

Shadfly

by H.T. Yim

‘I’m leaving.’

She could tell he didn’t believe her. ‘OK.’

‘You could come with me. Which would be awesome, seeing as you’re my best friend and I love you and all – or you could stay. In which case it would suck, but I refuse to stay here.’

He turned to consider her. ‘You can’t be serious.’

‘No – just deadly serious.’

‘And go where, exactly?’ he asked, bemused. ‘Where could we possibly even go?’

‘Oh, so you are going with me,’ she teased, tilting her head in mock innocence.

‘C’mon. I thought you were being serious.’

‘We’d travel. As long as we follow the bank, we won’t stray too far out into the water.’

‘Why do you even want to go? It’s not that bad here.’

Effie looked at him incredulously. ‘Not that bad? How many of us are sick? How many died as fucking *virgins*?’

Mero rubbed his forelegs together, the long bristles bending against each other. ‘This is our hatchery, though. We can’t very well just *leave*.’

‘Why not?’ she challenged.

‘Well, for one, we’d miss the final moult. And the nuptial dance. I mean, what would be the point?’

For a moment, she was silent. ‘We’ve waited over two thousand years to fly,’ she said gently. ‘Do you ever really think about that?’ She often remembered the moment, glorious and shining, when their swarm (if it could have been called as such with their

numbers so sparse) finally emerged. She remembered the resistance of the water as she burst through its skin; the explosion of freedom and ecstasy and sheer terror. She remembered lingering, clumsy in her newest body, before spreading her wings and rising with her siblings in the air, a single cloud at one with the sky – flying and dancing and alighting on every possible surface, exploring a world they had only ever dreamed of.

Yet festivities were fleeting as they realized in horror that the disease that had plagued them in the bedrock had followed them above. That someone, *anyone*, could be afflicted with the debilitating sickness; could so quickly deteriorate before one's eyes. The only difference was that up here, there often were no bodies to mourn – the victims simply folded their wings and plummeted towards the water, leaving behind nothing but air and grief, much as if they had been devoured.

Mero cocked his head to the side. 'What does that have to do with staying or leaving?'

'We've spent most of our lives hiding. From this disease and every asshole in the water – even those Stonefly bastards.' The larger larvae had always attacked from behind or below. She remembered watching, utterly helpless, as monstrous pincers sank into her sister's abdomen and consumed her alive, indifferent to flailing limbs or agonized pleas.

'And the most fucked up part ...' She would never admit it to anyone but Mero. 'All I could hear myself thinking was, *please don't let it be me*. I was hoping it would be somebody else – anybody – just not me.

'That's when I realized ... how much of a coward I really am.'

He ran his antennae over her face, the myriad protruding curves of her eyes and the crease between her head and thorax, caressing and soothing. She hated how safe he made her feel, when they weren't really. *Not safe. Not here.*

She murmured, calmer now. 'The shit we've been through, all the shit I've seen, I promised myself – swore that once we were above, it would be better.'

'It is better, Effie.'

'Yeah, Mero, at least we're not being cannibalized. *But it's still horribly wrong*. We may not be able to see it, but something's still destroying us in masses.

'And maybe it's just too late. Maybe even if we figure out the cause, we won't be able to do anything about it. Maybe we'll have a better chance if we leave.'

‘Effie, we don’t know what’s out there. It could be so much worse.’

‘It could be so much better. How will we know unless we try? Fuck, I’m not asking for paradise or anything! Just a place where ... where the odds aren’t so stacked against us. Where we might actually stand a chance.’

‘Everything’s going to be OK.’

She pulled away from him. ‘I don’t need you to tell me everything’s going to be OK. I need you, for the first time in your life – no offense, but this is something you know about yourself – to make a decision.’

For a moment he said nothing, and she feared he’d sulk irrationally.

‘All right. I’m always with you.’ He swung his tails, suddenly playful. ‘So does this mean we’re gonna be mates for sure?’

Her heart skipped a beat, though Effie refused to show it. ‘Yeah, it would.’

‘But only ‘cause of the complete lack in alternatives,’ she added slyly.

They took flight at the same time, him chasing and her throwing further taunts and both laughing – and for a moment, all worries and tribulations were meaningless.

They spent the next two years in blissful solitude. There were plentiful places to land, serene and inviting. Yet they pressed on, talking and joking and racing as if nothing and no one existed in the world but them ...

In their third year they alighted on an isolated plant with sturdy broad leaves, instantly recognizing the quickness of breath and the constriction of their shells, weighing them down. Since her days as a hatchling, Effie had moulted over forty times. Yet panic still took hold as her breath stopped abruptly; as her joints grew stiff and immutable, trapping her within her own body. Desperate, she writhed until at last the old shell split open, exposing her to a shock of air, cold and biting against her soft skin. For what always felt an eternity she struggled, pushing, twisting, wriggling. When she finally pulled free, she perched atop the abandoned casing and slowly unfurled her new wings, the tips rolling out from under and stretching in a dull, sweet ache. Then, with a deep gasp, she resumed breathing.

‘Mero?’ she called out, panting heavily.

‘I’m here.’ The voice came from behind.

Effie wheeled around and for a moment was struck mute and dumb, her mind wiped of all coherent thought. Standing before her was a full-fledged male. He was bigger, his legs and tails much longer. His thorax was enlarged and powerful, sunlight gleaming off his already hardening shell. His wings were now sleeker; transparent and glossy, no longer opaque or covered in fine hairs. He was beautiful, strong, *irresistible*. She had been close to Mero ever since they were hatchlings, young and innocent – had always had a crush on him. Yet in their final skins, everything had changed.

‘What is it?’

‘You’re ... you’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen,’ she said stupidly.

‘You’re one to talk.’

They drew closer to each other, drinking in the sight of the other as though they had never met before. Then they took to the air with a newfound agility, their exhaustion from the moult forgotten. They propelled back and forth in harmony – in an ancient dance, their wings beating a routine that had never been taught yet were known all the same – titillating with flight and desire.

She shuddered with pleasure as he stroked her abdomen with a leg, leaving her shell tingling where he traced it. She was engulfed by passion, by insanity, by a heat which told her to climb on top of him, to ride him fast and hard. She knew he was driven by the same madness, that he also knew what to do as he dipped midair and positioned himself beneath her, his long forelegs wrapping around and clutching her thorax. The moment she felt him inside, she realized she had been half a sandgrain all along, realizing its brokenness only when the waters, with rare mercy and by impossible chance, had reunited the two pieces. They were whole, now in this embrace. They consumed each other with neither reserve nor shame, until she demanded that he shoot it inside her.

When they climaxed, they did not pull apart. They drifted downwards in tandem, two leaves with a shared stem, their interlocking bodies descending lazily upon the breeze.

They closed their wings in upright position, ready for sleep. ‘Y’know,’ Mero said softly, ‘I wouldn’t have minded staying back.’

‘What?’

‘The hatchery. I mean, yeah, it wasn’t perfect. But it was home, it was easy, and we were

with everyone.’

Effie bristled, at once angry and frightened. ‘Then why did you come with me?’

‘Because our entire swarm didn’t mean half as much as you do to me.

‘I initially thought it didn’t really matter where I was, so long as I was with you. But now I’m starting to think you may have been right.’

She stared at him and wondered what she had ever done to deserve him. ‘I do tend to be right,’ she quipped. He pushed against her playfully.

‘Maybe leaving really was the best chance for us. And for what’ll hopefully be like, three thousand of our babies.’

Effie twitched her hind wings with a pang of uncertainty. Since they were larvae, everyone had looked forward to becoming parents. Everyone except her, it seemed. She had only imagined procreation with trepidation – with overwhelming fear. How much would it hurt? What if they came out wrong? How many would end up dying? Yet when she thought of making life with this beautiful male, nothing seemed more fulfilling.

‘One thousand. No one lays three anymore.’

‘Two.’

‘One or nothing!’

They fell asleep in peace, the tips of their antennae touching lightly. When they awoke, they exchanged a single glance before taking flight – taking to each other’s legs once more before setting out.

She was the first to know. She could feel the eggs growing within. Her entire body felt different: heavy yet with unprecedented alertness, her two sights sharpened as never before. He was ecstatic, just beside himself with joy. She laughed and called him an animal, obsessed only with reproductive instinct. He called her a miser obsessed only with guarding themselves and letting the world think they were more angsty than they really were, and continued to titter and babble like a larva, newly hatched from egg. Then they made love – wildly, recklessly, completely without abandon.

He was the first to die. They had always been cautious, travelling far above the surface. They were supposed to be safe. Yet the scaled behemoth jumped – *flew* – from beneath,

closing its jaws around Mero and taking him down to its watery hell.

Her best friend, her love, her brother, the father of her eggs. There all her life, and lost in one moment. *Gone forever*. Effie had laughed hysterically. Didn't they always say men lived longer?

She went on through the heat and haze, every wingbeat an agony.

She knew when it was time. She descended towards the surface of the river, dipped the tip of her abdomen into the water, and let loose the children. She tipped her wings and circled back to watch them: two thousand and twelve eggs swaying and spiralling as they sank towards the riverbed, leaving a trail of bubbles in their wake.

She watched, and felt nothing.

Copyright Info

“Shadfly” is copyright © H.T. Yim, 2016. All rights reserved.
All fonts used are public domain.

Redistribution of this document is permitted for non-commercial purposes.