

The Butterfly Assassin

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The Entomologist's smile is a tiny half moon, weak and incapable of casting any light. "They will reconsider?" he asks.

"No, there's nothing they can do. You have to leave." Malar's mouth is sticky and sour from the heat but the Entomologist has just one bottle of water in his room. She wonders what will happen if she dehydrates and dies here.

"You told them who I was?" he asks.

"Yes."

"And what did they say?"

"They said there's nothing they can do. You have till Friday."

"Perhaps I should write them another letter."

"That won't help."

The Entomologist runs his fingers along the wall as if he is trying to find a secret door.

"Uncle, Friday means Friday. Ok?" Malar watches as his hands crumple up like dying spiders.

"Say ok."

The Entomologist nods but doesn't say anything.

Malar knows how to make killing jars. She has chronicled the life and death of the coconut beetle and arranged local butterflies in alphabetical order. She has paid the Entomologist's electric bills, swept his floor and made arrangements for his drinking water because she is a good person.

In the night she dreams that his room is carpeted with a thick green meadow. The sun glows in the corner, stabbing the grass in broad, fierce lines. Two large butterflies skirt the walls and the Entomologist chases them with a net and bottle.

"Don't clap your hands!" he says as he disappears under the sink. Malar looks down and sees millions of tiny butterflies burrowing into her palm, trying to fly from the tips of her fingers. She clenches her fists and feels the floor liquefy between her toes.

The next day Malar finds the Entomologist sitting on the floor with a pen and paper.

"I'm writing another letter," he says. "I don't think the other ones were strong enough."

Malar takes down his butterfly collection and arranges the boxes on the table.

"Why don't you wait?" says the Entomologist. "I think they might reconsider. This is a very strong letter."

Under his bed she finds newspapers bundled and stacked like building blocks. The Entomologist once said that words were sacred and should never be touched with the feet. Malar drags the bundles out to the head of the stairs. Then she kicks them down, one by one.



Malar is sitting on the grass in the Entomologist's room. She can hear the newspapers at the bottom of the stairs, wailing and cursing her with constipation and perennial bad breath. A large butterfly with shoe brushes on its feet hovers next to her, waiting for an explanation.

"Well it's not like I could carry them down by myself," Malar says. "It's not like he was going to help me."

Another butterfly with cobweb wings flutters above her head. The newspapers hope that Malar will get vaginal warts and grow a beard.

"Things are so much easier with a killing jar. It's quieter, you know," says the Cobweb Butterfly. "Have you ever been inside a killing jar?"

Malar rolls her eyes.

"I can't fit inside a killing jar, silly."

"Nobody can," says the butterfly.

The next day Malar brings a borrowed suitcase. The Entomologist has barricaded himself into a corner behind his butterfly collection.

"I'm not leaving," he says.

"Yes you are."

"What can they do? Will they throw me out in the street?"

"Yes."

"They can't do that. I'm an academician. I've been here for twenty years."

Malar begins piling his clothes into the suitcase. The scent of naphthalene settles on her tongue and she realizes that the Entomologist has always smelled like insect repellent.

"What about the butterflies?" she asks.

"I'm not going anywhere," says the Entomologist.

"You can take them in your hand or I can put them in the suitcase, there's still room."

"You're not listening to me."

"Or we can pack them tomorrow," she says. "I have to see the landlord about your key now anyway."

The landlord thinks that Malar is a saint and a blessing. Sometimes he makes his wife bring her ginger tea.

"Did you try speaking to the new owners?" asks the landlord.

"They said there's nothing they can do."

"It's a blessing you're here to help him at least. Else imagine—where would he go?"

Malar thinks the Entomologist would probably sit in the street surrounded by his butterfly collection. He would sit there until someone ran him over.

"I'm not doing anything great," says Malar and the landlord shakes his head vigorously.

"No, no. You're a blessing. You're really a blessing. Have you managed to pack everything?"

"Everything except him," she says and they laugh. Malar feels her teeth flash like pieces of broken glass.

It is raining in the Entomologist's room and the clouds are bumping against Malar's forehead like bundles of wet cloth. The butterflies are under the sink, shaking the water from their wings.

“It’s almost done you know,” says Malar. “All I have to do is get him out of the room.”

“You’ll never do it without a killing jar,” says the Cobweb Butterfly.

“I don’t need a killing jar. Besides, he won’t fit.”

“It’s not that hard,” says the Shoe Brush Butterfly. “Everything in this world can fold, you know.”

Malar doesn’t think she will be able to fold the Entomologist that far—even if she does she has a feeling he will break the bottle and send slivers of glass into her hands and face.

“I really don’t think he will fit,” she says.

“Nobody *fits* into a killing jar,” says the Cobweb Butterfly. “They have to be *put*.”

The rain begins to pound into Malar’s skull like a shower of gravel. She wonders if she will catch a cold.

“Well good luck,” says the Shoe Brush Butterfly. “Good luck from both of us.”

The butterflies dip and soar into the thunderstorm like tiny slips of paper.

The Entomologist cuts a wobbly diagonal with his toes—sometimes an arc, sometimes a line. Sometimes he doesn’t seem to be moving at all. Malar looks at his bloodied eyes and marvels that the ceiling fan didn’t break.

Before hanging himself the Entomologist smashed every single one of his butterfly specimen boxes—Malar thinks he probably threw them on the floor, one by one. Or maybe he put his foot through them. She is not sure if he crushed the butterflies himself or whether they simply fell apart once the glass was broken. She finds a few specimen tags; Gossamer-Winged Butterfly, Brush-Footed Butterfly, Skipper Butterfly. She irons them out with her hand and places them on the table in alphabetical order.

Malar watches the Entomologist swing back and forth and tells herself that some people are like accidents. They are like sprained ankles and stains—they just happen.

“I am a saint and a blessing,” Malar says and the words squirm inside her mouth like dying fish.

