

MAYFLY

Ben Rogers

Our mayfly wriggles up through the silt of the river bottom and into the water above, savoring the fresh flavors in his gills. Hibernation has left him groggy. With a gentle hop he joins the flowing murk and is carried downstream, glancing against pebbles slick and cool to the touch. He tunes into the murmurs and clicks of the river underworld. The muted colors could use some punching up, he feels, but no matter. *Carpe diem*. Our mayfly is happy enough just to be alive. A mayfly like any other. Except for the oversized cartoon eyes and the recognizable voice of a mildly Jewish comic actor with broad demographic appeal.

He falls in love right away.

She is clinging to a reed. It sways in super slow-mo. Shall he compare her mouth to a mulcher? It art more omnivorous and more economical. He grows to love this mouth. The way it scrapes and sucks fish shit off rocks. But she plays hard to get. She gives him the silent treatment. The cold pronotum.

He waxes anthropomorphic, praising her rock-hard abdomen, her no-nonsense charm. She stares, chewing, into the gloom. Often she just scuttles off. No nod of acknowledgment, no flip of the antenna. It is as if she doesn't know he *exists*.

Worse. It is as if she doesn't know *she* exists.

He names her Jennifer.

After a particularly fruitless afternoon of wooing, he takes three of her claws in his and more or less drags her across the riverbed to a sun-warmed shallow near the bank. *This* she seems to respond to. When she sinks her incisors into his mesonotum, it tickles a bit. Jennifer's a feisty one! And he's open to that. He runs his foreleg through her caudal filaments and she curls into a fetal, shrimp-like position, which at least makes her easier to transport. He rolls her to the water's edge and waits. When she

uncurls from an O into a C, her view is of a yellow buttercup, lit by a beam of sunlight, with snowy granite domes in the backdrop.

“When the hatch happens,” he begins, but her blank expression worries him. “The hatch. You know about the hatch?”

No response.

“It’s okay. So, when everybody starts sprouting wings, we’ll have just a few hours to live, and mate. And I guess what I’m asking is, will you do me the honor of—you know...”

No response. He thinks perhaps he has offended her.

“Not right this minute, of course. When the time comes. I’ve found the perfect place. The yellow chalice you see before you. Promise me, Jennifer. Promise me you’ll meet me there?”

Her mouth gapes. He considers this a positive sign. A “yes.” Maybe.

But it’s something else. It’s awe. Jennifer has never seen air.

“Jennifer!”

A figure swift and black glides overhead. It lands nearby and starts pecking in the muck. Jennifer curls up. Jennifer is plucked out of the water like a Cheerio. Jennifer is swallowed whole.

He crawls under a rock and there he remains for what would be two of our years, or about 10 days. The next night, a large female squeezes in next to him during a thunderstorm. She’s a generous listener. He names her Diane, and Diane doesn’t seem to fault him for droning on and on about the murder and ingestion of his ex. When next the sun brightens the water she ventures out and he follows. Yapping away, he bumps into her as they navigate a narrow passage between two rocks. He apologizes. Diane doesn’t budge. He scrambles up and over her body to find that it ends abruptly. The top third of her has been pulverized by a rogue twig.

A week later, he is at Sheila's side when she quakes, convulses, and explodes after eating some bad decomposed organic matter.

He reconsiders the practice of naming his love interests.

In fact, he wonders if he's just not cut out for romance. But the days grow longer and the water warmer and he knows he can't just give up, so one evening in early June he finds himself back at the shoreline. Different buttercup, same proposal. This time he really has to grapple. He pins her down with all of his legs, leaving his antenna free to point out the flower. Horrific grinding noises come from her hypopharynx.

"Listen. *Listen!* I, for one, am not content to be—hold still! Do we have to be opportunistic generalists like everyone else? Let's make a choice. Together. Stop it! I'm not letting go of you. Can I call you Caroline?"

She stops squirming.

"That's better. We can be humane about this."

He eases his grip. "It's my eyes, isn't it?" he says. "I know: they're *googly*."

She shivs him with two of her claws and disappears into a carpet of moss.

"Caroline," he gasps, "you heartless nymph."

Our mayfly stops eating and hopes to be eaten. Hour to hour, day to day, little changes. He spends most days just drifting. One night he is awoken by the dull reverberations of a fallen tree banging against the boulders. Another time he is nearly stamped flat by a clumsy set of hooves, only to endure gulp after gulp of hot, cascading piss.

When one morning his guts empty out and fill with air, he attributes it to his hunger strike. He's disappointed to see other, healthier mayflies contracting similar symptoms. Newly buoyant, he rises. The river bottom recedes from view. He somehow knows he'll never see it again. This realization elicits

an unexpected and embarrassing little onslaught of nostalgia, which ends as soon as he pierces the surface and is blinded by sunlight, the river's murmur now a roar.

Others pop up all around him. Hundreds of them. Mayflies bobbing on the surface like life-jacketed survivors of some catastrophe.

He watches his neighbors unfurl glistening wings, gorgeous to behold, and stretch them out to dry. Soon the air thrums with takeoffs and landings. Mayflies skitter to and fro upon the water's cellophane-like surface. Some stay aloft long enough to reach drooping willow branches. Others fall back into the river, where they are met by rising bass—a sight that sends panic rippling through the floating multitude. Crowd-fed panic. Save-thyself panic. Hollow-out-thy-mother-to-make-a-canoe panic.

Our mayfly washes downstream around a bend. He eddies out over a sandbar and gets carried into a long, shallow riffle set between steep banks. Though his shuck has cracked, it is not open wide enough to let him out. He is stuck. As he struggles he sees, in a meadow beside the river, a passel of buttercups.

The river bends again. The flowers shrink from view. He is overcome with self-pity. His enormous eyes well up.

Exhausted nearly to death, he glances off a boulder in the middle of the stream and is flipped facedown. Once again, the world turns muffled and dim. He struggles to right himself. Looking up through the water, distorted glimpses of glinting gossamer against a cloudy sky, the new wings of those who've taken flight, heading sunward like little Icaruses.

He stops fighting and floats. He wants to give up, but as soon as he tries to he gets angry, and all of a sudden he's a raving lunatic, muscling free of a straightjacket. His eyes turn bloodshot. He surprises himself with his own strength and the shuck cracks. He takes a deep breath and discovers that he has soiled himself.

He squirms free of his former corpus and finds his bearings. The river here is slow-moving and shaded. His feet make little

dents on the water, but don't quite poke through. He starts walking on the lid of the river. He is Jesus H. Christ, only with wings, and two penises.

What would Jesus do with wings, two penises and mere hours to live?

Here's what our mayfly does: he darts upstream, hoping against hope that Caroline is still single. He follows the river until he reaches the buttercups. And that's when he first lays googly eyes upon it: a dark, shifting cloud of mayflies, slung low over the water like smog, scattering and rearranging with each passing breeze.

It looks like a happening little get together and he flies right into it. Once inside, he sees the swarm for what it really is—a quasi-consensual gangbang. A female that might be Caroline catches his eye and he tracks her as she zips among the groping throngs. She is approached by a pair of males, both of whom attempt to snatch her out of the air. Both miss. She picks up speed again, only to be nabbed and doubly penetrated by a third male. She goes limp in his clutch as they hover a few feet from the water, her wings no longer beating. He lets her go. Nearby males make half-hearted grabs for her as she plummets. She plops into the water, squeezes out a gooey cluster of eggs. Dies.

He wants to scoop her up and lay her fragile body to rest inside a clamshell jewelry box with white silk lining. A coffin befitting a fallen pixie. But there are too many—far, far too many—too many to count. The river is littered with fucked-to-death Tinkerbells. Fish and birds are gorging themselves. He sees a brown trout vomit up a paste of half-digested FTDTs, then start eating again.

Hovering mid-swarm, pivoting up, down, left, right, the mayfly takes it all in, this godforsaken fuckfest warzone Armageddon. The sun is blackened out. He hears the groans of the ecstatic and of the dying. He smells sex and putrefaction. The air is fecund. The river below a moving carpet of carcasses.

Caroline. He knows he is never going to rendezvous with her. He's known that all along. He wants to cry out. He can't. His mouth is merely ornamental, a genetic throwback to some classier ancestor. Back when adults were adults, who wined and dined, then made love.

He feels suicidal, which is awkward because he also has a handsome, matching set of boners. Like most everything, they have proven to be beyond his ability to control.

A hefty male rises up out of the frenzy and grabs him, hugging his metathorax. The embrace is a bit uncomfortable but also consoling, somehow. This is all he needed, our mayfly realizes. Just to be held.

The hefty male rapes him for a bit, then flies off.

Dusk falls on the river. Starving without a working mouth, the mayfly huddles under a slab of bark. He is spent, although his erections have yet to subside. He realizes this should embarrass him, but he's too close to death to feel mortified.

Then, out of the deepening blue...what? A light?

Yes. A glorious light. It wakes him as if from a dream. It shines from nearby and it is breathtaking. He feels compelled to make his way toward it. He *must*. It has *gravity*.

As he flies closer to the light, it gets bigger and brighter and then it separates into two lights. They are the headlights of a 1989 Ford Escort LX parked at a campground near the riverbank. Apparently, he isn't the first to be mesmerized by these lights, judging by the bumper-high pile of dead mayflies accumulating below each one. He spends his last few moments deliberating: Is it more meaningful to die in the pile on the left, or the right? He decides upon the left. Overnight, the piles get bigger and merge into one wide heap. The car's battery dies out, the lights dim. In the morning a snowplow is called in to scrape the heap off the road.