

What a Shelter Means to Me

By Eric

A shelter is most commonly known as a building that protects people, like walls, a roof, and hopefully a door that doesn't squeak every time you open it. Most people picture a house, maybe an apartment, or at the very least a structure that won't collapse if you sneeze too hard. Sometimes the definition is narrowed down even further to "a place under a roof," which makes it sound like any random overhang or porch could qualify. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that a shelter can be almost anything. And I mean *anything*.

Take a tree, for example. A tree is not exactly a five-star hotel for humans. If you tried to sleep in one, you'd probably fall out, get sap in your hair, and wake up with a squirrel staring at you like you stole its mortgage. But to the squirrel, that same tree is basically a luxury condo. Squirrels, chipmunks, and birds all use trees as shelters; they set up nests, stash snacks, and raise families there. What looks like a regular tree to us is, to them, a bustling neighborhood with excellent branch-to-branch transportation.

Then there's the classic hole in the ground. To humans, a hole is a tripping hazard. To mice, groundhogs, snakes, and insects, it's prime real estate. Cool in the summer, warm in the winter, and conveniently located far away from anything with big feet. It's not exactly a shelter humans can use unless you're a very tiny human or you enjoy living underground like a potato, but for the creatures who rely on it, it's perfect.

And sometimes, shelters get even weirder. Sometimes one animal becomes the shelter for another. Cats and dogs, for example, unintentionally provide five-star accommodations for fleas. To us, fleas are pests. To fleas, our pets are warm, fluffy, and all-inclusive resorts with unlimited access to food. It's gross, yes, but it proves the point: a shelter doesn't have to be a building. It doesn't even have to be made of wood or dirt. It can be alive. (Though hopefully not *your* hair.)

But I can go deeper. Much deeper. Because once you start noticing shelters, you realize they're everywhere. The space under the couch? A thriving metropolis for dust bunnies. They gather there, multiply, and probably hold secret meetings about taking over the living room. A pen holder? That's basically a roofless apartment complex for pens, pencils, and that one mysterious marker that hasn't worked since 2014. A drawer is a shelter for objects that don't want to be found. A laundry hamper is a shelter for dirty clothes that have given up on life. Honestly, most people don't even realize how many shelters exist inside their own shelters.

And even considering all that, I can still go deeper because shelters aren't just physical. They can be emotional, too! Take the brain, for example. It's the ultimate storage unit. Memories live there, rent-free, for years. Some memories stay neatly organized, while others wander around like they forgot what aisle they belong in. Parts of the brain are specifically designed as emotional shelters. The amygdala can shelter stress and anxiety, but also pleasure. The prefrontal cortex and hippocampus handle decision-making, emotional regulation, and memories that like to pop up at inconvenient times. The thalamus keeps emotional memories safe, and the insula and cingulate cortex shelter bodily states, pain, and all the feelings you pretend you don't have when someone asks if you're okay.

So, finally, what is the definition of "shelter" to me? Well, considering all of this, I would say that a shelter can be something any physical or emotional space where a living being, non-living object, or memory can make a home, camp out, accumulate, rest, or simply exist.