

How the Monarchs Thrive

by Steven Gowin

Every summer's full moon, Leanne Lafleur drifts out of the Fairmont Cemetery towards Milkweed Lane plugging the bloody hole in her forehead with her little finger.

When we pulled onto the same track that night, The Old Man said he'd only be a minute. Out for a bite of supper, he'd polished off a couple pints. Well four.

I didn't like it. This was the exact same spot where Leanne Lafleur and Billy Weaver had parked that murder night when Billy was already 22 and a deputy for his uncle, and Leanne had just finished high school.

At the time, Leanne was meant to be going with Daryll Keyser. She played bells in Mr. Davis' marching band, and Daryll played tuba. On the bus home from Tulip Festivals, still in their uniforms, they'd do things to each other in 10-minute turns. Daryll believed in fair play and counted precise time. Leanne always kept a tissue handy.

Deputy Billy had met Leanne in May when he'd pulled over a bunch of girls for underage drinking. He'd not been able to get over Leanne's jet-black hair and the red headband that matched her ruby lipstick.

He let the girls off the hook, and in a couple of weeks had begun rendezvousing with Leanne out here on Milkweed Lane. Leanne knew she'd be breaking up with Daryll the minute Billy asked her for that red headband.

She did surrender it voluntarily but asked Billy for his collar brass in return. He'd hung the headband from the prowler's rearview mirror, and Leanne carefully fixed the collar brass to her purse.

Leanne's girlfriends all said that a breakup with Daryll was about right. After all, Daryll's dad, the whole family in fact were *off*, weren't they? Didn't they all practice nudism or something, and wasn't Daryll crazy anyway? Why he'd collect all those old

broken clock springs and crowns and worthless pocket watches?
Why?

I don't know; maybe Daryll really was mental. The winter before the tragedy, Mr. Davis had had the band out marching all over West Jesus, in February, freezing cold, and two months early for the Tulip Festival.

As we crossed, the Raccoon River, Daryll'd had it. He'd yelled that his fingers were frozen, that he'd had enough, and he would chuck his tuba over the bridge, and so he did. The clattering instrument cracked the ice and sank down down down toot da sweet.

And by that next June, with the Leanne situation and all, Daryll was worse and said he wished he'd followed that tuba below, plunged under the ice, trapped, hopeless, never again to surface.

He talked suicide all the time and reckoned that freezing was the best way to go, gun blast the second. Boom, straight to the brain pan. In the end, with the warm weather and all, firearms won out.

The day he snapped, Daryll knew exactly where to look and found his Daddy's .38 under a stack of *American Naturalist* magazines. Once he'd pulled on some mildewed clothes from a heap, he fired up his Dodge, and exactly 20 minutes later, rolled into Milkweed Lane.

The lovers were there in the moonlight alright but separated by radio gear in the patrol console. Revolver in hand Daryll calmly walked in front of the prowler, squared up, pulled once gently, and shot Leanne through the windshield.

For his big date that night, Billy'd dressed in a brand-new lawman's uniform with bow tie, shiny collar brass, braided epaulets, and red leg stripes. The shot had startled him, and he'd peed his pants a little, but after a quick check, he was relieved that no single drop of urine or blood had stained his new outfit.

Outside, Daryll was leveling the pistol's muzzle to his mouth. Since Sheriff Uncle Roger'd never gone over anything like this, and without knowing what else to do, Billy flipped on the red rollers.

At that moment, in that ruby strobe, both he and Daryll made it out. Leanne was dead alright, but always fastidious she'd poked her pinky finger into the hole in her skull to stave the bleeding.

The deputy struggled out of the prowler and around to Daryll who'd already dropped the .38. He stared back and forth at Leanne and at Daryll and at Leanne and finally bumbled around to get the cuffs around Daryll's wrists. Daryll'd had to help him, but the two finally managed.

After Billy'd called it in, the boys leaned on the prowler's hood waiting for Sheriff Uncle Roger and the ambulance. Wind rustled the ditch weeds, and big moths bumped the patrol car's headlights. Billy said if they were smokers now'd be the moment, but neither did. Billy asked Daryll for the exact time.

By Fall, when the trial came up, most of Dallas County felt sorry for Daryll, what with his odd home circumstances and all, so Judge Bishop Thornton ruled him insane and sent him on down to the Asylum at Clarinda.

Daryll studied lapidary and jewelry work down there, and when released became a watchmaker. Then he moved to Nome, Alaska where he practices that vocation to this day.

In the end, Deputy Billy married Leanne's sister, Laureene, who he'd met in court. They now have two daughters both with jet-black hair.

The Weaver girls wear red headbands to keep the bangs off their faces. The older, Leanne, plays cymbals, and the younger, Lafleur, plays flute in Mr. Davis' marching band.

Leanne's grave at the Fairmont Cemetery overlooks the Raccoon River Bridge. Thousands and thousands of orange and black butterflies flit around her headstone all summer.

They say that as she walks at night Leanne sometimes forgets her wound and carelessly soaks the foliage, weeping as she realizes what she's done.

When the old man has finished his whiz, I say again that Milkweed Lane gives me the heebie-jeebies and wonder why in hell do we always have to stop here?

The Old Man will say anything and now claims it's because those butterflies need milkweed, and milkweed needs tears to grow up strong.

You betcha, he adds, mostly tears but also blood, and now and then a little pee. Tears and blood and pee. That's how the monarchs thrive.

