

Episode 44: Cassandra Logs #2: The Nameless Fish
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When do we decide what we are? It may be impossible. By the time we define ourselves we are already something new.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Hello again!

I once knew a CryptoNaturalist who never found what she was looking for. She searched and searched for her whole life and never found it. She saw it only once and that moment defined her forever. Even now, her compatriots remember her for her quest, her yearning, her ultimate failure.

Her name was Anna Marie Stoneburner and, growing up, her family owned a cottage in Northern Canada that was inaccessible by roads. Her grandfather built it board by board by loading it into his boat near the local tavern, winding up the Elbow Narrows, unloading each board and plank and nail, and then building. At night he slept under the stars and listened to the cacophony of night creatures and the gentle drumming noise of the water against the hull of his boat.

His son did not love the cabin as much, but his granddaughter, Anna Marie Stoneburner, adored it with every ounce of her being. Anyway, it was a cheap vacation her father figured, and he planned to sell it when she went to college – because of course she was going to college. Anna Marie Stoneburner did not particularly want this for herself. There was yelling, as there had been yelling during the divorce and movie nights with boys and going out wearing *that*.

Anyway, the college argument had been won or lost, or at least an agreement was reached, and she promised to go if they could spend one last summer at the cabin. She thought they might bond, might find some common ground before she left for dorms and classes, and maybe they did – a little.

They fished. They hiked. They built fires in the little metal stove at night. Sometimes, when the fish wouldn't bite or they ran out of beans or they just felt like it, they ate lunch at the lodge and took the boat home.

One night they left the warm and bright lodge very late, and the sun was already almost completely behind the pine trees. Their boat was small, and technically it was illegal to run it on the lake at night. They didn't have the proper lights and reflectors, or any kind of horn to warn larger boats that they were out there.

The reason all this was necessary was that the lake, at night, was black. Deep black. If you sat in a closet with no windows, shut the door, and pulled a hood over your head, you might get close to the blackness of that lake at night. Up on the hills, far into the trees, one could see a flicker or two of lights from other cabins, but the water was black, the trees were black. The sky, filled with stars, was too far away to light anything down below.

Their small, metal boat disappeared in the darkness as if it had been swallowed.

They were both afraid, not of the legality, but of sinking. They felt heavier, somehow, in the darkness, as if that black water would suck them under if they so much as touched it. Like it was sticky tar instead of the soft, cool lake they swam in all afternoon. If they could just make it a little longer, if they could just get to the dock, they would be fine.

In a soundless instant, a light appeared in front of them.

"Crud," her father said, "What's a boat doing out here anyway? Here, Annie, take the flashlight and sit at the bow. It's better than nothing."

She fumbled for her father's hand, for the flashlight, and made her way very carefully over the boat seats. She watched the light, bothered by it. It was bobbing gently, but not quite the way a boat would in the waves. Instead it swayed, reminding her of a parent rocking an infant.

"Hello!" her dad yelled and she wanted to hiss at him to be quiet, not because she was afraid of the light's attention, but because she was afraid of scaring it away. She wanted to see what kind of boat it was. She wanted to wave at them and

share a secret moment in the pitch darkness – a moment of strange, off-balance excitement.

“Flash the light,” her father said nervously as the light came closer. “I don’t think they saw us.”

She did, though they didn’t seem to be in any danger of crashing into the other boat. It was going to come up alongside them.

And then she realized that it was not a boat. And then she thought, with terror, *what else could it be?* And then, with wonder *What could it be?*

As it came up alongside them she fully saw that it was a fish, larger than their entire boat – it’s dark body undulating beneath the surface. It was darker, somehow, than the water and the night. It was shadow against shadow. It seemed to suck the light into it. The movement of its massive body did very little to disturb the dark water. It moved like a knife through air.

An eye – the size of her whole head and only slightly lighter than the black body, looked out at the dark, dark water. It didn’t flick up at her face or the boat or her father. These things – these surface creatures, were nothing to it. It was unbothered. It was at peace.

Attached to the body, just above the eye, was something like a tentacle, and on the end of that was the light, a ball of glowing brilliance floating inside a fleshy lattice that looked like a bird cage.

It was beautiful and enchanting. It was, without question, the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. Not simply because of its singular physical form, but because of all the things that it represented. The possibilities. She turned to call out to her father – to share this moment with him and, thus, amplify her own joy.

But her father looked horrified. Fear had completely gripped his face and his hand was frozen on the motor. He didn’t look at her, only at the fish and its brilliant light.

She turned back in time to watch the great fish heave under the water, its massive tail spreading out behind it like a bridal veil, and then it dove down, down, down, the light shrank to a distant spark and then was gone in the darkness.

They did not speak the rest of the way home, or as they carefully docked the boat, or picked their way through the dark up to the cabin. As they took off their boots she couldn't wait another moment.

"Dad!" she said.

"I don't want to talk about it," he snapped

"But, it was amazing. I've never seen anything –"

"I said I don't want to talk about it!" He snapped and stomped off to his own room.

At the time she was furious at him. How could he look at this creature and feel no wonder? They had, harmlessly, broken through the surface of the world and seen the magnificent beauty underneath. It was like knocking something commonplace off the shelf and, when it shattered, learning it was secretly made of diamonds. It was impossible and perfect and she wanted more of it immediately.

She stayed up the rest of the night, sitting at the dock, watching the still lake for any sign of the creature – even just a glint below the water's surface.

There was nothing.

As she grew older she came to understand and accept that not everyone reacted to enormous discoveries about the nature of the world in the same way. Two decades later her father carefully brought up the fish when they were alone, after Thanksgiving dinner, and she was thrilled to learn that he looked back on the memory with fondness, and that part of that fondness was the way it had transfixed his daughter and changed her.

Still, that night, she felt a gulf open up between them that seemed impossible to cross.

Anna did not go to college that fall. She'd realized something – that the world was larger and stranger than she'd ever imagined, and that the people she loved and cared about, did not consider that fact with awe and fondness. They wanted her to follow a path they set out for her, and though there was nothing wrong with that path, it might not fit.

She became a Cryptonaturalist in the way that so many do – by wandering around the world, following the barest rumor of answers to her questions. She discovered a great many things and added to our understanding immensely. At least once a year she returned to the lake that changed her and searched for the nameless fish, the fish she planned to name upon their second encounter.

That fish remains unnamed.

Anna Marie Stoneburner, I'm afraid, has left us. But she never spoke of this as a failure. Not once in all the times I encountered her. Sometimes she felt defeated. Sometimes she considered giving up, but at the end, when she knew she no longer had the strength to return to the lake, she still spoke of the sudden light, of the dark, of the fish, with nothing but wonder and admiration. Someone else would find it, would see it, and wouldn't that be wonderful.

The world goes on. What a gift.

As a side note, if anyone has gone boating in the dead of night and seen, floating across the water towards them, a fish the size of a Volkswagon beetle, darker than dark, carrying a light in a cage, please let me know. I would like to hold that knowledge like a candle for a departed friend.

Until next time, my friends, make your own roads and travel them boldly.

Show Notes: Episode 42 CL 1 Dragons (00:14:40)

Credits

Cassandra recalls an old friend and a nameless fish.

The CryptoNaturalist is written by Jarod K. Anderson and Leslie J. Anderson. Cassandra is voiced by Leslie J. Anderson. The CryptoNaturalist is voiced by Jarod K. Anderson.

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