

The Ghost Zoo

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We live underground. More or less all the time. We eat roots, berries, tubers and insects.

Occasionally rodents. Naked mole rats if we're lucky enough to find a colony. Then we party.

We even cook them if someone knows how to do that. We grow mushrooms too. They *flourish* in the dark, and sometimes they taste good too.

We creep around. In the dark. It's safer that way. Creepy was bad once. Creeps were unappealing and undesirable. People shunned creeps. Now it's sort of a virtue. Now they're heroes. We look up to creeps. When we look up, I mean.

We own flashlights that glow light when we shake them repeatedly. Actual batteries are a rare and temporary commodity. Most of what we have runs on gymnastic energy. We pedal in place a lot. Days on end. Those of us with stationary bikes, I mean. Or we stroke velvet pads wired into our family electricity storage drums. A lot. Most of us have carpal tunnel syndrome. Especially children. And everyone has arthritis. But it pays off. Sometimes we have an hour of light. Or more. We wear rags and sleep in dirt. There's not much point to bright colors.

Hobbit holes. We live in hobbit holes. That's what they're called. For some reason.

Jehovah's witnesses have a lot of batteries. I don't know how they get them. Perhaps they *manufacture* them. Batteries are why so many people are Jehovah's witnesses. And their garbage men. They actually have people who take away the garbage. Now that's a luxury. I'm almost a believer because of that. God clearly knew how to recycle long before we hit on the idea. That's what death is. That's what carnivores do. Maggots and worms. Mushrooms. Blow and bottle flies.

"Blow flies and bottle flies," I read this once, "have sponging mouthparts; antennae are feathery, at least on the bottom two thirds. Larvae are eyeless, legless, tapered from large, rounded rear segment to head, which is a pair of dark hooks."

They come around to our holes offering salvation. The world is going to end soon, they tell me. Promises, promises, I say. No really, they say. Hasn't it already? I ask. Ended, I mean? Isn't that why we don't worship our ancestors anymore?

They don't get jokes. They're a very literal minded bunch, even for religious people. We always end up arguing about evolution. Naked mole rats are a lot cleverer than they used to be, I tell them. Isn't that evolution? Soon they'll be eating us, I tell them. And then I smile. This way they can see that I still have all my teeth.

Emma, my daughter, has a dollhouse she made herself. Pieces of wood, plastic, fabric, bits of clingwrap for the windows. And parts of real houses probably. Drywall certainly. Plaster she's

ground and worked into place. Some metal. She's been at it for months. She's a very clever and resourceful child. I'm so proud.

There's plenty of rubble everywhere, and she's put things together in her dollhouse the way she's found them pictured in books. There's tiny furniture, realistic-looking bathrooms with tiny tiling, and fixtures. I'm in awe and in love. She's used bits of colored glass and porcelain, breaking them into the right shapes with rocks and an old butterknife, gluing them into place with sticky plaster. She's used powdered egg shell to texture the ceilings and walls.

There's even a rug. It looks Persian. And she's taken old postage stamps, built little frames around them with toothpicks, colored paper, and hung them on the walls. Children can be so smart. And in such an innocent tender way. They're our future, don't you think?

It's beautiful. And scary. Emma talks to herself while she plays. Sometimes she's him and sometimes she's her. A couple. They're investment bankers, she tells me. Uh huh, I say. I doubt she knows what an investment banker is. I sure don't. They're rich, she tells me. That's why they have clothes and other stuff. I nod. We all appreciate the value of stuff.

The thing is there's no people in Emma's dollhouse. This is a little weird. I've found all sorts of small figurines, dolls and toy people, but she doesn't want them, doesn't put any of them in the dollhouse. She talks constantly about her couple, how he's sitting at his tiny desk looking at his portfolio. How she's in the attic building a gun. But the chair in front of the desk is empty. And nobody's in the attic.

I'm squashing bugs for dinner when Emma says, Daddy? There's something living in my dollhouse. Dolls? I ask. I don't think so, she says, looking down at her muddy feet. Emma's a serious child, doesn't lie, doesn't play tricks.

I'm on my hands and knees, looking through one of the windows, trying to be quiet so that I don't spook it. I can barely see a faint tiny light. Tinker Bell? I ask softly. Who's Tinker Bell? Emma asks. Most of my jokes fall flat that way. Witness the Jehovah's.

I've become impatient. Boo, I say loudly. The light vanishes. Annoyed, I take the roof off the dollhouse and shine the flashlight inside. Nothing. All gone, I tell Emma. She's disappointed.

So I don't blame her for not telling me right away when they come back. We're chewing over dinner when she tells me. They? I ask. I think they're ghosts, she says. Tiny ghosts. A man and a woman. Wearing clothes. I'll let you look if you promise to be nice and quiet. So I promise to be nice and quiet. I keep all my promises to Emma.

I've been watching them for hours while Emma's been sleeping. I've never seen anything so elegant and cute. Their faces are clean, they have clothes. In the evening, I guess they think it's evening, they turn down the lights, they undress slowly, watching each other, clearly in love, and they hang up their clothes with care in the tiny closet.

I didn't realize sex could be *pretty*. (It's times like this that one wants a magnifying glass.) They are in *bed* together. Did Emma make that bed, I wonder, with that intricate headboard? I am amazed. They pull back the linens, and kiss. Outside the tiny bedroom window, the gargantuan voyeur wipes streaks of muddy dirt out from under his crying eyes, and watches. They are oblivious to his big face looming where the moon should be.

I have an idea. I clear an area on the ground, thumb a dry river meandering down it, leading to a lake. Half a foot away, I dimple the soil as if it is the ground of a forest, and place some pebbles judiciously around like rocks in a savannah. I'm working from memories, old memories, so I don't know if what I'm doing corresponds geographically to *anything*. I can only hope it doesn't matter.

What are we waiting for, Daddy? Emma asks plaintively, what's going to happen? Shhh, I say, maybe nothing. Maybe we'll see. I give her a twig to nosh on so she'll calm down. It doesn't take long, I guess, because it's always night down here anyway. A little translucent tiger is first, his tiny paws tentative as he explores the terrain I've created for him. Then some ghostly antelopes along with brush for them to ramble in.

What *are* those? Emma asks in an astonished whisper. Those are *antelopes*, I tell her. That's a *tiger*, I say. They're beautiful, she says. It takes hours for the ghostly vegetation to locate itself, the extinct water to make its way into the riverbed and lake I've created. We watch a dead world replay, engage in rerun. I name each kind of animal, when they appear, and try to describe to her

how big they were when they were alive. So subtle it's beautiful. You can almost see the translucent gray stripes in the tiny galloping zebras.

Beauty and danger, I tell Emma. Over there are crocodiles, I say as I point. Those are their snouts just breaking the surface of the water. They're waiting. Everything needs to drink water, so they just wait. These are hippos. Nobody is going after them because they're too big. Look, look, Emma says, pointing gleefully. Those are lions, I tell her. Everything in this world was edible, I tell her. There's a bright side and a dark side to everything being edible, I say.

What's that, she says, suddenly alarmed. That's a cloud, I tell her. And that's rain. Rain wasn't always dangerous. Rain used to be innocent. And those are snakes. Snakes were beautiful too.

The little ghosts glow and waver in the dark. We watch for hours and hours and never use flashlights. Sometimes, but only sometimes, there is just the hint of colors.

That's *tawny*, I tell her. What? what? Emma whispers, almost frantically. She doesn't want to miss *anything*. The color, I say, you can barely see it, on the lions. Yes, she says, turning to me, her eyes shining, I can see a color. I can see it.

I hold her tight as we watch. And I kiss the top of her head, tasting the soil that's resting there. Daddy? she says, I want to be a ghost, just like them. Can I be a ghost when I grow up? Yes, I say, you can. You will.