

Bekah's Confessions: Infested—In Defense of the Centipede

Written by Bekah McKendry

Wednesday, 23 March 2011 13:46



I consider myself to be pretty horror-hardened. I can watch impalements, eye-gougings and eviscerations without batting an eyelash. I feel I have been adequately trained in the event of zombie uprisings, and I have learned the various tricks to take down werewolves, oversized killer sharks and endless Freddy Kruegers and Jasons. I've got 20 years of extreme horror viewing behind me. And yet, if I'm getting into my morning shower, for example, and a single centipede suddenly darts from the drain up the wall at lightning speed, I will scream like Marion Crane from PSYCHO.

I think I may be better equipped to deal with Norman Bates in drag. My years of horror training would kick in, I would gauge the situation and then quickly decide whether to grab the toilet brush and fight back for dear life or just get the hell out of there. But my reaction to the centipede is far different. It's one of pure fear. Fear so strong I'm unable to move. I'm frozen, staring, barely screaming, unable to budge. Sweat beads form on my forehead, and my eyes dart around wildly, looking for some way out of this situation as this horrible little demon climbs the walls in front of my frozen face. Eventually, the freeze breaks in a surge of ultimate adrenaline, and my comalike demeanor surges into pure rage and anger that this multilegged hellspawn could evoke such a visceral reaction of pure gut-wrenching terror from me, the horror-hardened harlot. In my blind rage, I smash the hell out of the centipede and then, still shaken, flush the corpse. But all I actually want to do is put its little head on a toothpick and erect it on the floor as an example to the other creepy-crawlers that may try to f**k with me, all motivated by pure and unbridled terror.



To explain my extreme fear of centipedes, I must go back several years to my first New York City apartment. New York City is riddled with pests. Be they rats, pigeons or roaches, most areas of the city have life lurking under the streets and behind the walls. While most of my impoverished starving-artist friends battle roaches daily, I never had to worry about them—because in my apartment, the centipedes were firmly in control. From years of dining on oversized roaches (or waterbugs, as they were called by my in-denial landlord), the centipedes in my hovel had grown unnatural large. So while I was going about my day, showering, making

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ramen and living an otherwise poor existence, the Manhattan version of FOOD OF THE GODS was taking place within my walls. One normal night, I awoke from sleep in a groggy state, and headed into the bathroom. I flipped on the light and caught a reflection of myself in the mirror. Clinging to my face was the biggest centipede I had ever seen. I screamed...loud! I quickly realized that the bug was just resting on the mirror itself, but when I caught my reflection, it looked as if it was latched onto my face. Now, realizing it had not been feasting on my sweet, tender flesh, I quickly dispatched it in the aforementioned manner. But again—for a split second, this centipede was, according to my perception, stuck to my face and about to start munching my eyes. Thus, my enduring fear of the multilegged demons was born. Regardless of whether or not they were trying to eat my face off, all future encounters evoked the same fear, the same rage and the same aggressive reaction.

What the hell's wrong with me? I approach the most depraved horror films with an air of control. Of course I can watch and mentally take them. No sweat. But a single 5-inch long insect paralyzes me. For the longest time, I thought this was just my thing. Yeah, my secret, incredibly strong phobia of centipedes. It's my mental Achilles' heel, so strong that if I see one run under a couch or dresser, I will not be able to sleep until I locate the evil entity and see its cold corpse lying before me so I can dispatch it straight to hell. Weirder yet, I'm the ultimate pacifist, a total animal-loving bleeding-heart hippie type who would throw myself in front of a car to keep a squirrel from being nicked. Yet with centipedes, I'm a bloodthirsty killing machine who will stop at nothing to see the entire species wiped out. Even roaches don't elicit such rage from me. I can't even call it fear as much as just rage. Once my paralysis ends, my gut reaction is not to run, but rather stomp the life out of it. I sound like a monster, and perhaps somewhere, deep inside my centipede-loathing soul, I am one.



But several weeks ago, I got into a discussion with a large group of people about insect phobias. I soon discovered that most people, even the hardest horror fans, are still pretty freaked out by them. This started me thinking about what it is about our multilegged brethren that can evoke such terror. Why does watching a single spider crawling across the ceiling above your bed seem so much more horrifying than any monster movie? Of course, the movie is fake and the spider real, but really...it's 2 inches long.

Like zombies, insects tend to travel in hordes. This is perhaps the first reason I feel they plague my dreams. When it comes to bees, roaches and ants, if you happen to be caught staring one in its beady eyes, chances are there are many more in close proximity. Like your common

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zombie, a solo encounter can be easily controlled, but a mass group is the material of nightmares. Bugs also tend to lurk in dark and dank places where you would expect your worst fears to dwell. Dark, scary basement? Meet the gigantic camel-back cricket. Frightening musty attic? Meet mondo-mega-spiders. Running blindly through thick woods? Say hello to the bloodsucking tick. Insects have learned to evolve in the worst environments and not only survive, but prosper, growing larger and larger.

Additionally, insects have cornered the market on the element of surprise. Whether a spider dropping down from the ceiling or a dreaded centipede racing suddenly up your wall, bugs have the ability to remain elusive—ever-present, but rarely seen. Truth be told, most insects are just as frightened as you are. Their superfast darting is actually a method of self-preservation, the evolutionary version of a “Let’s get the hell out of here” fight-or-flight mechanism. I know that when I look at that poor centipede running up my bathroom wall, and my brain is screaming “MONSTER!”, the centipede is hearing my wretched screams and thinking the same thing: “F**king giant redheaded monster!”

Writing this insect-oriented diatribe has pointed out something important to me. In my horror-movie life, I almost always side with the tragic monster that may look different but is ultimately just trying to fit in. Starting with Frankenstein’s creation running in fear from the angry pitchfork-bearing villagers, I have always found connection with these horrible, hurt beings. But yet, it seems this is ultimately just the same as my loathed centipedes. They are just scary little monsters darting from bathtub drains, trying to escape the angry villager (a.k.a. me) who can only see the exterior difference between us. Granted, I’m not exactly going to go up and start hugging centipedes. But if I have learned one thing from horror films, it is that often, the most horrific creatures are the most sincere and genuine. Perhaps, this simple centipede running for dear life from the redhead monster welding a rolled-up magazine is actually expressing far more humanity than I. So before you smash, consider the centipede. Not a monster, but perhaps, the most basic element of fear that can be found in every one of us.

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