

THE NEXT STEP

by

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Dawn tried the one wing again. It was definitely the weaker of the two. Logical, she shrugged, well mentally shrugged, since she felt nothing physically move. Logical that the left wing would be the weaker of the two, as had been her left arm. Before.

“Granny Mead,” she addressed whatever might be listening, “you tried to get me to develop both of them. Since I was a baby, you did that. Were you trying to prepare me?”

The thoughts passed on and she registered that they evoked no emotion. “Well, if I’ve traded emotion for wings, I’ve cut a good deal.”

Looking around, she chose the closest surface that was a bit lower. “You can glide there if you can’t coordinate these gossamer extensions,” she encouraged herself.

Patting first one foot, then another, she marveled at her new body and appendages. Flexing her torso, she found she could curl under but didn’t have much lateral movement. With the nimble high-stepping legs she doubted that

lack would present a problem. She relished breathing through the holes in the sides of her torso as she'd been cursed with endless sinus problems. Before.

She was contemplating her overpowering hunger when the subtlest of air movement and the whisper of a sound startled her. Feeling her enormous eyes grow even larger, she quaked from one of her own kind who had landed beside her.

"Well, what have we got here?" he drawled as he looked her over, his hairy antennae twitching. "Bran' new and scared o' ya own shadow," he chuckled. "Had a suck yet?"

Silently she acknowledged that she looked just like him, that she would be sucking her next meal through the protrusion on her face, and that the meal would be blood. She froze.

"Don' worry, Babe, Big Tom'll take care o' ya, yeah." His gravely bass was jazz in texture, earth in color. Her fear lessened.

"That obvious, am I?"

"We all been there. Now hush up and falla me."

They lifted off the table and cruised across the room, a living room, she registered. Afraid she'd forget to flap her wings, she started off tensely attentive but relaxed as she realized how effortlessly they worked. It was as

if she'd always flown. She followed close behind him through a door, down a hall, and into a bedroom.

"That was great!" she beamed as she came to a graceful stop beside him on the night-stand. "And easy. I'm not out of breath or anything. You don't have to think, it just sort of happens."

"Right. Now pay 'tENCHUN 'cause ya first mistake is ya last."

On the bed a man was sprawled with his head back and from his open mouth came choking, growling noises. She'd never heard such a snore, but knew it signified solid sleep. He'd probably notice nothing.

Following Big Tom, she landed delicately just at the edge of the thick hair that covered most of the man's bare arm. Her mind told her that she would have found the act repulsive, before, but instinct guided her proboscis into the flesh. She had just begun to drink when the world jerked. Barely had she withdrawn and become airborne when the man's hand, monstrous at such close proximity, flew through the air and slapped down exactly where she had been.

Jostled by the back-draft she struggled to stay aloft, to regain control. She realized how delicate and frail was her body, knew a crash-landing would cripple her. That meant sure death. Her wings pumped frantically.

Dawn managed to settle on the floor, shaken but intact. The arrival of Big Tom was reassuring, though she expected him to laugh heartily at her incompetence.

Instead, his first utterance was, "Whew, that wuz a close un! N'er can be sure how fast folks'll react. C'mon." He took flight with Dawn close on his tail.

In the cool safety of a potted plant they relaxed. "Tell me somethin' 'bout ya," Big Tom said. "Pretty soon ya be fergettin'."

"My name is Dawn. I'm twenty..."

"Wuz."

"What?"

"Ya wuz twenty."

"Oh, right, and I had blonde hair and..."

"Young. Did ya OD?"

"Uh, no, a car crash. Some drunk..."

"Now, there's a safe top-up fer ya. C'mon."

They landed in a forest. She could barely see Big Tom, never mind get to him through the stiff hairs. Their host ambled across the room. She balanced as he stretched out. He gave a contented groan and a couple of tail wags before his breathing became even and shallow in sleep. He radiated such heat that

she knew the cool tiles felt nice on his belly.

It took several tries to get through the dog's tough skin, but she managed and drank her fill. Back in the air she followed her self-appointed leader outside to a flower-bed. In its corner lay a derelict statue, broken and ignored.

Coming to rest on the green moss and stale water that covered its foot, Dawn sighed, heavy after the gorging. "Why aren't you all swollen up like me? Why have we come out here?"

"Ya don' know nothin', do ya?" he chuckled. "I don' suck 'cuz I'm not a broad. But, ya need tuh so ya kin lay eggs."

"Right! I do feel 'ready', now that you mention it. But, that means no sex. What a bore."

"Yeah," he laughed ruefully. "That's somethin' I ain't fergot, how good it wuz."

She rested, contemplating, while Big Tom perused the area. She knew she'd outlive him, lay lots of eggs with no control over who fertilized them, but it just didn't really matter. She was feeling rather Buddha-like, all-knowing and all-accepting.

"So this is 'it'," she murmured. "No worrying, hating, questioning. Just sort of existing, functioning, providing more bodies for disenfranchised souls to lock onto." She looked at her contemporary. "But, what about heaven and God and

all that?"

"Ya got a problem?" Big Tom asked distractedly. He was watching another female make her deposit in a puddle on the ground.

Again the mental shrug, "No, actually I've never been so completely contented." She watched him move down, settle and begin fertilizing the eggs.

"Did you become a mosquito as well, Granny Mead? No, I can see you more as a dragonfly. Illusive and graceful."

Dawn sighed. "This is that exquisite tranquility everyone was striving for. And all you had to do was to die for it."

"In truth," she whispered, as her eggs began emerging, "it doesn't matter what the next life holds. . .or if there is one."

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