, more like a humming, a low-level vibration somewhere in her nether regions, then louder, more insistent.

Eventually she has no choice but to give herself over, to make her way to the bathroom, shut the door and strip down. She sits on the toilet – lid down – kicks off shoes and peels leggings, thrusts hips forward and bends head. Even from this position, bum balanced, legs akimbo, she has trouble discerning anything. It isn't so much that the thing is well hidden, as it is that its very form resists easy definition. Much about it is familiar: its colour – pinkish, brownish – its jowls and dugs, its convex shape. All these things are easy to describe, but how they are assembled evades logic.

Her first reaction is to snap her legs shut, get dressed, and pretend she has seen nothing. She tries to calm herself. To breathe. She isn't usually scared by strange animals or creepy-crawlies. She grew up outside the city, a semi-rural area known for its biodiversity. Her childhood was spent collecting worms and beetles, chasing after frogs and meerkats. It's only recently that she moved to the south, a coastal metropolis. She tells herself that the thing

is probably like her, some poor rural animal that has strayed from its natural environment. It is nothing to be afraid of. After all, there must be all sorts of species, and subspecies she has never encountered before. Small mammals alone come in a number of varieties. There are rodents, tree shrews, and the eulipotyphla made up of moles, hedgehogs, and solenodons; and each of those categories has its own variants and deviants, its smallest incarnation.

When the pamphlets on mammals and reptiles that she obtains from the local Parks Board office reveal nothing, she extends her search. It is possible that the animal is not from these parts, not indigenous, as the books call it. That it is an alien or an immigrant. Cases like this are documented all the time. On the internet, she reads stories of vervet monkeys and miniature hippos smuggled across borders. A rare sea snake, usually only found in the waters of Mauritius, pops up in an aquarium in a restaurant in lower Manhattan. A cat travels aboard a research vessel all the way to the Antarctic.

She tries Google, but it yields nothing. The problem is in her search terminology. She has difficulty finding language to describe the thing. It is hairy, but the hair is neither long nor soft; it isn't furry exactly, but it seems to have a sort of fuzzy quality, a kind of fluffy pertness that could be considered cute under the right circumstances.

Mostly, though, it is ugly. Its hair stands up in a shadowy tuft framing a sad little naked face that might have resembled a puppy had it not seemed so bunched up, so awfully scrunched. She feels almost sorry for it, a warm prickling in her stomach. No wonder the thing is hiding – a tiny lonely Frankenstein creature with no protection from the outside world.

She clicks a link and finds herself looking at pictures of rabbits: Bugs Bunny next to the white rabbit from Alice, and a man-sized cyborg rabbit ghost from some movie she doesn't recognise. The final picture isn't of a rabbit but rather a man covered with bees from top to toe. The picture is titled "Beeman". She stares at the photo and then the caption. Something about it, the combination, makes her stomach knot. What is the relationship

between the bees and the rabbits? And the man and the bees? Is the caption meant to suggest a new species, a coupling of man and insect into a vibrating human swarm? She thinks about evolution. Ape skulls and how human embryos have an extra jaw that fades into the skull, early on in development. She bites down hard, clamps her teeth shut against the memory that rises.

She considers that the thing might be a type of mole. It seems to be blind or rather, if it has eyes, she has yet to see them – at least anything that resembles the eyes she’s seen on other animals: the hooded eyes of lizards, the soft brown balls of cows, the red obsidian beads of the rat, the cat eye, fish eye, eagle eye, each so distinct. But sometimes the eye is not an eye. Seeing without perceiving, for example; sight as an act of creation. In addition, there are all sorts of species that are eyeless. A quick search reveals cave wolf spiders and sea urchins and all types of shrimps and salamanders. Most of them are underwater dwellers, but she is sure more will appear if she searches deeper, if she delves into the underground caves and abandoned mine shafts that litter the local landscape.

Later, looking at a blind naked mole rat makes her think that maybe the thing is a hybrid. She has read reports and seen pictures. Genetic modification is leading to all kinds of permutations. At the shops, she buys cherries the size of pawpaws and oranges with edible peels and a new fruit that combines a pomegranate and an apple. The fruit is expensive and ultimately disappointing. It lacks the apple’s crunch or the pop of pomegranate rubies. She remembers a vegetarian friend who warned her that they were already breeding chickens without wings and limbless cows. Picture it: just the central mass, a cow torso or trunk, clumped and inert. Could it be that her creature is such an experiment?

She thinks of how pearls form in oysters or how a tumour grows in a body, a clump of cells without differentiation. And then her creature. She imagines it beginning life as a ball of tightly packed radioactive flesh, raising itself up from the bottom of some medical waste truck,

swimming through the debris of polluted biological matter, swamps permeated with the discarded waste of every living process. Emerging, its body limp, face exposed, hauling itself on to the tarmac, the hum of the sliding liquid. The sucking sounds it makes as it drags itself towards her...

Her bladder feels hot and tight. She closes her laptop. Head throbbing, she walks to the bathroom. Pees without looking, holding her legs clamped together. She listens to the sound of her piss on the water. Sits like that awhile, then slowly spreads her thighs, peers downwards and gasps. The creature seems to have grown; its features are more distinct, more pronounced now.

A shudder goes through her. She quickly balls up some toilet paper, touches a wad lightly to it. The paper comes away wet, but she has no way of knowing if it's her pee or the creature exuding liquid. She recoils, hurriedly pulls her pants up. Flushes, holding down the handle until the paper disappears.

She considers her relationship with the thing. What is she to it? Is she a friend? A habitat? A habit? A home? Or a safehold, a place of refuge, somewhere warm and secluded away from the city, like a hole or nest? But if she is a nest, then is the animal nesting? Creating a safe place so it can breed? The thought drops down to her stomach, hangs there a moment, then births a dozen small creatures, tiny replicants of their mother with pink, crinkling faces and a tuft of soft downy hair that scrabble in her belly. She touches a hand to her stomach, wonders what will become of them once they are fully grown. Where will they go? She doesn't have space to house them. The enclave between her legs is the only really private nook of her body, unless of course one counts the armpits – but surely even those are exposed countless times in everyday activity, in lifting and carrying and calling for attention.

She lies awake in bed, her senses on high alert. The room is filled with shadows, monsters hiding under the bed, ghosts that run lights across the ceiling. The shadows in the room are still when she fixates on them. But when she looks away, they move subtly in the corner of her eye. They're breathing, she thinks, and closes her eyes, then opens them an instant later.

She is sure that as soon as she sleeps, the creature will awaken, begin some kind of secret nocturnal creaturely activity. She tries to lie very still, to hold her body inert. Her limbs are heavy and tacky with sweat. She listens. Finally, when nothing happens, she reaches down. Her hand gropes under the sheet, slides inside her panties. It seems somehow less scary, and she folds her hand over it. Initially it is warm, almost body temperature, but as she presses down, she feels it swell, grow hot and distended. Immediately she pulls back, uncertain if she is somehow smothering it. She waits a while before she slides her hand back down, this time cupping it gently so its little hairs tickle her palm. She falls asleep like that, her hand between her legs, mouth open, saliva gathered in the corners.

In the morning, the bed has a sweetly fetid smell and the sheets feel damp. She balls them up and throws them in the laundry. In the shower, she scrubs herself down. She uses the disinfectant soap that she usually reserves for the kitchen. She scrubs her armpits and her breasts. Washes her feet and behind her knees. She rubs the bar of soap between the lips of her crotch, sliding it down to the groove of her arsehole. She rubs back and forth until her arms ache from reaching and her crotch burns. She repeats the motion until her thighs are red and splotchy from rubbing. Positions her body so the hot water scalds her stomach and streams down between her legs.

She should take action. Report the animal. But to whom? Should she go to a doctor? That's where you would go to get a tapeworm removed – but her creature is not a tapeworm. She has no indication it's parasitic. It does not suck sustenance from her body, at least as far as she can tell. She hasn't lost weight recently or experienced any undesirable symptoms. No

hair loss or broken nails to indicate a vitamin deficiency. If anything, she is looking rounder since the thing arrived. Her breasts seem heavier and firmer and her cheeks have a new sheen. If the thing isn't feeding off her, what does it eat? The question unsettles her, the idea of the thing eating. But of course it must eat! What else would be the use of the mouth? What she thinks is a mouth. The thing doesn't seem to use it for sound. It is very quiet, unnaturally so. Since the initial itch she has heard nothing. She listens intently. The silence unnerves her.

She conducts several experiments. She wets her fingers with different things: fruit juice, honey, the bloody effluence of a steak she buys at the butcher. She unbuttons her pants and rolls down her panties, slides a finger between her legs, angling along the thing's surface until she reaches the small hole of its mouth. In each case, the response is the same: nothing; not itching or twitching, no change she can gauge in the thing's temperature.

She pours a saucer of milk, balances it on a small bench, and sinks her buttocks in the cool liquid. Sits like that a while, motionless, the pink and dark flesh of her creature submerged. Finally, she stands, the milk dripping down her thighs. She examines the saucer but there is only a small change in the liquid's level, probably caused by the displaced milk that now pools on the tiles below her.

It's cold inside the Natural History Museum, quiet. She spends hours wandering the hallways. Lingers in front of stuffed lions and hyenas, an ethnographic display featuring Khoisan hunters, passes snakes adrift in jars of formaldehyde, petrified insects entombed in stone. The display cases are giant aquariums emptied of water. She stares at the predatory jaw of a coelacanth, the ancient bottom-dwelling fish that was believed to be extinct until a scientist found it at the mouth of the Chalumna River. The locals laughed at the discovery – how can something that has always been, lived long amongst us, be discovered? She runs her fingers along the glass case surface. Stares into the fish's eyes, its ravenous mouth, traces the

snapping urgency of its teeth. Feels a welling in her stomach as a museum guard approaches.

“Can I help you? Is there something specific you’re looking for?”

She shakes her head. Just looking.

The guard’s presence makes her nervous. She imagines her creature would be quite a find for a place like this – an institute or research centre. For the first time she thinks of the thing’s worth. She goes to the information desk and asks about the price tag attached to rare animal displays. The stuffed riverine rabbit or Ethiopian wolf, say, or the hairy-eared dwarf lemur from Madagascar. The woman doesn’t understand the question. She is just a help desk jockey, trained to dispense brochures and pinpoint areas on the map. She points the girl to the curio shop.

She has no interest in curios, but walks in the direction indicated so as not to arouse suspicion. She buys a bottle of water and a plastic bat on sale as part of some special focus on cave-dwelling mammals. Once outside she wonders if she chose the bat because she sees an affinity between it and her thing. She thinks about her body and its caverns and sinkholes.

She resolves to keep her thing secret. To tell no one, certainly not anyone involved in the study of science. After all, it doesn’t seem to be doing any harm. It demands very little. It doesn’t need to be fed and it makes no sound. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, it doesn’t even exist.

As if to prove this to herself, she phones a man she met at a party she attended when she first arrived in the city. The man, if she remembers correctly, was introduced as working in wildlife conservation, some sort of research into endangered species. She dials his number and says, “I don’t know, I was just thinking of you.” He seems flattered. “How about a drink sometime?”

She has had little social contact since discovering the thing, and is afraid that it might somehow show, be visible to others. She wears an old pair of black jeans that keeps

everything neatly tucked in without riding too close to her skin, too near the panty line. The restaurant they meet in is crowded. They find a table, squashed in the corner, and face each other. As it turns out, she was wrong about the man's field of expertise. Yes, he is in conservation, but he is mostly concerned with legislation. His background is legal. She tries to focus while he tells her about a case study he is working on, examining how recent trade agreements with Chinese shipping companies have affected the perlemoen population in local waters. He tells her about the plight of local fishing communities, the tiny motorised fishing boats that carry pirates, armed gangs that run the illegal perlemoen trade.

The word "pirate" catches her attention. She feels a shudder. It is as if the setting or the man or what he is saying has upset the thing. She doesn't know how she knows this. It is not so much a feeling as a sudden twitching, a sort of pull-itch that makes her slide her arms across her belly and hug them tight. She wriggles in her chair, overly aware of the sucking sound her bottom makes on the seat's vinyl cushion. Eventually the pressure is too much. She excuses herself and rushes to the bathroom.

Her bum hugs the toilet bowl, pants around her ankles. Her panties are slightly damp – not wet exactly, not like she peed on them – but clammy, coated in a viscous substance. Her mouth is dry. Could there be something wrong with the creature? Is this how it bleeds or maybe some weird form of weeping?

She is overcome with a flush of emotion. It starts in her stomach and radiates out until her whole body is filled with small warm fuzzy things. She reaches down and gently cups the thing. She begins to stroke, very slowly at first, then faster.

The thing grows taut under her touch. She feels its warm mouth open, the liquid excretion saliva, not blood. It coats her hand, stringy tendrils that seem to pull her deeper. She slides a finger in, just one, then another. She roots around, scratching at the top, the soft yielding sides that bulge when pried. She pushes harder, discovers a funny sound made by

squishing the walls in. She starts to laugh. Her body tingles. Her skin shudders and her jaw trembles. The thing pulls tight, spasms into a hard knot and then goes slack. Everything becomes indistinct. The air is hot and thick. She sits on the toilet breathing. The thing is quiet. Her belly is flat and relaxed. She stands slowly, legs shaky beneath her, wipes herself off and cleans her panties with toilet paper. At the small enamel basin, she avoids the mirror, washes her hands twice, dries them under the hot stream of air from an electronic hygiene drier.

At the table, the man is drumming his fingers. They sit in silence. She is sure her face is flushed, and she looks down to avoid his gaze. Finally, she looks up and asks: “Do you have any pets?” She doesn’t know why this question.

He shakes his head. He doesn’t like the idea of animals being domesticated. He says something about corrupting the animal spirit.

She says: “And cockroaches?” Cocks her head and watches his face. Obviously he doesn’t get it. She tries to explain that there is no urban and rural divide any more, no pure, incorruptible nature. She asks him to try to imagine dogs before they were domesticated. Or rats in the wild and pigeons in jungles. Of them all, the pigeons seem the most unimaginable to her. They seem so stupid and placid.

She hopes her thing never becomes like that. Docile and dependent. She likes its wildness, its skittishness. How it cowers below her, seemingly afraid of the light, the hard air. She slides her hand between her legs under the table. Her thighs are hot. When the waiter comes she orders steak. The man orders the grilled line fish. “I don’t eat red meat,” he says, as if needing to explain.

She watches him slice carefully into his fish and take the bones out. The meat is pale and flaky, gives easily. The spine comes out clean. He impales a forkful, brings it to his lips. Between bites he talks about problems with the Chinese shipping industry. Certain practices: sharks brought up in nets, their fins ripped off, thrown back, still living, to sink like stones.

She watches him eat and thinks sharks do not have bones, only cartilage. The thought makes her seasick or at least feel something like seasickness, that same lurching. The smell of the man's food is suddenly overpowering. She can see his jaw moving. A deafening noise around her: the sharp sound of metal and porcelain, high-pitched voices.

Outside it is raining lightly. She declines the man's offer of a lift. She wants to walk, to be outside, to feel the air and water on her face. She walks quickly. In the distance, she can see the silhouettes of the cranes in the harbour against the sky, the lights of the ships far out at sea. The wind rips through her and blows her hair in her face. She is soaked when she gets home.

She decides not to phone the man again, pushes him out her head. That night, he keeps coming back to her. She thinks of the fish dish in front of him, of him eating then talking, of his lips opening and closing. The spine left on the side of his plate, its spikes and serrated edges. She goes through to her bedroom and undresses slowly. She sits in the centre of the bed and spreads her legs. Her heart beats quickly as large red splotches spread across her thighs. She breathes, reaches down and feels a quiver. The stirring grows so strong it's as if her insides are tiny animals, gnawing and scratching the walls of her body. She runs her fingers across the creature's skin. The mouth feels like a little wet cave under her touch. She wants very badly to stick her finger into it. She peels open the lips, very wet suddenly, lubricated so her index finger slides in easily. The whole thing cleaves as she penetrates it, goes in with three fingers, pushes deeper, rocking and thrusting.

In that moment she realises that her understanding of the animal has been very limited. What she took to be its body, the bulk of the thing, is really only an exterior. Buried just below that is another whole extension, an animal holed out or turned inside over. It is not clear if it's mammalian or reptilian or amphibian. It could even be fish or a plant. It has no bones, or perhaps she just can't feel them. Its muscles, or what might be muscles, are coiled in

spasms that knot and loosen as her hand strokes them. Its skin is hot and wet, a mucus membrane covered in a thin layer of slime. It doesn't make a sound, but as she thrusts deeper she becomes aware of a vibration, low and metallic, like the hum of insects, a soft buzz at a pitch that human ears shouldn't be able to hear.

She listens closely, tries to imagine the shape of what's inside her. She navigates like a bat sending out signals. Does it go on indefinitely? Does it have many parts, chambers, like a heart? Is it contiguous, or are parts of it cut off from the other parts, sealed away, unreachable and silent? Are its parts solid, defined, or do they simply take on the shape they inhabit, like liquid? In that moment she thinks she smells it, a smell like fish, like seaweed on the beach in the morning, but after a time she cannot remember that smell, or seaweed, or morning. Her ability to compare anything with anything else is slipping. There is nothing to compare. They are no longer separate creatures.