

The Bitterness of Butterfly Wings

by Dave Clapper

I seldom go to the university's various social functions, though I would if invited. I crave that question that inevitably follows introductions: "What do you teach?"

"I'm a Lepidopterist," I tell the enquirer, a profession I know isn't familiar to most.

"What's that?" they usually ask.

"I study butterflies." Men typically change the subject at this point. Most women, however, are either interested or feign interest. They usually ask what got me interested in studying butterflies. I tell them something sort of romantic, testing the waters. If one seems interested in the romance of butterflies, I know that this is not the person to whom I may safely confide.

Just once I met a woman who seemed disappointed in the romance of butterflies. It is because of that encounter that I'm rarely invited to social events.

"Can I tell you the real reason?" I whispered to her. Her eyes, which had begun to wander, snapped back to me.

"Yes, please," she said in an equally low voice.

"It's the powder."

"On their wings."

“Yes.”

“I love that powder,” she said. I felt that unique vibration created when energy percolates between two people with similar passions.

“Have you tasted it?” I asked.

She blushed and almost imperceptibly nodded. “It's bitter.”

I grabbed her elbow and steered her to a less crowded room. She didn't resist.

“The first time I caught a butterfly, I was six. As I clasped its wings between my fingers, I heard something awful, something I'd never heard before. My parents were having sex.”

Her eyes widened.

“The sound so distracted and frightened me that I crushed the butterfly in my hands. It was an Anise Swallowtail. To take my mind off the sounds, I focused on the mess on my hands. I could have wiped it on my jeans as most boys would have done, but the experience would have ended with the memory of sounds of my parents. So I licked the Anise from my fingers. Making sure that I didn't miss a single bit of the taste of its various parts.”

“God,” she said.

“It was the powder that stuck with me. Other parts of the Anise could be compared to other tastes I'd encountered, but the wings' powder was unique.”

“Bitter,” she said again.

I hesitated, drew a deep breath. “I have some butterflies in my car,”

I said. Her eyelashes moved like moths and I would swear I heard her moan.

Staggering like drunks, we made our way to my battered old Jetta. I removed a satchel from the trunk and selected several specimens. She gasped at each one, but chose a Monarch, that most American of the beauties.

She traced her fingertips gently over its wings and extended her fingers to my lips. I sucked them greedily. She withdrew her fingers, traced them over the orange wings again and coated her own lips with the powder. I tasted them, my heart pummeling.

Several specimens later, as I lapped the emerald of a Queen Victoria's Birdwing from her labia, we were interrupted. A professor's wife had wondered to where her visiting sister had disappeared. She was not happy to find her being ministered to by the odd little associate professor with the thinning hair and an unhealthy obsession with bugs.

I never saw her again. I hope to be given the opportunity again to relate enough romantic versions of why I took up Lepidoptery to make it back onto guest lists. I hold onto the unlikely wish that one day I will meet another woman who shares my appreciation for the bitterness of butterfly wings.

