



In a Pinch

I suppose it is simply a reflection of the fact that my home is located in a semi-rural area, but it does seem that insects have been featuring fairly frequently in these stories over the years. From the point of view of the women in the workshop here, Dave is the 'man to call' whenever a large spider comes visiting, and although it feels nice to be 'needed', I sometimes chastize them for not being able to handle this by themselves.

I responded to one such 'emergency' the other day to find two of ladies cowering in fear of the visitor, but when I arrived on the scene with, "Not *another* spider; can't you handle this by yourself?" they quickly corrected me. "No! This time it's a snake; a big one!" Fair enough; this one gave *me* a bit of pause too, before I was able to get it safely removed outside, with the help of a longish stick.

In any case, all these experiences have caused the staff here to develop the impression that Dave is totally OK with all these animals and insects, but if I left it at that, I would be a tad dishonest. I too have my limits with these natural visitors, and perhaps the best example of this is the case of the Japanese *mukade* - a type of large centipede. This is where I draw the line; I have no love for these guys at all!

My relationship with the *mukade* goes back to our family's first years in Japan, when we decamped to Granddad's place in Mie Prefecture for a month or so each summer. The family home there was a very old and rickety farmhouse, and there were pretty much no barriers at all between the outside and in. The structure kept the rain off, but not much more than that.

There weren't any spare rooms, so our family - myself, my then wife, and our two little girls - ended up sleeping in the main 'living room'. Having grown up there, my wife of course knew what to expect as night came around, and she directed how our bedding should be laid out: "I'll sleep at this end. Dave, you sleep at that end, near the large wooden cupboards. We'll put the two kids here in the middle between us, where they will be safe." I just laughed. "Safe? What are you expecting during the night ... robbers?"

She said something to the effect that if I were lucky, I wouldn't find out, and left it at that.

All these years later, I no longer remember whether it was on that first night I received my initiation into the nocturnal habits of the Japanese centipede, or sometime later, but what I will *never* forget is the pain. The scenario played out exactly as she had predicted; sometime during the night, a centipede came out into the room from its lair under the cupboards, and began foraging. The first thing it encountered was me, lying on a thin pad in my shorts. Sensing the presence of something that seemed edible, it explored. Still asleep, I must have felt the tickling and brushed at it. It attacked.

What I say next is said with absolutely not the slightest exaggeration. I have never encountered such pain, neither before, nor since. There is some combination of the strength of the jaws, plus the poisons being delivered, that makes a *mukade* bite an absolutely exquisite experience in pain. I probably screamed out loud; I no longer remember. But for the next few minutes all was chaos as she and I tried to catch it before it could retreat back under the woodwork.

These insects are astonishingly difficult to kill, and banging with a rolled-up newspaper is nothing to them. You need weaponry. After we dealt with that first one that night, I spent the rest of the summer (and subsequent summers) sleeping with a steel fireplace poker at hand next to me. And I learned not to automatically brush at anything that I felt touching me as I slept.

I have to admit though, that despite my initial cynicism, her 'defensive plan' did work as she calculated, and our girls were never bitten.

I suppose they'll never know about the incredible sacrifice their father made to keep them safe!

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