

The Guided Hike

"What's your favorite butterfly?" Susan asked the solemn guide.

Her words sweep over the lepidopterist, but David has nearly been netted before and knows how to glide through the mesh of the pursuit.

"Monarch, but of course everyone expects me to say something more exotic like the South American Morph," he answers, a hint of ennui in his tone.

"It's remarkable how Monarchs migrate from Canada to Mexico."

"Everything about them is remarkable, including their toxicity to predators," he continues, wondering how long he'll have to keep up the one-on-one with her.

"Milkweed's the culprit... and the caterpillars are mad for it. They devour a whole leaf in just a few bites." Susan smiles brightly, obviously pleased to remember this fact.

"It's their only diet," David curtly replies, looking at her teeth and wondering if Crest White Strips would be effective for removing stains from old microscope slides.

"And a bland diet for such lovely creatures," she adds.

Susan wants to establish a good conversational base at the beginning of the hike to enable her to feel comfortable extracting more information about butterflies later.

"Monarchs are a good example how looks can be deceiving," he declares, rolling his shoulders back and down to loosen the tightness he feels.

David immediately wishes he hadn't said this because it sounds as if he might be referring to her. All of her is sparkling in the sun, not just her teeth, and he can't keep himself from staring.

Susan surmises that David is unaware of his effortless good looks. He is tall and model perfect with boyishly lustrous black hair that falls into his eyes. As he leans down to gather nets and binoculars, his hair reminds her of Sam, her black lab, and she wants to touch him as she would her beloved dog. His skin is smooth and the color of a latte, her favorite drink. When he stands back up, she

notices his sea-green eyes that emit blazing intensity as he gazes at the surroundings he is in command of. His mouth is full and sensuous, Chapstick residue stuck in the corners. Susan thinks about wiping his mouth with the Kleenex she has in her pocket, but she flips open her water bottle and drinks half of it while the other hikers gather together.

David is impatient with having to take time caring for his body and he doesn't like to look in mirrors, often shaving while pouring over his research. When he does look in a mirror, he tries on different expressions in an attempt to conceal the size of his lips. He has occasional sinus problems and when it is difficult for him to breathe, his mouth hangs open. Once when he was congested, he walked into the men's room at work and was startled to see that his lips appeared even larger when they were hanging open. And when he is not having sinus difficulties, he thinks that his lips get in the way of being taken seriously. Women he guides on hikes quickly set their eyes on his lips after staring into his eyes and then drink gulps of water from the water bottles attached with Velcro to their back packs. This happens on every single hike to women who have long given up the mating dance ritual and are surprised to meet David under a blazing summer sun in meadow grasses swirling around them. Over the last few years, the sound of Velcro ripping is as familiar to him as the hum of insects.

Susan knew immediately that David was not interested in her. She speculated that his daily life was probably much like the daily lives of insects in the natural world, but that he was stuck, or arrested, in the pupa stage, and not ready to emerge. A predatory instinct surged through her when she thought about what it might take to make him unravel and fly. She looked at his Botanical Gardens T-shirt where one half of a monarch's wings had been rubbed off. He had just put on an Audubon cap over his gorgeous hair and was screwing up his face at her and the other hikers. He had an open mouth squint, the kind you see on grade school boys who are concentrating or on people stumbling out of darkness into broad daylight. She stepped away from the other hikers to speak to

him.

"Some butterflies mate for three or more hours," she says devilishly.

He stops squinting, his face relaxes, and when he licks his lips, the Chapstick residue disappears.

"Only a few species."

"Well, that's fortunate then."

He looks at her with interest, licking his lips again, for they suddenly feel very dry. He reaches into his pocket for his Chapstick.

"Why?"

"If it took hours for all butterfly species to mate, we wouldn't have as many butterflies. The world would be less beautiful."

"Yes, that's very true...right about that...I never thought of it that way," he says after smearing the lip balm over his lips. He leans slightly towards her and squints again, this time to observe the way the sun shines on the glimmering highlights in her hair.

The humid day is hazy, which causes the landscape to appear filmy and without clarity, like some of the Impressionist paintings at the museum that aren't Susan's favorites. Soft pinpricks of serenity, but nothing that striking, she always thinks. Susan re-wets her contacts with eye drops and blinks to try and see clearly, but then thinks the day itself needs some kind of cleaning. It is a steamy summer mid-day whose brilliance has been blurred, but Susan knows the dazzling light is really there behind the mask of the atmospheric conditions.

David leads the hikers on a path through the nature reserve and although it is a strain for them to follow the dance of butterflies, his passion and knowledge cut through the ponderous air, and after some time, the mere sight of a cloudless sulphur appears sharp and showy in the fuzzy sunlight. Hallucinatory exclamations resound over the meadow when someone snags one in a net. It doesn't matter it isn't a monarch, painted lady, or a giant swallowtail, for the cloudless sulphur has become an ethereal fairy that teases and arouses them.

Susan doesn't speak again to David for the duration of the day's hike, but

listens attentively when he points out details of the butterflies' habitats. She becomes as entranced with the milky sulphurs as everyone else. After the hikers pack up their gear and walk to their cars merrily chatting to one another, Susan lingers to talk with David.

David knew this would happen. It always happens, he thinks, agitation flowering in his chest creating asthma-like symptoms that hinder his breathing while he gathers his paraphernalia as fast as he can. On nearly every hike, there are young biology majors, old men seeking hobbies, senior couples making good use of their retirement years, and lonely middle-aged women. The biology majors sometimes challenge his knowledge, the old men and senior couples are a joy to hike with for they are unadulterated nature lovers, but the women are always a nuisance. They are usually homely with enormous breasts sagging underneath vibrant colored butterfly wings etched on their T-shirts. They wear caps bearing environmental slogans like his own, and some of the hats have flaps that make them look like Snoopy the Red Baron. Their fanny packs bump along on their pillow-like rumps and their faces are creased as if they've been folded and re-folded too many times, oiled with sunscreen.

David registers all of this as precisely as the data he collects about butterflies. These women study their field guides and suck desperately on water bottles as if they are gasping for air on breathing tubes. Their expensive binoculars would dangle over their drooping breasts and it was this particular thing that would cause David to feel pity towards them. Then he would be forgiving and patient in answering their questions, hoping to inspire them with his love of butterflies.

This woman is different, he thinks, after assembling all his materials that now sit on the ground by his feet. He takes in a long breath, puckering out his lips while releasing it, and watches Susan as she packs away her guide book and water bottle. She seems fairly intelligent and her wit amuses him. She isn't wearing an old botanical T-shirt, or a hat to cover her shimmering sunlit hair. However, he is irritated that she is staying to talk to him after everyone else has left.

Susan finishes packing up her things and stands in front of him, smiling

confidently. David sighs and looks over her pretty head. It always narrows down to one, he thinks. Usually there might be two or three women kicking at stones, asking another question - perching and patrolling. Then one at a time they would leave, understanding the game they hardly knew they played was over.

Susan doesn't know about these female games on summer hikes. She is euphoric inhaling the salty sea air and the magic she has found in such a small common butterfly she has ignored all summer in her backyard. She is experiencing what the poet, Keats, said about poetry reproducing the common universe and making it new. David is just standing there looking at her with a goofy look. She closes her eyes wondering if it might be true that a blind person becomes more intuitive. It has been like that today, she thinks. She'd been blind to simple beautiful things and now she's eager to ask David questions about her butterfly bush and other flowers she had planted in her yard to lure butterflies to.

"Don't move!" David hisses.

Susan opens her eyes and David stands with his net poised over her, his breathing raspy and labored.

She thinks about responding with a lighthearted remark, such as, "You can catch me without the net, you know!" but decides against it. It would be wasted on him.

With his lips barely moving and standing still as a statue, David murmurs, "We have found our monarch and he is perched upon one of your golden curls."

"Our monarch?"

David is embarrassed. He closes his mouth, sucks in his lips, and then whispers, "The monarch is clearly attracted to the color of your hair."

"What's a monarch now that we have examined the beauty of a cloudless sulphur," Susan says, sighing and sweeping her hands up into the air.

"Don't move," he says sternly, swatting her hands down, "I want to tag him."

The monarch doesn't move from his perch on her shiny hair.

"He's wonderful," David whispers, walking closer to Susan, "but he doesn't seem to want to leave your hair."

"You must tell him that I'm already betrothed to the delicate alabaster," Susan

says, and giggles. To think that she had been chasing after the allusive monarch all morning into the afternoon and now one was tangled in her hair.

"This one's gorgeous."

"You said yourself looks can be deceiving." She laughs at his serious demeanor. His lips are parted and he is panting.

David sweeps the entire net over Susan's head to capture the monarch.

"You know, Mr. Nature Guide... there are other ways of getting the attention of a woman," Susan laughs and tries to adjust to the odd position she is in with the net over her head.

David doesn't hear what she has said. He only sees the monarch and the monarch only sees Susan's hair. He is filled with awe because there is one more monarch to tag to again prove and celebrate its remarkable flight over many miles, enduring wind and predators. How strong and unceasing is this life within the monarch! His heart is beating rapidly and he can barely breathe.

"Shhh, don't speak or move!" he orders in his wheezing breath.

David moves close to Susan's head with the net over it and the monarch underneath it. He tries to focus on the butterfly but his eyes begin to blur and he smells something that alters his equilibrium. It must be her hair, sweet and exotic.

"You know they have no hearing," Susan says, curious as to what else this glorious day might hold for her.

David is three inches from her face and she feels his warm unscented breath. There is no scent about him, not even the scent of sweat. He's an unscented candle giving light to the insect world, she considers. Then she holds her breath and dares to look into his eyes. They are the color of the sea and she can hear the sound of the waves crashing upon the shore of her heart.

"He's tangled in your hair! Hold still! I'll save him!" David exclaimed, reaching inside the net and tenderly touching the monarch's proboscis that is wrapped around strands of Susan's hair. As soon as David touches the butterfly, it panics and flutters violently. He carefully removes his hand from underneath the net and Susan emits a long and shaky sigh, but doesn't move because she knows

now David means business.

Before she realizes what he is doing, David has pulled out a pocket knife from his back pocket. To Susan's horror, he unfolds it and in a matter of seconds he has reached both of his hands underneath the net to cut a large chunk of her hair that holds the monarch in it. She holds her breath and her eyes tear up. David slowly and delicately removes the monarch from underneath the net and watches it violently flutter, frightened and unable to fly from the scintillating lure of Susan's hair. One more taste before Mexico, David thinks it must have thought, not knowing it would be torn apart by blinding bright color patterns bereft of the energy rich nectar it needed for its long trip.

David drops to his knees and lays Susan's hair with its captive upon the ground.

"There...relax and I'll free you," David coos.

Susan drops to her knees alongside David.

"His proboscis is broken," she says sadly.

David hangs his head over the monarch.

"It's your fault. It's your entire fault," he whimpers, and then sobs, drool coming out of his nose and mouth.

Susan jumps up and backs away from David and the dying butterfly. She looks out towards the horizon and observes the misty lazy sun lowering itself to spread pink and lavender pastels atop some milky clouds. Gnats and mosquitoes swarm around her perspiring skin and another monarch dances boldly before her. She touches the bare spot on her head, turns around, and runs as fast as she can to her car.