

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 passing fancies—maybe a desire to visit a palm reader or to sit in on a seance or maybe just a vague longing to be visited in the night by the ghost of a deceased friend. For myself, and surely many others, it has always been more than that. Ever since my childhood, I have wanted to see something from beyond the pale—to watch a demonstration of telekinesis or to observe a UFO—anything that would allow me a peek behind the veil of ordinary reality. Despite all my willingness to believe in something more, however, until that time I actually experienced evidence of the other side, I could be no more than a questing 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 off Puget Sound in western Washington during the break between the winter and spring trimesters last year. The trip was as much vacation as casual adventure for a couple of scientists anxious to see the largest temperate rainforest in North America firsthand.

Like many biologists in the past twenty years, we had become concerned about the environment, so we decided to collect insects, small animal carcasses, and specimens of feces as we explored the peninsula. We would take what samples we found back to our lab at the California university where we both taught and analyze them for man-made toxins. Out in the mostly untamed Olympics, we hoped to find a relatively high degree of purity.

Because of a little ego-thing that always stressed between Laverne and myself, whether in our publications, our students, our philosophy, 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 ever met, we had each kept logs of dates, locations, and the number of eagle sightings we had 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 to the other upon return. As it presently stood, I had seen but two more eagles in the wild than had Laverne. So we bet a bottle of cognac on our bird watching talents—whoever spotted the most eagles during the trip to the Olympic Peninsula won the bottle.

After twelve hours of driving the first day, we arrived at our destination in the late afternoon of the second. We claimed a campsite and pitched our tent in a densely wooded glen in the rainforest bottomlands on the western most side of the peninsula. To a couple of wide-eyed biologists accustomed to hiking in Northern California, the vegetation was as stunning as it was otherworldly. A thick, spongy coat of bright green moss covered everything. The ground, the boulders, up the trunks of Red Alders, Vine Maples, and a single towering Sitka Spruce at the far end of the glen. And 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 rest of the daylight hours of that first day venturing with child-like fascination into the alien eco-culture of the surrounding glen. We broke out our set of vials and found several viable specimens right away. Amid this initial fervor, to my chagrin, Laverne also spotted two large bald eagles in the first hour we were there. Then it was time to forage for some dry wood, no easy task in a rainforest, and to get a campfire going before nightfall.

No sooner had we built ourselves a fire and finished off a dinner of freeze-dried chicken noodle soup and stick-toasted French bread than it began to rain. Of course we were prepared for this, so we quickly squeezed 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, arguing the extent of reality, and generally getting snookered.

“Christ man, sometimes you are so full of it,” muttered Laverne after I'd expressed to him 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. “Well, yes, we see but a narrow portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. And our ability to hear is nothing compared to that, say, of a dog.” He was a few years short of fifty, yet his hair was entirely silver, a bit long, and swept to one side off a rather narrow face. His nose was a thin, hawkish beak, but his lips were full and expressive—like his steel blue eyes that always glimmered playfully with a wry kind of warmth. “But these kinds of physical limitations suggest nothing of the extrasensory.”

“It’s more than that, Laverne. Like scientific innovation, like plain imagination, our consciousness is unlimited. There’s no telling what we might know.”

Laverne turned away from me to reach for his sleeping bag.

“Think of the mind as a house—with the roof blown off,” 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 of our house. But isn’t there also an attic. A kind of extra-consciousness. Our intuition. Our sense of the whole as more than the parts. The metaphor of life. The vast suggestions of the infinite universe.”

“The vast suggestions of the infinite universe,” he repeated thoughtfully, opening up his bedroll and taking another swig of Wild Turkey. “Like those two beautiful baldies I spotted today flying side by side.” He offered me the bottle with a smirking grin. “It was practically a religious experience.”

“Up yours,” I sneered, taking the bottle. His comment was both a sarcastic reference to my once telling him I thought sighting an eagle was akin to a spiritual experience and a barbed reminder that he was two up in the eagle competition. “One day you’ll wake up from this dream we call life,” I replied, tilting the bottle into my mouth and savoring the heat of the liquor singeing down my gullet. “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 and he stared back. 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.

“Good night, Laverne,” 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, half-baked, amid the pouring rain, barely able to see ten feet into the dark, layer by layer I became aware of the great depth of the forest around us. Through the steady hiss of the falling rain, a light wind, scented with wet woody smells, whispered in the nearby trees. Beyond that, the lonely hoot of some night bird carried in the distance. Further yet, a hollow stillness echoed in my ears like the sound of the ocean in a seashell—the spirit of the wood confiding in the night...

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 out over my head. The rain had stopped during the night, and a steamy fog rose up off the verdant forest floor to meet the misty clouds settling down on the treetops from above. With the over-sized ferns and hanging mosses, the feeling of the morning was like that of 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 right behind me. His eyes betrayed the same spinning thickness that queezed within me. Speaking seemed more than either of us could muster, and as zombies, we set about the task of getting a fire going, then food for our stomachs and coffee for our heads.

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

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” he said, as I stooped to inspect the object he pointed out. Compressed into the soft moss by one of our footprints from that morning was a small, very colorful beetle corpse. Though it had suffered the fatal consequences of a boot heel, the body was hardly damaged at all. 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 its 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 big 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, Laverne,” I said with 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 tenth of the world’s beetles in books. 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 heavy mist that engulfed our camp, a large breakfast of pancakes and eggs served to brighten 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 first evidence of the sun began faint resolve above, like a full moon behind a drifting gauze of clouds. Then five thick beams of sunlight, delineated clearly by the tiny drops of moisture in the air, broke fully through the trees. One fell squarely on the table where our now empty dishes were spread, causing me to marvel at the crystalline clarity of those ordinary things—when from beneath my tin spoon, a tiny green and orange beetle crawled with measured speed straight at me.

“Laverne,” I called softly, as much for his head as mine, “it looks like your rare find ain’t quite so special as you hoped.”

He followed the direction of my eyes to the beautiful beetle and edged closer to the table. “Ah,” he chuckled, “now we might bring one back alive.”

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

Laverne’s return caused me to look up as he sat down. His eyes hardened to mine. “Watch out, you’ve let the little bugger free,” he said just as I noticed the same. The beetle was still upon its course—headed straight at me!

Now 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 maybe he trusted me less than his eyes.

A little undone by his tone, I sat back to allow 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 damned bug?”

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

Now Laverne seemed truly 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 a 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 must catch that bug,” exclaimed Laverne transfixed with excitement.

I looked at him in disbelief. “But what are we going to keep him in?”

A vague pale of impossibility washed over Laverne's face as 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 back in the shoulder. Again our eyes met in question, weighing, however abstractly, our reality.

“Would you say that bug looks harmless—no large mandibles, no obvious stinging device?” I queried.

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

I allowed the mysterious insect to crawl into my hand, then closed it delicately into my

palm. Incredulously, we both watched it exit out the back of my hand.

“Pinch me again, Laverne,” was all the response I could muster. Equally lost, Laverne delivered a plier-like pinch to my forearm—“Ouch!”—to which *our dream* dissolved not!

Laverne stood abruptly. “Let me get my camera before this thing is gone.”

I grabbed his arm before he could take a step. “Don't waste your film. 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 quicksilver and the glass, I was sadly disappointed to be confronted by my wide-eyed face. And there below on the table teetered the Ka Beetle, its two front legs feeling for the 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 are not drunk. We are not asleep. We are 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,” the ancient Egyptian term for the astral body or spirit. Fumbling blindly for the edge, the bug tumbled, as any material insect might, off the table and onto the ground. With little other choice, on hands and knees, we followed the beetle, as it fixedly aimed in the direction of our tent.

Its progress was slow, stumbling and struggling painfully 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 would propose ways we might entrap the bug and I would count them out.

His frustration boiling out all over him 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 large leaf, driven by some inner force like a salmon on the run.

“Laverne, there is an understood law about these types of things. You cannot make money off them. For some reason or another—like photographs of UFOs—they just don't ever 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 on film. 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, excitedly selecting film speeds and aperture openings. I let him snap a few before trying to explain his foolishness. “Even if the bug appears on the film, 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?”

“God damn it, I'm the pragmatist here, not you!” He stomped off, then 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 on to 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 procedure of moving one hand after another, 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 keep the little fellow on the treadmill of my hands as I get in the truck. Then you drive, and 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.”

“We could take turns.”

I nodded skeptically.

Together we stood, Laverne still doing his deft handwork with the bug. 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 and his brow tightened. “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 mind. 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 before our collection vials.

My initial intention had been to examine the materiality of the dead specimen. So continuing along these lines, I opened the vial and allowed the lifeless insect to slide into my hand. With the prod of a finger, there was no doubt about its solid existence. In doing this, I had also moved myself off the line of the beetle's advance some ten feet. As I suspected, the Ka Beetle now altered its direction to coincide with my change.

As Laverne steadily gained insight to what was on my mind, I again moved sideways another ten feet. And again the beetle adjusted its reckoning as though I held true north in the palm of my hand.

When I stepped forward to intersect the beetle's advance, Laverne assumed I had contrived the same manner as he to lure the astral presence all the way to California. But my greedy friend's eyes just about popped from their sockets, when I laid the specimen directly in the beetle's path. Before he could move a muscle—except for the blinking of his bugging eyes—the Ka had entered the lifeless body—its goal all along. Then with life renewed, its orange shell parted, and lacewings lifted it into the air.

Laverne made a futile grasp at the flying bug, but it felt freedom as never before and soared beyond his lunge.

Laverne did not speak to me 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 very upset by his reaction.

Two weeks after we'd returned to the university, and Laverne had determined that the beetle was clearly catalogued and nothing rare at all, he stopped by my office. He strode up to my desk and placed the unopened bottle of cognac he'd won on my desk.

“What's this?” I asked.

“For first understanding the real nature of the Ka beetle, I think you deserve credit for an addition eagle sighting. I say we split the bottle between us.”

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

But he wouldn't have it. “Don't we record our eagles because when we see them we feel uplifted, knowing something of the noble spirit they define?” He paused and our eyes met. “For me there was a similar transcendence with the beetle.”

I had to smile and 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. “And the things we'll never understand.”

I graciously took a swig and looked him in the eye. “To the Ka beetle,” I said, “and one day waking from this dream we call life.”

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