

The Town Drunk
Presents

A Natural History of the Pancake Badger

Matthew Bey

Copyright © 2009 Matthew Bey

Mike felt fatalistically calm as the pancake badger slipped off its display and tore across the Hall of Extra-Terrestrial Ecology toward twenty undefended Catholic schoolgirls. *There goes my career*, he thought with some relief. No longer would he lie awake at nights wondering what could be worse than getting fired from the Field Museum of Natural History and having to take a job as curator of the ludicrously low-prestige Beloit Natural History Museum.

Mike stopped his spiel about the Aldebaran watershed in mid-sentence. He murmured, “I think everyone ought to stand on this exhibit.”

The students of St. Margaret’s Catholic School for Girls, who had not been listening to him in the first place, continued to giggle about boys they only saw on weekends.

“Excuse me, Mr. Spiekle? Did you tell us to stand on the exhibit?” Sister Langsquid asked, her eyes narrowing in a nunnish scowl. She glanced first at the sign that read, “Do Not Touch Exhibit,” then the “Warning: Quantum Containment Field” sign.

“I SAID GET ON THE EXHIBIT!”

The snarl of a charging pancake badger made up the girls’ minds. Even if they couldn’t see the ankle-high wad of primal aggression barreling along the floor, the reptilian part of their brains understood the pancake badger very well. Girls screamed and leapt, practically levitating onto the one-to-one-million scale model of the Aldebaran watershed.

Sister Langsquid dawdled. She clucked disapprovingly.

Mike hoisted a chunky student by her sweater and then joined the girls in crushing a diorama that had eaten the funds of four separate grants.

“Why, I—” The sister changed her mind as the pancake badger rushed the last four feet toward her steel-toed work boots. She hopped to the safety of Mike’s arms, the hem of her habit ripping in the beast’s jaws.

The sight reminded Mike of penguins squirting out of the sea to escape leopard seals.

The school girls screamed and jostled each other, a Brownian churning of elbows and plaid skirts.

The students close to the edge clutched at their neighbors and tried to push themselves toward the center. Their cries echoed from the high ceiling like a tropical aviary.

A look of horror smothered Sister Langsquid's normally sour expression. She stabbed her finger at the floor. "Was that—"

"That's the animal you saw in the Greesmans World exhibit," Mike admitted. He could feel his head buzzing. So far, no one had died, so he could possibly sidestep criminal charges and serious litigation. "It was the one chewing up the cinder blocks, remember?"

Sister Langsquid mouthed words that a nun would never say out loud. "How—how—how did it get out?"

"Well, normally the quantum containment fields would be working. They're supposed to be on all the time..."

The pancake badger looked nothing at all like a badger. A multitude of segmented legs surrounded a disc-shaped body about the size of a bicycle tire. It scuttled crab-like as it patrolled the floor beneath the watershed exhibit, its back looking as leathery as a soft-shelled turtle. When it growled, its entire body split open like a clam shell, revealing one of the most powerful jaws ever discovered in a galaxy of fauna. It reminded Mike of a chattering teeth wind-up toy. It also reminded Mike of a rabid bulldog, his garbage disposal, the sound a city bus makes, a bandsaw, and his ex-boss at the Field Museum.

Sister Langsquid noticed that she was clutching Mike's arms and let go. Immediately she teetered over the edge. With a sneer of loathing, she regripped the curator and balanced herself. She craned her neck to look at the floor. "Where'd that monster of yours go, Mr. Spiekle?"

Mike couldn't see where it had gone, but slurping and grinding sounds issued from beneath the exhibit table. "They can't really jump, pancake badgers. Probably, it's trying to chew off the supports. It's the sort of thing they would do in the wild."

"But the legs of this table are metal!"

"Steel. And rated to over a ton." Mike nodded. The gnawing sounded like a temporary reprieve melting away. "It might take it two or three minutes to work all the way through."

"Quiet, ladies!" Even under threat of alien attack, Sister Langsquid's voice had the authority to freeze the students' panic. Forty eyes blinked in her direction. "We're in a little bit of a crisis right now, but rest assured that the adults have everything under control."

We what? Mike gaped at her.

"I need you ladies to stay calm and quiet while we sort things through. It's very important that you follow Mr. Spiekle's instructions immediately and without question. Am I perfectly clear?"

A chorus of “Yes, Ma’am” followed.

“Very good.” She looked down her nose at Mike. “Mr. Spiekle? What do we do now?”

Shit. Forty eyes blinked at Mike. He straightened his tie, an action that dislodged Sister Langsquid’s left hand, forcing her to grip him by the belt. “Um. There’s been an unanticipated technical malfunction.” *There’s an understatement.* The quantum fields never just failed. Either the contractor had cut a lot of corners, or—and the thought was beyond comprehension—the entire quantum energy grid had gone down. But the grid had multiple-redundancy failsafes. If it ever stopped working, planes would fall out of the sky, hospitals would shut down, and skyscrapers would collapse.

“And what are we going to do about the animal...?” the nun prompted.

“Um. Well. I guess, um, that I’m going to have to, um, you know, subdue it?” Easier said than done. It had taken a team of thirty naturalists to capture a pancake badger breeding pair, and four of them had to get replacement foot grafts.

“Well then. Please don’t let me get in your way, Mr. Spiekle.”

He leaned close to her ear, whispering so the students couldn’t hear. “The room’s equipped with a panic device. I just have to type the four-digit code. It seals the hall and floods it with tranquilizer gas. It’ll knock out your students, but it should take out the pancake badger, too.”

“Well?” She raised her eyebrows in a “get on with it” expression.

“Well, the control panel’s over by the entrance.” He jerked his head at the far wall. The city had converted a sprawling complex of warehouses into the museum, so over a hundred feet of exhibit space lay between them and the panel. Mike supposed he could dash for it and punch as many as two of the digits before the pancake badger treated the St. Margaret’s girls to the spectacle of a full-body human dismemberment.

“*Mr. Spiekle,*” Sister Langsquid snapped with nunnish condescension. “I don’t care what you—”

One side of the exhibit table dropped, the surface tilting like the deck of the *Titanic*. Twenty students screamed and lurched. A girl slipped, and her classmates pulled her back from the edge, digging their heels into tiny streams and tributaries, fighting for traction in the miniaturized swamps of Aldebaran.

The table swayed, supported by only three legs and a handful of bolts. The sixth graders huddled even closer together. The pancake badger began work on the next piece of steel.

“Exactly how long are you planning on waiting, Mr. Spiekle?”

Mike lowered his eyes in shame. He saw the girls’ legs, bony knees projecting from plaid skirts, and he hated to think of those legs getting torn off.

“Sister Langsquid? Sister?” A ponytailed student with glasses reflexively raised her hand to get the teacher’s attention. “Who’s that man standing over there?”

The adults followed a half-dozen pointing fingers. A huge figure lurked by the passage leading to the Earth wing. It ducked to pass under the door and walked toward them, its arms swinging in languid arcs.

“Oh, my goodness. It’s Wayne. He must have gotten out too.” Mike gestured frantically, pinching his fingers near his temples and throwing his hands forward, palms out. “Wayne! Go back! It’s not safe here!”

“What are you doing?” Sister Langsquid growled. “He could help us.”

“Danger, Wayne! Danger!”

“Help us! Help!”

“Shut, up!” Mike pushed down the nun’s beckoning arm. “You’re going to get him hurt.”

“My first concern is my students, Mr. Spiekle.”

Then the students got a clear look at Wayne, and their screaming started afresh.

From a distance, Wayne looked kind of like a very tall man in a fur coat. Up close, the apparent humanity disappeared as it became obvious Wayne wasn’t wearing any clothes at all. A smell like rancid milk washed over them as Wayne approached the Aldebaran exhibit. An oddly skewed face leered.

(thing)(tell)(Mike)(now), Wayne signed.

“It’s a bigfoot!” the chunky student exclaimed. The next round of screams befitted the sudden appearance of a rock star.

(danger!)(flee!)(flee!), Mike signed urgently, his hands a blur.

For the first time that day, Sister Langsquid seemed almost impressed. “I had no idea you had a sasquatch here, Mr. Spiekle.”

Aside from an embossed coffee mug, Wayne was the only thing Mike had taken with him from the Field Museum of Natural History. Wayne himself had insisted on following Mike into exile, nearly crippling the Beloit Museum’s operating budget in the process. It wasn’t cheap to house a sasquatch, although legally speaking he was closer to a volunteer than an exhibit.

Even with the humans standing on the table, Wayne had to look down to make eye contact. The sasquatch furrowed his brow, momentarily looking like a giant ape. Then he smiled, and the hominid seemed like someone’s uncle with a very bad haircut and a pituitary problem.

(people)(day)(day)(end)(end)(end). Wayne held his fuzzy hands like a surgeon fresh from scrubbing and flashed his palms forward repeatedly.

“Is he trying to say something?”

“Would you shut up?” Mike hissed. “I’m trying to talk to him.”

The pancake badger continued worrying through the exhibit legs, as if it were more keen on getting at the smorgasbord of Catholic school girls than harassing an animal the size of Wayne.

It had not been easy to find the sasquatch population of the Pacific Northwest. It had taken satellite imaging and helicopters, but once they had learned the trick of it, researchers began to find bigfoot all over. Troops of bigfoot massed throughout the Cascades. Small family units squatted in abandoned Boeing tool sheds. Hungry males foraged through bakery dumpsters in Spokane and Portland. For centuries, they had focused their substantial intellect on evasion and camouflage. A man walking to work in suburban Seattle could pass within feet of an adult *Homo sasquatchus* and never notice the giant hominid hiding inside a refrigerator box.

Conservative estimates placed the breeding population at close to fifty thousand.

The sasquatch proved more intelligent than anyone had ever suspected. All bigfoot lured into captivity learned to play chess at grand master level. By every non-verbal measure their IQs tested into the genius range. But no matter how hard they tried, the sasquatch simply could not learn language. The best they accomplished was a pidgin version of American sign language and a few lisped words. They approached symbolic communication like a man doing binary arithmetic in his head. Noam Chomsky had been right—all language derived from a universal grammar, a mental facility specific to *Homo sapiens*. For all their versatility and cleverness, the bigfoot could never join the human club.

(day)(then)(day)(then)(day)(thing). (end)(end)(end). (no)(man). (no)(snacks). (no)(homes).

Sister Langsquid wrinkled her nose at Wayne’s pervasive B.O. “What’s he going on about?”

“I think he’s trying to warn us about something,” Mike said.

“We already know we’re in trouble. Tell your pet to save us or get on with it already.”

“He’s not my pet,” Mike snapped. (Wayne)(help)(us). (danger)(animal)(below). (save)(girls)(now).

Wayne lurched forward suddenly, his bristle-haired arms folding around Mike and Sister Langsquid, an action that prompted a surprised yelp from the nun. Reliable witnesses had observed sasquatch dismembering grizzlies with their bare hands, but Wayne gently cradled the *homo sapiens* in his arms. He leaned his head close, his beard scratching Mike’s neck, his wide lips tickling Mike’s ear.

“I use your car now,” Wayne whispered.

The sasquatch let go and strolled from the exhibit hall, the shadows enveloping him like a forest of Douglas fir.

“Is he going for help?” Sister Langsquid peeped.

“I think he’s going to steal my car.”

The pancake badger tore off the second table leg, and the students toppled over each other like dominos. The exhibit vibrated like a diving board, completely unsupported at one end. Mike heard the table splintering.

“Fuck,” he yelled. Then he rolled to the floor and started to run.

Mike was not an athlete by any stretch of the imagination, but in that particular instance he ran like a greyhound. He beelined for the nearest exhibit table, keenly aware of the pancake badger’s snarl behind his heels. He launched himself at a case of Protelean flencing artifacts, stretching his body out vertical.

He hit the edge of the case, his feet doing an undignified dance to push him over the top. Then he was safe, and the pancake badger spun in circles beneath him like a cocker spaniel taunted with a biscuit.

“Don’t stop, Mr. Spiekle! Hurry!” Sister Langsquid made shooping motions at him.

Mike gasped for breath, rolling his head to appraise the gauntlet he had just run. Fifteen feet down, and another hundred to go. If he took it in bursts, taking advantage of terrain, that meant running another twenty feet to the display of Cheney’s Fronds, then leaping directly onto the machine culture exhibit, then a fifteen foot sprint before climbing the skeleton of the Salizaron Behemoth, and then it was a good thirty feet to the control panel with no cover. On top of that, the stress had triggered an asthma attack.

Mike wheezed, “I don’t think I can make it.”

“Stop being so negative!” the nun shouted.

Of course I’m being negative. I’m an obsessive pessimist. Mike’s therapist had told him that, just before the therapist had checked into narcotics rehab.

At that moment, the lights went out.

A paranoid niggling at the back of Mike’s brain wondered if the day’s problems were actually isolated to the museum. He remembered Wayne’s oblique warning, which hinted that a greater cataclysm had caused the failure of both the quantum fields and the electricity. *What if I activate the panic device, and the tranquilizer gas falls down, and nobody ever arrives to rescue us?*

Shut up, Mike, you're just being paranoid.

“Go, Mr. Spiekle, go!” Sister Langsquid and the girls dangled their legs over the side of the drooping table, luring the pancake badger like bass anglers. The beast drew away from the Protelean display case, scuttling back and forth indecisively, torn between two tempting morsels.

Fighting to breathe, Mike exploited the head start, jogging through the gloom of the emergency lighting. Once again he climbed to safety a hair's breadth ahead of the pancake badger and its remorseless jaws.

From the display of Cheney fronds he leapt directly to the machine culture exhibit without touching the floor. It reminded Mike of the playground game of “don't touch the lava.”

Mike broke a priceless brain crystal as he scrambled across the display, drawing air into his constricted lungs with increasing difficulty. When he reached the far end, the girls once again used themselves as bait to give Mike a few steps advantage over the alien.

Mike ran, his legs feeling like bags of molasses. The skeleton of the Salizaron Behemoth stood directly on the floor, surrounded by a plush velvet rope, so he had to duck the rope and shimmy up a shin bone to get out of reach. But the girls did a good job, and two seconds elapsed before the pancake badger arrived, circling the behemoth's foot and snapping with frustration.

One last dash remained between Mike and the control panel. In an effort to reduce the final distance, he climbed the skeleton, brachiating across the behemoth's pelvis to grab the most advantageous of its three legs.

Just as Mike wrapped his legs around the door-side femur, the skeleton began to collapse. The steel wires holding the skull against the rafters snapped one by one, twanging like guitar strings. Then the whole structure folded, vertebrae cracking and ribs crunching.

The pancake badger burped in confusion.

Like a bag of I-beams the skeleton hit the floor, scattering everywhere. Mike collided with the “Do Not Touch the Exhibit” sign as he fell. An elbow joint struck him painfully on the back of the neck. He rolled on the ground, thrashing beneath the pile of bones.

Faced with a novel stimulus, the pancake badger resorted to its most basic behavior pattern: violence. It snapped and tore, splintering behemoth bones like a wood chipper, lashing out indiscriminately.

Mike ran. Behind him he heard the St. Margaret's field trip group shouting and jumping on the floor, unprotected and vulnerable.

Mike made it to the entrance before the pancake badger noticed him. Almost leisurely he flipped up the control panel's lid and punched the four-digit panic code.

1-1-1-1.

With his finger poised above the “Enter” key, Mike paused. He remember all those long nights in the Field Museum of Natural History, playing chess with Wayne, sitting with the hominid in the semi-darkness of the sasquatch exhibit. Of all Mike’s friends and colleagues, only Wayne had stuck by him when he got canned. Stealing his car at the first sign of trouble just didn’t seem like Wayne. And what would Wayne do with the car anyway? It was a Citroen subcompact; the hominid’s legs were far too long to work the pedals.

It was faith in his tall, hairy friend that made Mike stop and whistle for the pancake badger—the high trill they used just before they fed the pancake badger its twice-daily dose of goat carcass.

The creature forgot about the behemoth bones and charged him. A Pavlovian river of drool splashed from its gaping jaws.

Mike ran for the front door, the pancake badger close at his heels. The Earth wing, the Hall of Synthetic Biology, and the museum gift shop flashed by in a blur.

He couldn’t draw enough oxygen into his asthmatic lungs, and his vision started to tunnel. Mike could see the big glass doors of the front entrance, his car parked right at the curb. It was a light-beige, quantum-powered Citroen X-90, and Mike was pretty certain that was not where he had parked it.

The clatter of segmented legs on tiled floor sounded as close as his own shoes, but Mike didn’t dare look. With his lungs burning, Mike pounded toward the power doors of the front entrance. The doors didn’t open.

Mike launched out of the museum in a shower of lawsuit-proof safety glass.

He rolled to the curb, sprawled and stunned. He looked up just in time to see Wayne lift the Citroen over his head. The French subcompact and the American primate reared into the sky with the triumphant pose of a Soviet propaganda mural.

The pancake badger launched at Mike’s face. As the great jaws hinged open, Mike saw nothing but the beast’s pink maw lined with diamond-hard teeth.

Wayne dropped the front of the car on the pancake badger’s leathery back, the right corner of the bumper smashing the flat beast even flatter.

The pancake badger squeaked like a bath toy.

Mike stared at his own reflection in the chrome bumper of the car. Both the bumper and the squashed remains of the pancake badger were inches from his nose. Mike calmly noted his reflection’s surprised expression.

Wayne ground the 800-pound car into the alien like a man stubbing out a cigarette.

Mike wheezed as he brought himself to his feet. “Thanks, Wayne. I knew you wouldn’t leave me.”

Wayne let go of Mike’s car to sign, and the vehicle toppled into the street upside-down. (wait)(long)(time). (thought)(mike)(lost). Wayne’s lips pursed in a chimpanzee smile.

“Hey, it takes longer to run from one of those things than you would think.”

Sister Langsquid and the girls came out of the museum, apprehensively stepping through the broken glass.

“Everything’s okay! You can come out.” Mike beckoned. “Wayne took care of it. You’re out of danger.”

“What’s going on out here, Mr. Spiekle? Why is everything so quiet?” Sister Langsquid looked at the world with a disapproving glare, and it was only then that Mike realized that something was terribly wrong with Beloit.

Birds whistled from the rooftops of the warehouse district. A fast-food wrapper rustled through the street. Mike pricked up his ears, but he couldn’t hear anything else—no murmurs of traffic, no police sirens, and no clattering railyards.

Beloit was as quiet as an alpine meadow.

“Oh, my.” The enormity of the disaster struck him. It wasn’t just the museum’s containment fields. “The quantum grid is down. Everything has stopped.”

Mike caught sight of smoke rising from downtown. At the corner, a man ran with his tie flapping over his shoulder, disappearing behind a row of parked semis. The girls started sobbing.

“Settle down, girls,” Sister Langsquid said. “We’ve all had communion this week, so if the world’s coming to an end, we don’t have anything to worry about.”

Wayne gestured for Mike’s attention, pointing toward the Beloit city limits. Mike nodded, and then shouted to be heard over the panic. “Maybe the world’s ending, maybe it isn’t. But I think all of us had better find someplace safe for the time being. Wayne is good at hiding and avoiding trouble. We should all go with him.”

Mike took Sister Langsquid’s hand and Wayne took his. Together the three of them lead the class of schoolgirls into the fields and forests that surrounded the city.

Mike felt calm for the first time in years. He no longer had to worry about his job.



Matthew Bey is a writer and editor living in Austin, Texas. He co-edits the zine *Space Squid* and the fiction page of RevolutionSF.com. He discusses weird food and various other topics on his blog, *Zombie Lapdance* (<http://www.revolutionsf.com/bb/weblog.php?w=5>).