

Invasive Species

(About 3200 Words)

Some weeks or months ago, I smuggled five mongoose eggs into the United States. They were in an egg carton in my backpack. They looked like chicken eggs, but instead of peep embryos, each egg contained a growing mongoose fetus.

I purchased the eggs from a man in the Virgin Islands. I had been drinking rum drinks at a dive bar in Cruz Bay and chatting with a woman about the Virgin Islands mongoose, among other things. She had been sitting several stools away and I told her, in a roundabout way, how cute they are, and that, of all the rodents in the world, the mongoose is the smartest.

When I stopped to take a breath and sip my drink, the lady said, “They may seem cute but they’re nothing but trouble. One, they carry diseases. Two, they eat everything they can find, anywhere they can find it. And C, they reproduce uncontrollably. Once they start you can’t stop them.”

I took another sip of my drink and said, “You don’t know anything about mongooses.”

“They smell. And they want to take over the world.”

I turned away from the ugly woman and said to the bartender, “I shouldn’t drink so much rum. It makes my sunburn hurt.”

“Ask the Hawaiians what they think about them,” the lady said to my back.

I turned towards the woman, who had moved to the stool next to mine, and said, “Hawaiians don’t know shit about mongooses, so why would I care what they think? Do me a favor? Find an Indian with a cobra up his, or her, ass and let him, or her, tell us what they think about the mongoose. You know what they would say? ‘Hey, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, get over here and get this cobra out of my ass. And don’t listen to drunk repulsive ladies who don’t know anything about mongooses.’ That’s what an Indian would say.”

Then she hit me with an open fist on my sunburnt cheek. She caught me square on the jowl with the meaty part of her palm. I fell on the floor, my face greeted by cool concrete and spilled drinks, closed my eyes, and lay there waiting for a follow-up kick. Instead, the rude lady removed herself from her stool, stood over me, called me a dumbass, and left.

I stood up, brushed sand and dirt from my face, and got back on my barstool. “Another rum drink, please,” I said to the bartender. He ignored me. I was about to become loud when something touched my sunburned arm. I turned and a Virgin Islander now sat upon the drunk lady’s stool. He looked into my eyes, his face not more than six inches from mine, and whispered, “I can get you mongooses. Very special ones. The best mongooses available.”

I felt uncomfortable with his Islander face close to mine, but I did not want to insult him, so we continued to look into each other’s eyes. I kept my mouth shut for quite some time and we continued to look at each other. Finally, I said, “I didn’t know you could eat them.”

“Probably,” he said. “But I’m talking about living ‘goose. The best ‘goose on the island.” He moved his face a few inches closer. “The. Very. Best. ‘Goose,” he said with a short, silent pause between each word and each word less audible than the last. I felt his breath and I could feel him looking inside my skull.

“But, why?” I whispered.

“Mongoose,” he whispered, “eat snakes.”

“Go on,” I said.

“Mongoose eat rats.”

“And?”

“‘Goose,” he whispered, “will love you. Better than a dog. Better than a cat. Better than a woman. Better than a man. Better than anything.”

“And?” I asked.

“No mongoose in the United States. You will have the only one, or maybe two, if you want. The others you let go into nature and they eat the snakes and rats. Florida will be happy. Python gone. Arizona. No more rattlesnake. Georgia. No more cottonmouth. New York. No more rats.”

I moved my face even closer to his. Our noses were an inch apart. “Would you order me a rum drink?” I whispered. “The bartender is a dick.”

“No more rats,” he whispered.

“What about the drink?” I whispered.

He snapped his fingers and moved his head away. “And the mongoose?”

“Seems too good to be true. I’m intrigued.”

“I can get you six eggs and you can get them into the U.S., easy.”

“Eggs? Mongooses have babies, just like every other rodent. I would need baby mongooses that are old enough to travel.”

“No, no,” the Islander said. “Mongoose are monotreme. They lay eggs. Platypus, Echidna, and Mongoose. Lay eggs.”

“I don’t really know what you just said. Is that Islander talk? They lay eggs?”

“Besides, you can’t get live mongoose into the U.S. No chance. They confiscate baby mongoose all the time.”

“Okay, then why haven’t other people brought eggs into the U.S.?”

“Cowards.”

“True,” I said. “So true. New York is infested with rats. Now I know why. Cowardice.”

“I can get you mongoose eggs right now. Six eggs. Half-dozen. Fertile and ready to hatch. Once they’re born you feed them goat milk for a week, then ants for two weeks, then whatever you want. Send them into the wild. Keep a couple for yourself. They will love you forever. Cutest monotreme you’ve ever seen.”

“Where are you from?” I asked the Islander.

“Hawaii,” he said.

“Hmm,” I said. “That’s not what I would have guessed.”

The bartender came over with a rum drink and gave it to the Hawaiian Islander. He pushed it in front of me.

“\$1,000 for five eggs. I’ll throw in the sixth because you have guts.”

“Done.”

“Be right back.” The Hawaiian Islander left the bar and was back before I knew it.

“Here they are.” He handed me an egg carton with six eggs in it.

I handed him ten one-hundred dollar bills. I stuck the carton in my backpack and he left the bar without saying another word.

#

I stood still and straight at the St. Thomas airport customs desk as the customs officer examined me from head to toe. Then he held his breath and stared at my eyebrows. His eyes bulged and he exhaled through his nose and looked down at my passport.

“What was your reason for visiting the Virgin Islands?” he asked.

“Humanitarian visit,” I said.

“A what visit?”

“Vacation,” I said.

He asked me if I had any food or fruit or animals or liquor or if I had purchased anything that I was bringing into the country. My head hurt and my skin hurt.

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry, hold on. I have some hard-boiled eggs for an in-flight snack. Six of them.”

“Can I see them?”

I pulled the carton from my backpack and opened it. One of the eggs had broken and the ooze had soaked the carton. “That’s too bad,” I said.

“You need to boil your eggs longer,” he said. “That’s a basic cooking technique.”

“I like a softish yellow but that’s a little too soft, for sure.”

Where was the mongoose fetus? Had it not formed yet?

“Put it away,” he said. He stared at me again, apparently waiting for me to confess something. “You look like a criminal. Do you want to tell me anything?”

“Not unless you’re a priest,” I said.

“Where were you born?” he asked.

“U.S.”

“I mean where, specifically.”

“The U.S.?”

“Forget it. Are you bringing any seeds into the country?”

“Any what?”

“Seeds. Seeds. You know, seeds.”

“No, no seeds,” I said. “Wait, what about smoked almonds?”

“Move on,” he said.

#

I lived with my girlfriend in an apartment in a big city. The city has many rats and the mongooses were going to have a field day chasing them down. When I arrived home, I put the egg carton near the radiator--not too near--where the eggs would remain warm.

I turned around and my girlfriend was looking at me. “Where were you and why did you put that egg carton next to the radiator?” she asked.

“I had an errand to run,” I said.

“For a week? And did you forget sunblock when you ran your errand?”

“Well, it was actually a couple of errands. And then I got lost on the subway and I wound up I don’t even know where.” I do not like my girlfriend these days.

“Were you drinking? Have you been using your credit cards again?”

“Maybe one drink on the plane. I mean the train. The train. Train. When I got off the train I had a drink.”

“Oh boy,” she said and walked into bedroom and closed the door.

“Please don’t bother the carton near the radiator,” I called through the closed door. “It’s a surprise and I don’t want to spoil it.”

I drank a beer or two. My girlfriend came out of the bedroom with a suitcase and headed towards the front door. She called me the same name as the lady in the bar in Cruz Bay and walked out. I ran to the door, tripping on the rug in the hallway along the way. I got to my feet, threw open the door, and shouted, “I’ve got mongoose eggs, you bitch, and you can’t have any of the baby mongooses.” She kept walking. “They’re cute as hell,” I screamed as she rounded the corner. “And smart,” I said quietly to myself.

#

I moved the eggs to a casserole dish lined with a blanket. I kept them warm and turned them every eight hours. One week later, the eggs began to move and bounce on their own. Then, I noticed that a tiny mongoose nose had broken through the large end of a shell. Soon, all the shells had little snouts sticking out. Almost twenty-four hours later, all the mongoose pups had emerged and were wobbly and flopping about on their legs. They were fluffy, black-eyed,

pointy-nosed creatures with spindly hind legs with four toes and tiny front legs that looked like wings.

The five mongoose pups grew quickly. They bounced around the apartment on their back legs and made chirping sounds all day and night. Prior to the mongoose birthing, and before my trip to the Virgin Islands, I would sleep most of the day and some of the night, usually enjoying a beverage of some kind when I was awake. The mongooses interrupted my flow. I spent hours and hours feeding them and trying to clean up after them.

After they were a week old, I went to the park, pail in hand, and dug up several ant hills. I put the sand and ants in the pail and brought it back to my apartment where I dumped the contents on the floor. For the next few days or so, ants crawled all over my apartment. They were in the kitchen, on the furniture, in my unmade bed, in the shower. They were everywhere. The mongoose pups chased them into every nook and cranny of the apartment. If I were sitting on the couch, or maybe lying on the floor, and an ant crawled across my face, a pup would jump on my face, dig in with its sharp, pointy claws, and attack the ant with its hard snout. The ants were gone before I knew it.

I went back to the park with a rolling suitcase and filled it with dirt, sand, and ants. I rolled it back to my apartment and emptied it on the living room floor. I went back again, and again, and again, until ants and dirt were in the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. The mongoose pups ate and ate.

As the pups grew, their pelt developed a feathery sheen. And just like the meerkats on Meerkat Manor, which I had spent hours watching on television, among many other shows, the mongooses enjoyed standing on their hind legs and getting a lay of the land. They would stand

on their two thin, scaly legs, their heads jerking up and down and back and forth, and search for food, danger, or anything of interest.

After several weeks, their bodies had grown plump. They tucked their wingish forelegs tightly against their sides.

I went to the pet store and bought thirty-six mice. “What are you going to do with those?” asked the pet store clerk.

“I ordered too much cheese from Amazon the other day. I thought I would give the mice a treat.”

“That’s a myth,” she replied.

“How would you know how much cheese I ordered? It’s not myth. I’ll bring you a wedge of Wisconsin cheddar if you don’t believe me,” I said.

“Enjoy your mice,” she said.

I released the mice in my apartment, and they scurried pell-mell across the floor, up and down the curtains, over the ant mounds, through the garbage, and everywhere else. I expected the mongooses to give chase, and they did, but they did not have the agility to catch the mice. Instead, they competed with the mice to eat the ants, which had somehow managed to reproduce and build mounds throughout the apartment.

After another week had passed, the mongooses had managed to corner and kill only two or three mice. They did not eat the mice. They nosed around the bodies, made strange clucking sounds, and generally ignored the carcasses. Soon, the ants were swarming over the dead mice.

I ordered a dozen garter snakes from an online snake store and had them shipped to me the next day. The boas and pythons were expensive, but the garter snakes were only ten dollars

each, plus shipping. I used my girlfriend's credit card number, which I had been using for the past few weeks. For some reason she had not cancelled it. I expected the garter snakes to eat the mice and the mongooses to eat the snakes.

Another week passed. How many weeks, now, had I been nurturing the mongooses?

The mice, snakes, and mongooses had established territories in various corners of the apartment and the ants had built mounds wherever they wanted. Weeds and grass had begun to grow from the layers of sand and dirt that covered the apartment floor. I shared the bed with mongooses, mostly, and an occasional snake or mouse, all of whom enjoyed the warmth of my feet and groin while I slept. When I was awake, I drank and watched the animals interact.

One afternoon, I was awoken by a gentle rain. I had been asleep on the couch and a cloud had formed in the living room and dewy rain sprinkles had fallen on my face.

A kudzu vine had begun to crawl towards the window, apparently seeking nourishing sunlight.

I began to find mongoose eggs scattered around the apartment.

#

Some days or weeks or months after I had returned from the Virgin Islands, my girlfriend stopped by, unannounced. I do not know what time it was. I do not know if it was morning, afternoon, evening, or even the unnamed hours before day-peep. I owned no clocks and my phone had likely been buried under a bed of muck. An opaque light filtered through windows covered in a thin layer of grime; it could have been sunlight or city lights or even moonlight. She

still had a key to the apartment. When the door swung open, she stood in the doorway, unmoving, and absorbed the new world.

I had stopped wearing clothes a few days or weeks earlier and, after several rain showers in the apartment, a layer of dirt and mud covered my body. I had created a nest of sorts among several large tufts of grass that had sprouted against the wall and under the windows, and when the door popped open I was lying on my side, propped on my elbow, watching a mongoose and garter snake engaged in a territorial battle. A mouse had curled up in my beard and watched as well.

She leaned against the door jamb and did not appear happy with what she saw. Her face became white and she breathed quickly, and then not at all, and then quickly again. She clenched the sides of the door jamb with both hands. She closed her eyes and did not open them again until the mongoose, which had just vanquished the snake, began to screech, “buck, buck, buck,” in a shrill tone.

“The mongooses usually win,” I said. “The snakes hold their own for a while, which is surprising because the mongoose is known for its prowess with snakes.”

She released her hands from their grip and stood up. She took a deep, deep breath and walked into the room, over the ant mounds and through a patch of crab grass, pausing as a mouse raced across her path towards its hole on the other side of the room, and she stood over me. “I thought you said mongooses. It looks like much more than mongooses. What’s the deal?”

“Well, it’s possible things got away from me a bit.”

“I like the mongooses, though. They *are* cute.”

“Things got away from me a bit.” I pulled at a kudzu vine that had crawled up the wall, across the ceiling, and had wound itself around the chandelier. “I was supposed to let them go.

The Hawaiian Islander told me to keep one or two and free the others to help with the rats. But the project got away from me.”

“Maybe a little,” she said.

“I think I needed some help,” I said. “It became a big project that got away somewhat.”

“I’m not sure they’re really mongooses, though,” she said, “Are you?”

“Just a little help and I could have managed things,” I said. “I’m pretty sure.”

“I’m pretty sure as well,” she said. “Anyways, I came to tell you that I’ve cancelled my credit cards,” she said.

“I could have bought pythons,” I said.

“Just a little help to manage your project,” she said. “I’m pretty sure.”

Suddenly, two men in uniforms stood in the doorway. “We’re from the Fish and Game Department,” said one of the men. “We know about the mongooses,” he said, and pointed at the mongoose that had just killed the snake. The mongoose, which had been pecking the eyes of the dead snake, looked at the Game officer and clucked at him.

“Was it the Hawaiian?” I asked.

“What do you think?” he said.

“There was also an ugly lady,” I said.

“Do you know how destructive these bastards are?” the officer asked as the other officer began to hunt the mongooses and put them in cages.

“Which bastards are you talking about?” I asked him as my girlfriend took the kudzu vine from my hand, jerked it from the chandelier, tore it from the ceiling and wall, bunched it up, and covered my nakedness with it.