

Sidney and The Thing That Lives Under The Tub

By Melissa Kaplan

Those of you who know that I have a slug living in the house will probably not be too surprised to find that I have a Thing That Lives Under My Tub, the latter being the bathtub in my bathroom, as opposed to the bathtub in the guest bathroom, which is known as Mikey's bathroom.



The Slug

For those who don't know about the slug, I suppose I should explain. The slug and The Thing exist independently of me. They are not mine, in the sense that intentionally acquired pets belong to someone. They are not mine in the sense of unintentionally acquired pets belong to someone (as in, "Oh, look, honey, this cat has adopted us" or "Look what followed me home, mommy!").

The slug and The Thing are not pets at all. They are more like....co-inhabitants who occupy spaces I generally do not, or do so only in passing.

The slug, I suppose, spends her days (her, for I find myself calling the hermaphroditic mollusk Slugette, not to be confused with Sluggo, my blue-tongue skink) living somewhere in the wall behind the guest bathroom cabinet, or perhaps on or under the ground under the bathroom, sliming her way back and forth to her favorite indoor cruising ground, the hallway and den in my house.



Sluggo, my cuddly hypomelanistic blue-tongue skink

Slugette and I encounter one another in the hallway every 3-5 evenings or so during all but the coldest times of the year. Sometimes, when I stay up later than usual, I will come across her in the den. I now make it a point to turn on lights to light up the den/hallway junction, and the hallway into my bedroom, so that I don't inadvertently terminate her nocturnal indoor ramblings.

Afraid that any future tenants here may not be so accommodating to her love of the open, uh, carpet, I suppose I shall have to take her with me when I eventually move, and trust that she will find the new place amenable to her needs and likes.

The Thing That Lives Under the Tub

Over the past 13 years, for very brief times, sometimes during the day, sometimes at night, I hear a scratching sound coming from my bathtub. Now, for most of those years, the odds were that the scratching sounds were being made by one or more green iguanas.

Iguanas get bathed daily most of the time, and are quite able to get in and out of the tubs themselves. But sometimes they get a little needy in the attention department, and will scratch feebly and pathetically on the tub, their way of saying "I'm a poor widdle igwana who can't get out of the tub please come help me before I slide down the draaaaaaaaain."



Widdle iguana mode

To understand the ludicrousness of this possibility, you must understand that the worst offender in this category is Mike, all 50 inches from snout to tail-tip and 21 pounds of him. Mike is a robust 7 year old *Cyclura* iguana (an endangered genus whose species are barely surviving on a relative handful of Cayman islands), with an abdominal girth of 24 inches when he is sprawled out basking, sleeping or bathing. So, there is absolutely no danger of his sliding down the drain and no way he cannot get into or out of the tub on his own. There is, however, every danger of his wearing away the porcelain as he scratches pathetically, not to speak of annoyingly, to have me carry him back to the ig room, or scratching imperially to summon me to run more water for him. Now, if not sooner.

(Not, y'know, that I reinforce the efficacy of his behaviors by actually going in there and picking him up in a warm towel to carry him back to the ig room, or run more water for him. Nope, not me!)

When I had a dozen or more iguanas here, a couple of them would climb into the bathtub outside of regular bath hours, either in hopes of getting another bath (a solo soak - luxury!), or just to climb into the tub to get away from the madding crowd for a bit.

But there were times during the years when there was scratching that was not generated by iguanas, bearded dragons, blue-tongue skinks, or assorted chelonians. By nothing, in fact residing *inside* the house.

The air space under the house is ventilated (theoretically) by small openings cut into the building that are covered by sturdy wire mesh. All but one of the openings is in fact so covered. The one that isn't has provided access, according to the neighborhood kids who have had the opportunity to observe such access, to the rabbit who escaped from his pen next door, a "rat that was THIS biiiiiig!" the occasional skunk and, presumably, opossums, cats, and a variety of rodents.



The Thing's door

One of the rabbit kids tried to block it by placing a piece of wood in front of it, braced by a rock, but as you can see, Things are clever in getting around obstacles.

The visitor could be heard during the days, usually, for short periods of time, from a few hours to a day or two. Then, gone, with no alien scratching noises heard for months, sometimes years. The last time there was any scratching was last winter, 2004-05.

And so silence reigned, until about a month ago, when The Thing moved in around 4 AM one morning. At first, I thought it might be a cat, because around 1 AM one night (morning) (whatever), there were two Things, either fighting or mating. The squalling and yowling made me think cat. But I've never heard the vocalizations made by mating skunks or opossums, or raccoons, for that matter, so it might have been any of those. Or, it could have been a cat encountering an opossum under the tub, with the two of them discussing matters less than civilly.

In the weeks since then, however, I have come to believe that The Thing is a nocturnal critter since the scratching and shifting-around noises happen throughout the daytime hours. During the evening hours, the tub is silent. Around 4 AM (I can pretty near set my clock by it), The Thing returns and makes him/herself comfy wherever the hell it is that s/he hangs out under there.

I have noted that when we have several warm days in a row during which it does not rain and the ground and trees have had a chance to dry out a bit and warm up, The Thing is absent, with no noises or movement heard during the days or nights. Once it starts raining again, The Thing comes back.

Given the fact that I see the usual clowder of feral cats, especially the two known as Gray Cat and Scairdy Cat moving around in my returning-to-wilderness backyard during the daylight hours while The Thing is grooming itself under The Tub, I have come to the conclusion that The Thing is most likely an opossum.



Gray cat



Scairdy cat

Sidney the Dog

Sidney is my goddog. Those who have read my Lizards in Scarves blog have already met this strikingly large Doberman with his beautiful natural ears and sunny disposition. Depending on how crazy busy his mom is during her work week (meaning, how many hours she doesn't spend at home playing with Sid), Sidney comes over to stay with me for an overnight stay bracketed by a couple of play days.

Sidney hadn't been over for a while, not since The Thing started camping out here on a regular basis during this rainy season.



The slight bump just to the left of center is a sign that Sluggo is there.

Normally, when Sidney is here, he spends several minutes every 2-3 hours standing in my bedroom staring intently at the heating pad-and-towel covered cluster of upside down crates that forms Sluggo's quiet sleeping place. He can smell Sluggo there, and knows that sometimes Sluggo is under the blankies on top of the pad, or under the crates, wherein Sluggo will sometimes wriggle for some reason I have yet to fathom. Well, other than the more recent one which can be filed under the category of "Torturing the Dog".

Fortunately for both Sluggo and Sidney, Sluggo keeps a low profile while Sidney is here. Fortunate for Sluggo, because Sidney adores chew toys and isn't particular about what he chews on. Fortunate for Sidney, because if he chewed on Sluggo, I'd have to kill him, recycle him by feeding him to Mikey, Sluggo, the turtles and The Thing, and then lie to his parents about what happened to him. ("Gee, I guess he followed somebody else home...")

So, Sidney's time here is spent briefly trolling for Sluggo, but mostly playing with me, activities that involve well-chewed tennis balls, lots of growling with tail wagging, lots of running, and the occasional thump of a heavy body in motion meeting an object at rest.

Sometimes I'm the object at rest, other times I'm the body in motion, but mostly it is Sidney and the balls in motion, with both of us contributing the growls.

(Occasionally, just to get him going a bit, or startle him into releasing his hold on a ball, I will speak Cat to him, miaowing (I apparently speak Cat with a French accent, just as I do Hebrew and what little Spanish I muddle through) and mewling with the occasional hiss thrown in for general effect. When I'm with Sidney and his mom, we can really drive the poor boy nuts when Karen adds her remarkable turkey gobbling to the mix.)

Two weeks ago, I picked Sidney up on Tuesday morning for a two-day play date. There had been a break in the rain for a couple of days, enough so that there was actually some sun when we went to the dog park that afternoon. The dog park was mostly mud, but there was very nice guy who came shortly after we arrived, who had two dogs of his own and, more importantly, a ball thrower. He threw balls for Sid and his own dogs for about an hour, after which the dogs were pretty much coated in mud (just imagine a 120 pound Doberman dipped in dark chocolate).

So, rather than transferring all that mud to our vehicles, we went to the park next door and let the dogs swim and fetch balls and sticks in the lake. The dogs had a blast, while we watched the mud melt away.



Sidney asleep...

Sidney sacked out early that night, and slept through the night. Well, other than the two times he heard something out back that I needed protection from. But, that's normal for his spending the night here. I open the back door, he stands in the doorway until he figures out where the sound is coming from, a chase ensues, I call him back, and we go back to bed for a couple more hours.

Well, I go back to bed, while Sidney goes back to the couch, where he sleeps, since he has been so well trained by his parents not to sleep in their bed, that he won't even get up on mine.

On Wednesday, we played some more, visited the dog park again, but the day was much colder, so we didn't spend much time there, as I didn't want him all wet from the lake while we still had some errands to run. We did get some ball throwing and catching in, though it was a little different on this day.



Unclear on the concept: Sidney holds the ball thrower, and stares hopefully at his toy box.

Being enthralled at the idea of using a ball thrower to pickup slobbery, muddy, microbial-riddled tennis balls with something other than my cut-covered hands (one of the downsides to living with a large rough-scaled lizard like Mike), I stopped at the small pet store near by, and got a ball thrower of my own.

While Sid quickly caught on to the fact that I could pick up and throw the balls with the thrower, he kept thinking that he could somehow cut out the middle human and throw his own balls.

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As usual, his dad came and picked him up in the late afternoon, and I waved good-bye while Sid, also as usual, was so thrilled to be with his dad that he didn't notice that he was leaving me.

Not too long after they got back home, Sid's dad called me - he'd taken ill and needed to get to the hospital. Sid's mom being out of town, I headed over there, picked his dad up, and off we went. Fortunately, it turned out to be ever so much better than it could have been, and so he was released and we got back home before midnight. Because he was on medication and going back to the hospital for more tests the next day, it was decided that I would take Sidney home with me, and keep him for another night or two.

Sidney was a bit confused and clingy by the time we got back to my house, so he stayed by me, decidedly not playful, until he finally got sleepy enough that I thought he would go to sleep okay. So, I got him up on the couch, wrapped him in his blankets, and off to sleep he went, with me following shortly there after. It was around 1:30 AM when I turned off my bedside light.



Sidney usually starts trying to wake me up around 8 in the morning, but he slept in until almost 9:30, which was nice for both of us. His usual morning routine is: Sid trots down the hallway into my bedroom, tag jangling against his collar buckle, and stands by my side of the bed, staring intently at me for a few moments.



When that doesn't get me up, he begins poking his snout under the blankets and tries to throw them off of me or, better yet, put his cold nose in direct contact with warm skin. Since I sleep under at least one down comforter, and with a flannel-covered body pillow between me and the edge of the bed (hey! It's warmer that way!), all Sid gets is a snout full of flannel and covers that flop right back down onto his face.

Sid keeps this up for several minutes, while I 'remain' asleep. He gets increasingly frustrated, and eventually starts yipping and whining a bit as he works harder to try to get me up, pausing from time to time to see if there is any sign of life from me.

Eventually I take pity on him and "wake up".

Joy! Happiness! A chance to Out and Pee!
And Eat! Or Eat First, then Pee! And then
there's Lizard Food Leftovers! Joy! Happiness!
And maybe Eggs! Or a Cheese Omelet!

By Dog, Life is GOOD!



So. We spent Thursday day playing and eating and marking the front yard with pee (well, Sid did that on his own). The day, while cool, remained dry.

Friday also dawned sunny and dry, but clouded over as the day progressed. Sid's dad called and asked if I minded keeping Sidney for another night, and bring him home the next afternoon when his mom arrived back into town. Sid said he'd suck it up and tough it out. I threw in some Salmon Yummy Chummies and leftover tri-tip to sweeten the deal, and promised Mike I'd figure out some way to make it up to him for subjecting him to d-o-g for 5 days in a row.

The day grew increasingly gloomy outside and eventually it started raining. The Thing trundled its way under my house again and climbed up under the tub. Sid heard The Thing for the first time during one of his trips accompanying me to the bathroom. I have told him I manage to go all by myself when he's not here, but he insists it is his job to make sure I don't dawdle too long by tempting me with a tennis ball.

This time, however, the ball was dropped and forgotten as Sid glued himself to the bathtub, sometimes getting in the bathtub, trying to see where The Thing was. He'd look at me, as if to ask "Where the hell is it? Don't you hear it? Can YOU see it?? I WANT IT!!!"

He spent hours there, staring at the tub, feet in, feet out, snorting and sniffing and trying to find The Thing.

He barely came out to eat, which is remarkable for a Doberman outfitted with a bottomless pit instead of a stomach with finite capacity. He could barely be enticed out by some salmon treats, scarcely allowing me enough time to photograph him in a shawl for my Lizards-in-Scarves blog. (Contrast that with Halloween a couple of years ago when he stood still for almost 30 minutes, staring intently at single small salmon cookie on the kitchen table, while his mom and I worked out how to best wrap him with rolls of gauze to create a mummy costume for a Howloween dog parade.)

Throughout the rest of the day, Sid completely ignored Sluggo's area, and didn't even try to race into the kitchen to steal lizard and tortoise food when I refreshed their food in the afternoon. Sid would occasionally run into the den to make sure I hadn't disappeared, too, and then would race back into the bathroom. Finally, much later than his usual bedtime, Sid collapsed on the couch to sleep only because The Thing finally took off on its nocturnal ramblings.

At 4 AM the next morning (I know, because I checked my clock), The Thing returned from its nightly rambles. At 4:05 AM (yes, I checked again), Sid was at his post, head in the bathtub, ears cocked, listening to The Thing. What was remarkable was not that Sid heard The Thing return, or that he raced in to watch the tub. What was remarkable was that he did it in *complete silence!* Not bounding down the hall, tag jangling. No excited yips. No coming to wake me up to join the fun.

In fact, he left me completely alone, even when his usual wake-Melissa-up time came around. I got up all by myself, got barely a backwards glance from him, and so went the day. He barely moved for me when I needed to get into my own bathroom, apparently believing his business was far more important than mine.

And so the rest of the day went: Sidney at and in the tub, tracking every move The Thing made. I think at some point The Thing started playing with Sidney, because The Thing would go quiet for a while, and then start a flurry of thumping and scratching. The Thing could hear Sidney, just as it hears me. (Yes, I have fallen into the habit of talking to The Thing, and occasionally scratching the tub in greeting when it is in residence.)

Instead of this view of my darling goddog...



...what I got to see of him was mostly this:



Every hour or so, Sidney would run out into the den to check on me, and then run back into the bathroom. A few times, I tried closing my bedroom door, but Sid was so distracted, not even wanting to play ball, that I gave up, knowing that it was just until the end of the day, at which time he would be going home. Besides, I'd forget the bedroom door was closed and would go walking smack into it, nose first, so I figured better Sidney be entertained by The Thing (and vice versa) than me end up in the ER with a broken nose.

When the late afternoon rolled around, I loaded Sidney's saddlebags into my car, and dragged him way from The Thing. Well, by this time he was hungry, so the combination of "Cookie!" and "Go for ride?" drew him away long enough for me to get him through a couple of doors and into the garage.

We arrived at his home shortly after his mom did, so Sidney was bouncing around, greeting both of his humans, The Thing apparently forgotten. For now.

When I got home, The Thing had settled down to its usual occasional scratching and thumping, at a frequency and power level far less than that it engaged in when it had a doggy audience to play to--and with.

Okay, okay, I hear some of you out there chastising me for anthropomorphizing the behavior of an animal I can't even see. While most people think they most animals are stupid, and opossums are especially stupid, I think they are well equipped to live in close proximity to humans, if not particularly well versed on how to stay out of the way of moving vehicles.

(Well, let's face it, opossums and cars haven't co-existed long enough for the species to selectively breed for car avoidance. However, close observation of roadkill leads me to believe that possums aren't the only one slow to selective mates based on their car

avoidance ability, so let's not point our articulated digits at these marsupials, okay? Okay.)

Anyway, I worked with possums for a while back in the day (when I was still healthy and had a real life stretching out into my future), and I quite like their nearly hairless prehensile tail, coarse guard hairs, those lovely Grand Teton-like teeth, and their wonderful grasping hands. Feet. Whatever.



Here I am in the still-healthy days, with Stevie (moluccan cockatoo), Koji (our rescued akita who developed KVH which, among other things, turned his all black face and ears white), and another Mikey, an opossum born without eyes, found wandering a Los Angeles-area golf course when it was about 7 months of age, from where it ended up with me before going to an opossum rescue.

While they don't have the largest of brains in their relatively small (compared to body size) heads, individual opossums learn the two square miles or so that comprise their personal territory, developing daily and seasonal routines that include the best places to sleep and hang out during the day, the houses that have food available (intentionally or otherwise), which yards with dogs to avoid and when.

Let's take, for example the dog that lives behind me. She is generally very quiet unless she somehow gets through the fence into my yard, at which point she runs back and forth, whining, trying to get a human to rescue her and get her back on her side of the fence. So, I rarely hear her, despite her having lived there for 10 years or so.

Tonight I became aware of a pounding and scraping noise coming from my backyard, from the area of the 8 ft tall wooden fence between my backyard and my neighbor's. Alarmed at the thought that the dog has gotten trapped somehow in between the fence slats, I grab a flashlight, slip on some shoes and head outside. As I shine the light along the fence line and through my yard, I realize that the dog is on her side of the fence, jumping at it, scratching at it in an attempt to climb it, barking and yipping with increasing frustration.

Ah. The light dawns.

No, not the sun coming out at 6 PM. What dawns is the thought that the usually nice quiet doggy is frantically trying to get at something in the tree next to the fence in her yard. So I make my way to the fence and shine the light up, and there The Thing is!

Can you see me?



How about now?



Sitting calmly on top of the fence, front paws resting on the horizontal crossbeam in the neighbor's yard, the butt and tail hanging over my side of the fence. The possum is just hanging out, watching the dog go crazy.

I go back inside my house and get my camera to try to snap a few photos of The Thing before s/he/it disappears. No worries, as The Thing is still hanging out, relaxed, watching the dog bouncing and slamming into the fence and yipping.

I start shooting photos of The Thing, using my flash. Does The Thing leave? Nope. S/he/it stays there, just turning its head away from the flash while I apologize for said flash and shoot another photo. (Apparently, I'm not that sorry.) While I'm shooting and moving around trying to get a better shot, I talk to The Thing, figuring if it is indeed MY Thing, s/he/it'll recognize my voice.



The Thing could easily leave the fence and the annoying dog if it wanted to. It could walk along the fence in either direction, dismounting into any of the other five yards, including mine (after I went back into the house, of course). Instead, The Thing stayed there, watching the dog go crazy, for another 20-30 minutes. At that time, the dog-going-crazy noises stopped, so The Thing either took off, or the dog's humans finally realized something was going on and so dragged her indoors. All together, The Thing was there for almost an hour, based on the amount of time the dog was literally bouncing off the wall.

We have been having a glorious week of warm sunny days and cool nights, and so the tub has been silent as The Thing sleeps outdoors or wherever it sleeps when it isn't escaping the rain by hanging out under my tub. The weather is supposed to change later this week, at which time I expect noises in my tub will signal the return of The Thing That Lives Under The Tub.

It's Baack!

Oop! I was wrong. In the few days that lapsed between my writing of this article and the final formatting and inserting photos, The Thing returned to its hangout under my tub yesterday, despite the temperatures being sunny and mild. I talked to it, scratched the tub in welcome, and heard it quietly move around as the day moved into evening. Could it have missed the company? Was it looking for a little entertainment, checking to see if The Dog was back so it could goof on it?

I don't know. While many of you out there are yelling "of course not, you idiot!" at your computer monitors, the ethologist in me says, why not? Play behaviors have been documented in other species, and between species, so why not a playful opossum for whom the hours stretch long without a dog to safely drive crazy now and then?