

Run ... Butterflies? ... Run!

By

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PROLOG

It was a quiet evening in spring. Birds were singing. Children merrily playing in the nearby field. The sky was starting to cloud for the evening rain. An occasional flash of light began casting luminescent shadows on the ground as lightning far above made its presence known. Parents began calling in the children. One child lingered longer than the rest, playing with the wings of the little butterfly he had caught. Pulling them this way and that, pulling and pushing until finally they began to tear off and fall to the ground. Throwing the tiny body into the air, he too ran home.

Clouds, heavily laden with moisture, begin to move slowly across the northern sky. Growing darker and darker the sky emits an ominous growling, forewarning impending danger. Tiny droplets of rain begin forming within the clouds, then start falling. Slowly at first, then rapidly, as they pound the ground in rage. Miniature rivulets form on the ground, flowing toward the empty field where the tiny butterfly lie, lost of life. Flowing faster and faster, as more and more water begins accumulating. Reaching the fallen wings it picks them up and continues ever forward, transporting them with the rest of the debris found in the field.

The water grew deep, ran faster, making its way across the grassy terrain. Merging with tiny tributaries on its journey through numerous pebbles in its path. Reaching the field edge, it has grown from a tiny runoff to a fast flowing stream. Quickly emptying into the wash flowing into the nearby lake.

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On the far side of the lake, Rambersteen Manufacturing was casually dumping its weekly accumulation of waste. Workers scurried here and there, opening valves on the lines running waste from the main plant. Supervisors monitor the refuse as it makes its way along the enclosed channels, toward the trucks waiting at the end of the line. Steam rises along multiple points in the plastic pipeline. Minuscule cracks begin slowly widening as pressure forces the liquid down along the irregular surface. Slowly at first, then faster and faster droplets form along the exterior of the pipe. Each running down the exterior surface to a point where the pipeline takes a right angle to turn inland. Briefly crossing a small thread of water, running toward the lake. Droplets begin falling from the pipe, entering the still water below. The slow current carries the waste toward the center of the lake.

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On a third side of the lake, long, thin streams of molecular waste start rising from the city. The workday is ending and weary travelers begin their journey home. Wind carries the slender threads higher and higher into the evening sky. Bound in a westerly direction, toward the quiet lake. They drift slowly, a sudden downdraft catching the edge, begins to carry it toward the lake far below. As the edge touches the water an audible hissing becomes increasingly pronounced. The water begins to bubble, waves microns in height begin forming along the edge of the intruding stream. They begin to explode as they form faster and faster. Waves growing higher, current surging stronger and stronger, the flow nears the center of the lake.

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As the pollutants begin collecting near the center of the lake, they drift ever so slowly downward, toward the murky bottom. Melting into a single stream where sludge, air pollutants and surface slime all meet. They slowly combine with the partially dissolved butterfly body parts. Coming to a final rest atop a small meteorite, landing days before during a brief shower, lighting up the sky for several hours. The unexpected shower attracting many new visitors to the city in search of remnants.

THE CYCLE BEGINS

Weeks pass before the foamy cauldron lying at the bottom of the lake begins ejecting odd shaped egg casings. Each silently float toward the surface. Attaching themselves to pieces of passing driftwood, form small clusters as they ride the ripples created by passing driftwood. Ripples carry them further and further from the driftwood, closer and closer to the shore. By the time the drifting branch and egg casings reach the shoreline the eggs have already begun hatching. Tiny caterpillars emerge, crawling safely onto land. On the opposing shore more caterpillars emerge as a new ripple recedes from the shore.

An uncanny quiet follows the caterpillars as they begin their journey inland. A small bird, flying high in the air, readies a dive toward the slowly moving creature below. Making a long arc across the blue sky it folds its wings then dives downward. Lower and lower it glides, closer and closer the prey becomes. Within seconds landing softly on the ground, within inches of the slow moving caterpillars. It places a claw on one it has singled out. Tilting its head ever so slightly, it rests its separated beak on either side of the slender body. Without hesitation it snaps the halves together only to encounter an unexpected hardness. Experiencing a slight burning, it rapidly drops its captured quarry. Desperately it tries to spring upward, only to fail in mid hop.

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Jim rudely awoke from his dream to the feeling of something cool and slimy making its way across his leg. Raising his head slightly, he gently lifts the cover of the sleeping bag he is encased within. Peering down into the darkness he catches the movement of something as it continues to crawl across his leg. He picks up the flashlight next to him and, turning it on, plays the beam into the darkened depths. He saw the caterpillar.

“Oh, ma-a-a-n ...” he cries, squeezing it between his fingers.

Jim gently pulls it away from his skin. Bringing his hand out of the bag he flings the furry crawler into the darkness beyond. He tries to fall back to sleep. A few minutes pass as he is again awakened from his dreams. This time, by a burning sensation in the area where the caterpillar had been crawling. He lifts the cover and peers into the darkness. Feeling around he rapidly scratches the itch. His fingertips begin to burn. Turning on the flashlight he again shines the beam into the bag.

As the narrow beam plays across his leg Jim lets out a silent curse. A deep red welt outlines where the caterpillar had crawled. Along either side are tiny black trails, leading off at right angles and extending downward several inches. Merging into one they form a pit near the ankle which was rapidly filling with blood. Turning pale in the light of the quarter moon, Jim clutches his chest then lies down, silent. Other members of the camp sleep restful, unaware what has transpired.

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Slowly but steadily the tiny creatures make their way toward the city. The many obstacles they encounter do not sway them in their mission. Soon, insects big and small shy away as they pass silently on their journey inland. Partially devoured leaves turn brown and harden, dying instantly. The caterpillars move steadily forward, a path of destruction marking their journey through the forest.

Days pass before the caterpillars near the edge of the forest. Now matured and full-size, they are looking to hibernate before their final stage in life takes place. Finding a tree at the edge of the forest each locates a leaf and spins a silken sheath. The approaching night finds each safely in their temporary home, secured by a single silken thread.

Days pass before the chrysalis of each caterpillar begins to hatch. Bright yellow, blue and purple butterflies begin emerging. Each fly toward the field where their first kin had been so senselessly destroyed. The field lying on the outskirts to the city.

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Mae stood washing her hair as she watched the first little visitor arrive. It landed on the windowsill with a flutter, bright yellow wings flaying the air above its' minute head, folding and unfolding. Spreading the tiny wings once more, it folded them high above its head. Shortly a second, then a third visitor arrives. Each more beautiful than the previous.

Gently reaching out, Mae picks the yellow butterfly up by the wings, observing closely as its antennae sweeps through the air in seemingly random motion. While she observes it the remaining butterflies alight on the

fingers of her other hand. She lets them crawl along a finger a while before releasing the yellow one to fly back to the sill. Once she does the other two fly to join it. She continues washing her hair.

As she finishes, Mae dresses and makes her way to the small kitchen. Reaching for a small box of cereal on the top shelf, she begins feeling queasy. She puts the box back and sits down for a few moments in the chair by the small table. Momentarily shaking the feeling she again tries to reach the cereal. Again a feeling of nausea sweeps over her. Re-seating herself she rests a few moments longer.

Mae remains seated until the feeling subsides enough for her to stand once again. Having lost focus on the cereal, she quickly turns toward the sink. Positioning her head above the drain she purged herself of the previous night's meal. Removing the liquid sputum from her bottom lip Mae quickly makes her way to the bedroom. Picking up the phone she rapidly dials the emergency number then awaits a response.

"Emergency Services."

"This is Mae Madcau at 129 E Mountain View. I have experienced several bouts of nausea and dizziness. I've thrown up and am rapidly getting weak. I can't explain it but I think I may have been poisoned. I am barely able to hold onto the phone..."

"We're sending out an ambulance now, Ma'am. Hold on."

Several minutes pass before the ambulance arrives. The paramedics exit the vehicle and approach the partially opened front door. When there is no response to their knocking they fully open the door and look around for the occupant.

Discovering the living room empty, they proceeded to the bedroom. Here they discover the body of a female, age 30, lying face down on the bed. They roll her over and find she wasn't breathing. Applying CPR they attempt to revive her but to no avail. She has already passed on. Pulling the bed sheet over her they placed a call to the coroner.

Further down the street a small child was merrily playing on a swing. Up in the air he'd swing, pause, then came back down again. As he reached the bottom of the arc the second time he noticed a small group of butterflies playing in the field. He stopped, got off, then ambled over toward them. He watched a light blue one alight on the silky petals of a buttercup. It sat there for a few moments, spreading and folding its wings, then flew off toward another buttercup.

The little boy sat down amongst the buttercups and watched a second butterfly join the first. This was colored a bright yellow and was more interested in the clover growing in the field than the yellow buttercups. As a third butterfly flew into the child's field of view, this a light shade of violet, he focused his attention on it and left the others to their wanderings. It had alight atop a dandelion and sat slowly folding and unfolding its wings. He approached and when its wings were folded above its body, picked it up to view in greater detail. He watched the tiny legs spin circles in the air, reaching out for a foothold. Its antennae wildly thrashing the air.

"Do not fear me, little butterfly ... I will let you fly once again. I only wished a closer look ... " the boy said, releasing the insect, then wiped the dust from the wings on his trousers.

He stands then makes his way back to the swing. Taking a seat he resumes swinging once again. Up he goes, then down. Up, then down, then...

"Mommy. Mommy ... I don't feel so good." He cries, looking toward the park bench where his mother sits reading her magazine.

"Well, come along then. It is time to go home." She replies, helping him from the swing.

He coughs, then follows beside her as they start toward their house.

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Sunning himself on the porch Fred sat watching the colorful butterflies dance about the small garden next to his house. He had been watching several hours and felt it time to re-enter the house for a mid-morning meal. As he was about to get out of the chair he noticed several butterflies making their way toward him. He lay back in the wooden chair, waiting. They flew past the porch railing; up, over the small table he had momentarily rested his arm against, coming to light on the armrest of his chair. Each in turn spreading its wings, then retracting them as they settled in for a momentary rest.

Extending his right hand toward the trio, first one, then another and finally the last, all took briefly to the air then lightly alight on his forearm. Fred stifled a giggle as they tickled him, making their way toward his opened hand. He continued watching as first one, then the others, leapt from his open palm into the air once again to continue their flight.

Arising from the chair Fred made his way into the house, stopping in the doorway as he momentarily caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. He thought he had seen one of the butterflies, flying

beyond his porch, get snapped up in mid flight by a passing bird. Moments later he imagined the bird had stopped its flight, quickly spiraling toward the ground. Turning quickly he saw no evidence of bird or butterfly. He entered the house.

* * *

As the phone rang Jim lay the test-tube aside, looking toward his assistant. She was carefully stacking the slides of the previous test into their trays. He picked up the receiver, listening intently to the speaker.

“We need you here, now, Jim. The readings we are getting don’t seem to make sense. People and animals are dying and we are unable to establish the cause. Grab your kit and get out here as soon as you can.”

“Oh ... all right...” Jim grumbled, placing the handset back on the desk unit.

He removed his lab coat, placing it on a hangar. Gathering slides and other materials he placed them in a light blue box. This he placed in a large metallic box on a rolling cart he had brought along. Closing the lid he snatched his overcoat off the rack, made his way through the double glass doors and into the parking lot beyond.

Picking out his car from among the others cluttering the lot he was soon placing the box in the trunk and securing the lid. After returning the cart to the building Jim started his car and was soon heading northward.

REPORTS FILTER IN

The city is crowded and mysteries abound. The 911 operations center was first to receive calls as they started pouring in.

“He’s not breathing! ...”

“Calm down ... Calm down. We’ll have a paramedic on the way as soon as we get your location. Where are you?” the operator asked, gazing intently at the computer screen before her.

“1218 South Rosemont Drive. Please hurry!” echoed the frantic voice in the headset.

“I’ve already dispatched a medical team to your location. Can you be more specific about what is wrong?”

“My son went to play in the neighborhood field. Some of his friends showed up at our door several minutes ago. They said he had been playing and had suddenly stopped. They tried to get him to stand but he didn’t respond. They came and got me.

“I grabbed my cellular and rushed to see what had happened. I found him on the ground. He didn’t move and wasn’t responding to anything I tried. He is very pale and cold. I can’t feel a pulse and I am scared!”

“The medics should almost be there. Try to stay calm. What about the other kids? What did they say he had been doing?”

“They said he had been playing with some blue butterflies. One had landed on his finger and he was studying it. Suddenly he clutched his chest and rolled over on his side ... wait a minute. The paramedics are here. I have to hang up now.” With that the woman turned off her cellular phone and the 911 operator closed the call on her system, marking it a referral to the paramedic unit which had responded.

“Emergency Services.” the operator responded, picking up the next call.

“My son is very sick and I need to get him to a hospital quickly.” Came the excited voice.

“What are the symptoms?” the operator asked, opening a new case on the screen before her.

“He has a high temperature, is sweating profusely and coughing a lot. He’s just six years old.” She replied.

“How long has he been exhibiting these symptoms?”

“Ever since he came back from playing in the field next door. About an hour I guess.” Came back the quivering voice.

“Was he stung by a bee or some other insect?”

“He says he was just playing with some butterflies. He is beginning to shiver now, help him please.”

“Calm down, ma’am. An ambulance is on its way.” Again the operator turns the case over to the paramedics.

The coroners’ office receives the next call. They were to pickup a child found dead in a field near the outskirts of the city. Since the cause of death was unknown, they were to perform an autopsy. The child had initially been transported to the First Memorial Hospital for treatment so were to pick him up there.

An hour later the child’s body underwent an autopsy at the coroners’ office. The findings were inconclusive. Signs of a heart attack were present, but the child had recently undergone a physical for his school and had been in excellent health. He had been examined from head to foot. No signs of bruising or broken bones. Blood and tissue samples were taken and forwarded to the lab for testing. The case was filed as a premature heart attack. They went on to the next case.

“Victim came in about an hour ago. No apparent cause of death. By law we must perform an autopsy.” The technician was saying into the microphone suspended above the table where the body lay.

“Female, Caucasian, about 30 years of age.” He continued, moving his hands rapidly over the body. “Time of death approximately 3pm. No bruises or broken bones and appears in good health.

“I see a small purple mark on the right index finger.” The technician stops, places one of the fingers under the lens of the microscope. “When studied under magnification it appears fuzzy and irregular, around a millimeter long and about the thickness of a hair.” He focuses the lens then continues his commentary. “On the fingers of the opposite hand are bright blue smudges of a powdery material. Nothing to explain the hardening muscles and sudden heart stoppage. All indications point to another heart attack.”

“I’ll send samples to the lab for further breakdown.” He moves the lens over the head again refocusing it. “The pinkish areas on the scalp resemble fingerprints. I’ll send a sample to the lab along with a set of the prints and a blood sample.” He comments, snapping a picture with the microscopes internal camera.

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“You explained over the phone that there were several unexplained deaths,” Jim said as he entered the laboratory. “I’ll do my best to resolve that issue, Fred.”

“Glad to see you, Jim!” Exclaimed the technician at the microscope. “I’m just going over these slides we received from the coroner a few minutes ago.”

With that the two got to work. Samples were removed from vials, placed on slides, analyzed and results recorded. Minutes turned to hours, then into days before the two sat down to compare the results slide by slide.

“Minute radiation burns and toxic substances, seems most of the antioxidants have been burned off.” Fred said. Then, pointing to a long black trail on the slide ... “but I’m unable to identify this.” A fine line was barely discernable against the purplish coloring of the skin along the edge of the index finger.

“I had trouble with that as well.” Mike joined in. “Appears to be some kind of chemical burn.”

“Yes ... yes. That is what I had come up with initially. I can identify all of the components except this one.” Fred said as he brought out the next slide. “Under magnification it appears clearly defined and asymmetric in shape. Notice the little globes at the termination points. Like sacks feeding the main line itself. Even under the highest magnification there are no traces of what was in the sack-like material except the skin of the victim itself. It’s like whatever was holding the substance that made the trail dissolved into the surrounding skin.”

“I don’t get it. What are all these people dying from? We’ll need to send in a team to the area where most of these incidents seem to be occurring.” Fred commented. “You want to head the investigation this time, Mike?”

“Sure, soon as I get this slide uploaded to the database. I’ll head out to where the first incident took place. Think I’ll take Sam, Ceedra and John with me. They could use the exercise too.”

IN THE FIELD

The small group sat quietly observing the little girl hopping up and down in the field between the tall grass and flowers. She stopped frolicking and sat down. Holding her hand out, she slowly extended her right index finger. A few moments passed before a small brightly colored butterfly came to alight on it. It sat there folding and unfolding its tiny wings. She seemed to be softly whispering. While she was thus preoccupied, first one, then another brightly colored butterfly flew toward her. One alighting on her arm, another in her hair. She cried gleefully as she sat there playing with them.

Deeper within the small meadow a boy held a butterfly by its wings, blowing air over its body, watching it squirm. Tiring of this he released the insect by throwing it high up into the air. After a few somersaults the butterfly righted itself and flew toward the wooded area.

Pushing back the weeds in front of him Mike discovered the remnants of a butterfly the boy had previously been playing with. Parts lay scattered about the ground in all directions. In the distance, he could see other butterflies fluttering about. They appeared clustered into groups of three, which seemed odd as butterflies normally flew by themselves. Dozens of these small groupings appeared scattered throughout the field.

More could be seen emerging from the densely populated woods beyond the small rise at the edge of the field. Mike felt this worth investigating so began moving toward the rise. The group made their way down the incline and were soon standing at the entrance to the wooded area. Here they noticed several empty chrysalis casings. Sam and John elected to stay behind to examine the area in closer detail; Mike and Ceedra would proceed further into the woods.

Each step took Mike and Ceedra deeper and deeper into the woods, bringing them closer and closer to the edge of the small lake. Each yard of wooded land they passed through revealed more and more decaying animal and insect carcasses. Silver threads woven amidst the dirt and pebbles of the woodland floor, outlined the recent passing of caterpillars. Following the trail they soon ran across the remnants of a campfire. Near the circle of stone and outlining the deceased fire was a partially rolled sleeping bag. The infinitesimal trail of silver ran across and into the fabric, then disappeared, reappearing again several feet beyond the bag. Other trails started branching from the main one but all seemed to proceed toward the nearby lake. Mike and Ceedra found themselves looking out across its rippling waters.

"We'll need to get some underwater gear before proceeding further." Mike said, gazing out across the azure lake. "Let's check back with Sam and John."

"RU1 calling RU2. RU1 calling RU2. Come in RU2." Ceedra said into the mike dangling from the knapsack she had just set down by the waters edge.

"This is RU2, what's your status, Mike?" came the response.

"We're at the edge of the lake. Looks like the trail ends here. We'll need some water support to go further. You find anything of interest?"

"Lots of empty chrysalis casings. Always seem to be groups of three, a medium and two small ones. Looks like a dumping ground for the casings. Caterpillars come to this point, then stop. Waiting to hatch into butterflies before proceeding further. Spotted a few of the furry devils not far from where you left us. I placed a couple in a jar for observation later."

"Alright, let's return to the van. We'll see you in about half an hour." Ceedra said laying the microphone aside. Slinging the pack to her back she made the fastenings tight once more.

The two made their way back through the woods, passing the silvery trail, beyond the campfire and empty sleeping bag. Beyond the dead, rotting birds and other animals. Up the hill, through the field where the little girl still sat played with butterflies. Up the embankment, over the two-foot high metal rail designed to keep automobiles out and people in. They rejoined the other members who were seated inside the large blue van. All four gathered up numerous boxes and bags, placing them inside a small metal boat. This they placed on a portable dolly.

When they returned to the field the little girl was no longer playing. The butterflies were exiting the woods at the rate of 5-6 an hour. All members of the investigation team made their way to the edge of the lake. This time they towed a small metallic boat filled with numerous instrumentation packages behind them. The sun was beginning to set as they pushed off from shore. Approaching the center of the lake the water grew dark, stars dotting the evening sky above.

The scanner lying on the bottom had been chirping steadily for the last few minutes and now was giving forth a steady blare. The forward movement of the boat was stopped and the device turned off. Only water lapping the side of the boat breaking the silence.

"Try to hold this position while we go down and checkout what's here." John stated, slipping the ovaloid rubber mask over his face.

Ceedra smiled, placing her hand on his shoulder. "You guys watch yourself. We really don't know what to expect down there."

"See you in a few." Mike retorted as both he and John, sitting on the edge of the boat, flipped over backward and entered the warm water.

Tiny bubbles escaping the oxygen cylinders lazily swirled to the surface as the two descended the murky depths. Further and further downward they went. Lights on their heads barely dispelling the darkness surrounding them. Five minutes into the descent they reached bottom. They let the muddy water settle before beginning their search. Swinging the wand of the instrument they carried down with them they combed through the murky water until the light on the box started to rapidly blink. They headed off in that direction.

After walking along the bottom for a few minutes they stopped and stared in disbelief at what lie before them. A semi-porous pool of material, pulsating with a rhythmic beat. Churning up the waters around it.

John scooped some of the goo and placed it in the bag slung from his belt. He watched a tiny trail of black globules rising toward the surface, stemming from the spot where he had recently dug. Both he and Mike followed the stream in its ascent to the surface. Watched it cling to the underside of a piece of driftwood that floated by.

Removing his facemask Mike turned to John. "That's how it begins. Down there in the depths, rising to the surface. They catch a ride on some driftwood. Make their way to the shore. By then the larva have hatched and caterpillars begin to emerge. They make their journey through the woods, halting just short of the clearing to await the next stage. Turning to butterflies they fly toward the field. There they make their way to other points in the city."

"So," Mike returned, paralleling John as they swam toward the boat, "if can we eliminate *this* breeding place, we can stop it all right here, right now!"

"Yes," John replied, "but we'll have to move fast to isolate this part of the state. We *must* be sure none of these mutates spread farther."

Climbing aboard the small craft they explained their findings to the others. Within minutes they had turned the nose of the boat toward the dim shoreline. Time seemed to pass swifter on the return journey. No sooner had they begun the journey toward shore then they were searching out a place to land. The sounds of sand sliding past the hull of the boat brought the journey to an end. The technicians reeled the boat back onto its transportable rack, secured the holding straps, then set out through the darkened woods on their journey back to base camp, less than a mile inland.

After a few minutes in camp the silence was broken by the hissing of a two-way radio.

"RU1 calling RU0. RU1 calling RU0. Are you there Fred? Come back." John sat still, microphone clamped close to his sweating lips.

After several repeated attempts an answer came back from a sleepy voice. "RU0 here. What's up John?"

"We have identified the cause of the deaths. Brace yourself, it isn't going to be pleasant ..." John waited.

"Aaaaahh ..." yawned the receiver. "Go ahead, John. What'd you learn?"

"We found dead grass and butterflies. Following the trail led us to the lake. There is a radioactive mass located on the bottom. It is somehow generating butterfly larva. They float to the surface, cling a ride on some passing driftwood, and hatch on the way to the shore. Once the wood touches land they make their way to the edge of the meadow. There they lie in wait while they transform into full-fledged butterflies. We managed to capture one on the way back to the camp a little while ago. We have been examining it under the microscope.

"The powder on wings is radioactive but it is not immediately deadly. The Coiled-tongue is coated with toxic waste and is deadly in as little as an hour!" John paused to take a breath. "No wonder the cause was so hard to track. We need to do two things: One, isolate this area so this doesn't spread any farther. Who knows how long this has already been going on! Second, we need to determine the cause and prevent it from happening either here or somewhere else."

"Gotcha. Mike?" Fred asked, waiting for his counterpart to establish contact.

"I'm here." Mike returned.

"Need to have you take charge of the investigative team. See if you can find out what caused this chain of events. John, see if you can track down and eliminates this current generation of insects. Both of you keep me updated. Out" The set hissed static until Mike turned the volume down.

ELIMINATE THE ENEMY

“We know that Rambersteen Manufacturing had been making massive dumps of toxic waste around the time this seems to have started.” Mike said, addressing the investigators seated around the ovoid table. “They route the waste to their fleet of disposal trucks overland using an enclosed pipeline. Our investigation has shown there was a leak in the pipeline as it crossed a small stream feeding the lake. It had been operating in that condition for days before being detected and sealed. During this time a small meteorite had crashed into the lake, forming a small crater at the bottom. The caustic sludge had been riding along the surface and was pulled down into the depths. With the recent rain the surface of the lake was rich in insect parts and other assorted debris, this also was pulled into the mix.”

Mike paused to catch his breath. Taking a sip from the glass on the table he continued. “This assorted mixture sat and brewed until it started spewing egg casings out, we figure to be about a day or so later. Eliminating the source should be relatively easy. A hole can be excavated on the lake floor and its sides lined with cement. The hazardous mass can be pushed in and sealed with a cement lid.

“The difficult part will be tracking down and eliminating the current generation of butterflies that have already flown away from this spot. John, you want to explain what you are up against on that issue?” Mike concluded, taking his seat.

John arose to address the group. “It’s been about a month since this all began. We know the top speed of this butterfly is around 12 miles an hour. Flying non-stop from the first day they were released into the air, that’s about 8900 miles of travel. It is possible we may have some of these killers as far away as Jersey or New York to our East and California to the west. They could be well into both Canada and Mexico even as I speak! This has become global in nature and we will need the support of both local and international communities. We do have one piece of welcome information ... they tend to leave a minute trail of radioactive particles behind as they fly. Using air support and Geiger-counters we should be able to quickly locate the farthest flyer and start closing the circle from there. Meanwhile we will setup camp here and begin ground operations at the point of origin. Working outward with local help we should have this mopped up by next week. Questions?”

John watched bewildered faces as each in turn looked to their neighbor then sadly shook their head.

* * *

Two weeks had elapsed and it seemed the butterfly population was increasing, not diminishing. John rested his head against the side window of the Jeep. Was there something they had overlooked? The equipment had been brought in, a hole excavated on the floor of the lake; its sides lined with cement. The hazardous mound was pushed in and sealed with a cement lid. The source *had* been plugged. Donning protective equipment a Hazardous Materials team had entered the woods and eliminated the mutated caterpillars in various stages of development. Within a few hours they had reached the edge of the woods, made their way up the small rise and into the field beyond. There they eliminated the deadly butterflies and disposed of their radioactive remains. Using Geiger-counters, they were able to trace the flight paths of the butterflies into the city. Every route had been traced. Each and every remnant eliminated and disposed of. Yet ... when they went back to the meadow where it had all started, they found even more butterflies flying around than before. All with the same brightly colored wings. All radioactive and dripping hazardous material from their proboscis. John sat drumming his fingers against the rim of the window.

“RU1 calling RU2. RU1 calling RU2. Come in RU2. John, you there?” the blaring speaker interrupted his thought process.

“RU2, John here. What is it?” John responded.

“It is past your normal check-in. We were beginning to worry.”

“Sorry, I was lost in thought. Trying to figure out why the butterflies were reappearing in the field. I thought we had already taken care of them. The source is still capped and there are no leaks.” John listlessly responded as he sat staring out the window.

“I’m sure it will come to you. Get back with us next check-in ... on time next time will ya?” The speaker softly replied.

It was late in the afternoon; the disposal crew had begun arriving to eliminate the insects. John lazily followed their activities through half-closed eyes. He couldn’t get past the notion that there was something basic he was missing. He watched as they began sweeping the field with their nets. Catching any flyers and depositing them in metal boxes. Scraping grass and weeds with rakes in an attempt to collect any eggs or caterpillars hiding among them. The residue collected was also deposited in the metal boxes. These were loaded aboard waiting trucks and

disposed of later at the disposal center outside the city. On a hunch John decided to follow one of the trucks and see how the disposal process was being handled.

Leaving the field behind John found himself on the highway leading away from town. They stayed on the highway for about ten miles before turning onto a dirt road. John stayed far enough behind so as not to arouse suspicion. By the time he turned onto the road dust was thick enough to cover his actions from the driver of the truck. Driving through choking dust was not one of the high points of this assignment, John thought to himself. As the dust started thinning he was again able to see the truck in front of him. It had stopped at the bottom of the hill they had been driving across for the last few minutes. He stopped and watched the driver exit the cab, walking around to the back. Pausing briefly to see if he was being watched the driver began unloading the metal cases, stacking them against the side of the road. With no buildings in sight John began to wonder what was going on.

After the truck had been emptied the driver returned to the cab and he started it. John waited as it pulled away. He didn't have to wait long before another truck came to a stop at the same location. The driver exited the vehicle and began loading the cases aboard. Full, he pulled down and secured the door, re-entered the truck and began his drive, back toward John. John turned his Jeep around then ducked into the nearest cluster of trees until the truck had passed. Returning to the road he followed the retreating vehicle. Following at a distance they returned to the highway for several miles before the truck turned onto a road leading toward a factory. He could barely make out the logo painted on the side of the building. A green frog clutching a dragonfly. He had heard of the company before, Animitech. They were rumored to have been experimenting on small animals. Trying to make them stronger so they could last through tougher winters, which seemed to worsen over the last few years. The truck stopped to unload the metal canisters at the entrance to the building. Workers standing by brought them inside. Pulling away the truck soon left the scene. John started the Jeep and drove down to the loading dock.

Flashing his ID he approached one of the workers "I need to see the crew supervisor."

He was led into a small waiting area just inside the building. After a few minutes a tall, slender woman in her mid twenties approached. "I'm Sue, may I help you?"

"Yes." John started, again showing his ID, "I'm from the Institute of Applied Sciences in Lincoln, researching an upswing we recently had in the population of a certain species of butterfly. I noticed several containers had been brought here. What do you do with them?"

"The shipment we just received is used as a food supplement for the specimens we are conducting experiments on. Would you like a tour?" she replied, waving her hand toward the closed air-lock leading to the inner building.

"Sure." John retorted.

"Suit up," she directed, pointing to a rack of white suits hanging next to the door.

Moments later John heard the door seal behind him as they began walking the length of the open floor. He found himself listening intently to Sue as she explained what they were accomplishing in the various stages of work he saw going on around him. They had started out to strengthen skin resistance to the elements, such as air, water, fire, and so on. The process had been broken down into several stages.

First, the subjects (mostly frogs of varying species) were permitted to swim in a solution of creek water and remnants from the metal cases. They swam in the mix for a few weeks before being moved into the next tank. There they were subjected to long periods of ultraviolet radiation, lasting several weeks. The next tank is one in which they once again fed on the refuse from the metal cases, which now became mixed with some heavy water. Last stop before being tagged and turned loose in the environment. They kept a few to monitor locally, but the majority were released to the stream passing within yards of their back lot. The stream, John mulled over softly in his mind, was another part of the many rivulets, which ran into a small pond a few miles distant. A pond which had become the main source of that strange butterfly population.

"What did you use before the metal containers were available to you?" John asked, completing the round trip, finding himself back at the entrance again.

"We had a crew that manually collected bug parts, but they were not as plentiful as they have been these past few weeks. It would take us nearly a month to gather enough material to perform even one phase. We have made excellent progress these last few weeks." Sue replied, her green eyes wide with delight.

"Anything odd happen since you started using the new supply?"

"Not really, progress has been smooth. A few of the frogs have been laying weird looking eggs of late but we attribute that to too much ultraviolet during the second phase." Sue explained as she hung up her white suit.

"What do you do with them?"

"Flush them away with the rest of the refuse," she replied, pointing through the window at the running stream in the distance.

“Do you have any that have *not* been flushed downstream yet?” John said, trying to put a cap on his mounting temper.

“Sure,” she replied, walking over to a box labeled ‘Refuse’.

John retrieved one of the elongated gelatinous sacs. Producing a small magnifying glass from his pocket he studied it intently. Holding it up to the light from one of the desk lamps in the room he made out the outline of a partially formed caterpillar. He rapidly drew in his breath.

EPILOG

Two weeks passed before the federal government stepped in and put a stop to the dumping. A tighter watch was placed on the disposal of materials collected. The contents of all containers were set ablaze at locations from which the debris was collected. For months you could see thick, black spires of smoke rise all across the nation. The current generation of butterflies were again tracked down and eliminated. The watched outer circle moved inward to meet the ever-expanding inner one. No more mutant butterflies could be located. No more mysterious deaths were reported. It was over; we could breathe once again.

If one insect was missed, one not completely eliminated, or one trail passed over ... it could start all over. This is all just speculation but ... how was Mother Nature going to balance the equation? No more butterflies on the North American Continent meant some other species was going to lose its main source of nutrition. What of the butterflies' main nutrient source? Would it flourish in the absence of its enemy? Remaining unchecked, would we have yet another problem to worry about? Hmmm ... this bears looking into ... well, maybe next time.

NOTES

Butterflies fly during daytime. Caterpillars hunt at night. Powdery wings. Coil-like tongue (proboscis).

Top speed=12 MPH.

Life span: a few weeks.

Butterflies emerge from chrysalis. Chrysalis formed by caterpillar. Caterpillar emerge from eggs lain by adult butterflies. Caterpillars take 2-4 weeks to grow before spinning their chrysalis.

Pretty deep blue color. 1" wingspan.

[Outline help]

Heroine is an Entomologist.

Hero is a?

Location:

State: Kansas

City: Luray, Lincoln, Wilson (outside Salinas)

Lake: Wilson Reservoir

Highways: Interstate 70, State Highway 18, US Highway 281

