

The Dame Wore Green Elytra

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(Warning: contents may offend; reader discretion is advised. Names and places have been changed to protect the innocent)

It was a dark and stormy night. I sat in my unlit office, listening to the new tune by the Diurnal Rhythms, a group of black field crickets who spent their nights improvising chirps on the pavement below my building, and their days beneath the pavements, mugging *Collembola* and the occasional Middle Eastern scarab who'd lost his way in the neighbourhood.

The cockroaches were venturing out from under the refrigerator, searching for fallen fragments over the dark shadows on the kitchen floor, and doing doughnut turns in puddles of spilled milk. They called themselves roach-racers, and their activity 'going for a blattoid'. Not very subtle, or funny, but then cockroaches had never fully evolved a sense of humour. Unlike the *Huhu* beetles. They did a version of the knock-knock joke, except they said "Who, who" and you said "Where, where" or "What, what", and then they fell about laughing. I suppose it was pretty juvenile, but I was bored and it was better than sitting and waiting for your wings to fray and your setae to drop out. And it was way better than hanging out at the Antennal Club, listening to ladybirds yapping on about their aphid collections and how they couldn't get rid of their kids' spots.

Anyway, as I said, the weather was foul; it could not have been any weta, and I was bored, and a little worried. I am a private fly and I hadn't had a case in weeks and it was June already. Boy, how May flies! The larder was looking bare, so much so that the confused flour beetles were in a state of catatonia and the cockroaches had started looking hungrily at my trouser flies. I thanked my forethought at putting on my new snug-fitting underpants; no roach was going to get to me. There was only one drawback; the underwear was a real cockchafer on hot days.

I began scratching my head for something to do, but even the head lice were wise to that and were contemplating turning body lice, or taking up knitting. Furthermore, my new, hermetically-sealed drawers also excluded the lice from a life of public service, unless of course they were prepared to take the risk of forcing their way in and perhaps damaging one or more limbs, but then they would have to walk about on a crutch.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and a whole generation of borer beetles rattled to the floor. "Come in" I called, trying desperately to sound as if I wasn't desperate.

The door opened and in she came. What a looker. A prosternum that looked like something out of 'Playnymph' magazine, a pointed labrum, slightly pouting clypeus, large, luminous

eyes, slim legs, thrusting antennae, the tightest fitting elytra I had ever seen, and an abdomen to gladden the heart of any mantid. This was one fine womantid, and even the sight of her carefully folded forelegs didn't worry me. A hardened old private fly like me, from a different order, could still appreciate a predatory pin-up when I saw it.

"Hi", I said, "The name's Lou, Lou Cuprina, I find corpses, no job too big or too small. What can I do for you?"

"Hi yourself, fly-boy", she replied, briefly flashing a portion of maxilla, "What's a nice Italian boy like you doing in a job like this?"

I didn't want to tell her I was actually an Australian immigrant; these New Zealand female imagos could be touchy about us mozzies.

"Not so fast lady", I shot back, "Who am I talking to?"

"Just call me Maisie", she chirped, in a way that had my labial palps twitching.

"What can I do for you Maisie?"

"Well for a start you can put your prementum away and stop blowing bubbles, I ain't no piece of meat for you to suck on".

"Sure thing babe", I replied, "You're the customer". This gal had class, she was no stick insect and I was going to have to watch my behavioural patterns, but that pheromone she was putting out was making things awfully hard.

I tucked my mouthparts away, hitched up my aedeagus and concentrated on my visitor. "Shoot Maisie, give me the guts of the job. Are you here to tell me what Katy did, or have you got an opening on the Spanish fly?"

"Slow down, big boy", she snapped, "Don't get your antennae in a twist. I'm not interested in grasshoppers, short or long-horned, or gigolo beetles or blowflies or barflies or any other dipteran dork, and I ain't no bed bug. Try anything smart with me and I'll knock you on your Fannia. I can be a dragonfly when I'm angry!"

"I can see that" I buzzed, "I'll quieten down and listen. I'm all auditory organs".

"Well", she began, "I was hanging out at Midge's bar yesterday knocking back a few honeydew stingers with deep-fried aphids on the side, when who should walk in but sick Ada? That broad is one sucker of a bug. She catches every disease under the sun, even foul brood, and this time she had lost her voice. Anyway, she manages quadruple-tarsi sign language like a

pro and I can read it. She tells me that Magpie Moth - you know, that kleptomaniac with no night vision - well he was hanging out at the Thrips' shop last week with Sally Armyworm when he sees one of them Green vegetable bugs - you know those anti-spray, anti GE-crop types, all plaited setae and home-spun elytra - and he said that he'd heard that the painted apple moths are really fed up about the spraying programme and are going to get revenge, or they were going to start a bee-haad, or something. Anyway, whatever it was they were mad as hornets. They reckon no one's going to Btk them and get away with it."

She paused for breath and I watched her spiracles gently opening and closing while I contemplated what she had told me. I didn't like the sound of it; it wasn't cricket.

"I don't like the sound of it", I said, "It isn't cricket".

"Don't go all orthopterous on me", she flashed, "I just want to know what you're going to do about it".

I thought for a moment and I could feel my ganglia throbbing with the unaccustomed exercise. "Let's go down to Midge's bar and I'll talk to Ada. I'd like to hear her story first tarsus".

"OK, fine", she said. "Have you got transport?"

"Of course", I replied, "We can go in my beetle".

We headed off down town, my head buzzing with ideas and possibilities, while at the same time keeping a wary eye on her forelegs. You could never tell when a mantid might suddenly feel hungry.

Midge's place looked quiet when we arrived, and apart from some leaf-miners trying to cadge an underage drink, and a couple of leaf-rollers smoking outside, the place appeared deserted.

We walked into the gloom and I had to keep fighting an urge to turn back towards the light. I had to get this phototropia seen to if I was going to do any more night work. Maisie seemed at ease and stalked ahead of me, her beautiful green elytra sweeping the floor.

We reached the bar and called out. There was no reply. Suddenly, from behind the bar I heard a slight clicking, the sort of noise a femoro-tibial joint makes when flexed. I darted forward and there on the floor were Midge and Ada. Midge was on her back, legs gently waving. That was the noise I had heard. But soon, even that stopped. And Ada, she was no longer sick. She was dead. Ventral side down, wings spread and a small dribble of green, proventricular contents pooled around her mouthparts.

"Looks as if someone was preparing to mount her", I said.

"Probably someone from the Taxonomy Department", snorted Maisie, "They'd screw anyone".

"Well, we won't get any information from them now", I said, and started looking for clues.

There were three glasses on the bar and a bottle half-full with a milky liquid. I sniffed at it. "Smells like Gnat's piss" I told Maisie.

"I know him", she replied, Fungus Gnat, that's the little guy who runs the deli on K Road. He's always making home brew".

Well, we had a start. Maybe Gnat's homemade booze had been spiked. The technicians down at the lab would soon tell us. Also there might be some pulvillus prints on the glasses. And there was the little matter of who the third person had been at Midge's bar. Things were starting to look a little complicated.

"Nothing we can do here", I said. "I'll call a couple of spiders to clean up this mess and we'll go and see Gnat".

Gnat's deli was closed, but there was a light on upstairs with a couple of hepalids sitting on the window ledge. He was in all right. I did a six-point samba on the door and it wasn't long before he came down and let us in.

"Hi Lou, hi Maisie. What's up? Looking for booze, or do you want a bit of supper? I got a couple of fresh vinegar flies Maisie - nice piquant taste. Lou, you might like to try a ball of cow shit, one of the dung beetle boys rolled in with a fresh one this morning."

I passed on the dung; I didn't touch it often and, besides, it gives me wind, but Maisie dispatched of the flies hungrily, which made me realise I had been wise keeping a few facets on her earlier.

While she ate I looked at Gnat. He was a dapper little guy, running to fat a bit and with a toupé that kept slipping forward onto his frons. He'd always been vain and was so worried about bristle loss that he even wore ear-wigs.

"OK Gnat", I said. "Who has been buying your booze lately? It's possible some of your hooch is behind a couple of insecticides tonight and I want to know your customers".

He looked thoughtful for a moment, rubbing his palps slowly through his mandibles. "There were a couple of types in yesterday" he said. "Strangers - and not the sort of bar-fly we usually get around here. They drank a lot, like they were real thirsty, but didn't say much and they bought a couple of bottles to take away".

“What did they look like”, I asked.

“Sort of small and grey”, he replied, “With patterned wings folded back quite neatly. And I caught some comments about long drops and dunnies”.

“The Latrino brothers”, I hissed. These were flies for whom getting shit-faced was a way of life. Those guys got a buzz out of it in fact, like a gambler might, shooting craps. They likened it to a lottery where a small outlay could get you a big pile, although sometimes all you got was a smell, and then you had to be a bot fly to make anything out of that.

I decided it was about time I dropped the faecal analogies and started concentrating on where I might find these little buzzers.

“Hey, Gnat, got any ideas where I might find these little nematocerids?”

“Never mind the fancy talk”, snapped Maisie, “Leave that to the taxonomy department; just call them shit suckers and leave it at that”.

“Well”, said Gnat, “If its excrement you want, there’s good pickings down at the landfill, and I’ve had some good feeds at those toilets under Grafton Bridge”.

“OK”, I said, “Let’s head on down to the landfill, that’s a good place to start, but we can also swing by the men’s toilets down at the bridge just in case they’ve called in there”.

Not long after we pulled into a parking area near the toilets, and I swung the beetle into a space between two soft-drink cans and a cigarette packet, and dowsed the lights. The area was quiet; just a few moths doing burn-ups around the lamps and a line of ants cleaning up around some discarded takeaway wrappers. A bag-moth lady shuffled by and disappeared into the darkness.

“The toilets are down the far end”, I said to Maisie. “We can sneak down there out of the lights, but watch those pretty elytra, there are a few puddles on the way and I wouldn’t want you to soil yourself”.

“You just worry about your own hygiene”, she rasped, and I didn’t like the way her forelegs flicked open like a switch blade, but she relaxed as she saw the small glint of concern in my ocelli, and I could feel my Malpighian tubules regain their tone; it had been close, but I relaxed. I could fall for this broad, but I would have to work out an escape plan first.

As we neared the toilets I could hear a low buzz of conversation and I could feel the familiar thrill of tension between my halteres and started to wish I had brought my bombardier beetle,

but it was too late for regrets, I would just have to rely on fast wing work if we got into trouble. But I was a little worried as temperatures were dropping and getting a little too close to my activity threshold for comfort. I knew Maisie could look after herself. She was big girl, with a healthy appetite.

“All right you guys, we’ll do it, but it’s going to take a lot of organization and a lot of money”. I didn’t recognise the voice, except he was talking dipteran, so he had to be one of the latrine flies

“How much money”, said another voice. It was high-pitched, a bit like the guy was talking through his proboscis, and I guessed lepidopteran.

“A shit load”, said the first voice, “And we’re going to need a lot of crane flies. This stuff is heavy”.

“OK”, said the second voice, “Anything else?”

“Yeah, dung beetles and a lot of water, and access to a cow”.

My head was spinning and my cerebral ganglia were starting to smoke. Dung beetles, a cow, crane-flies? What in the name of entomology was going on?

The second voice spoke again. “Will you be able to make the drop by yourselves?”

“No way”, said the first voice, but we’ve got some older blowflies, too slow to catch sheep, and a squadron of syrphids, and if we get the right stuff from you I reckon we can get some houseflies, particularly if we throw in some cat shit and sour milk. There are a lot of lesser houseflies too that are keen, but they have a tendency to fly in circles unless you can scare them with a German wasp or similar, otherwise they’re likely to be a liability. I prefer flies that can go straight if you know what I mean”. I could almost see the wink in his facets, and there was a cackle of sarcastic laughter from the others.

Suddenly, I started to get a glimmer of what was being planned. It looked as if they were going to substitute the Btk spraying with a shit spraying. They were going to fight back, and the lepidopteran I had heard was probably one of the painted apple moth chiefs, and they were hiring mercenary flies to spray manure all over the apple moth zone. The subsequent uproar among the humans would stop the spray programme permanently. It was a bold plan, but I wasn’t sure I wanted a part of it. If the humans got wind of what was in the air they might retaliate with fly spray and I for one did not want my synapses stuttering their way to exhaustion.

I beckoned Maisie back a few metres out of auditory organ-shot and told her what I had

surmised. She was at first sceptical, but as I talked on the hungry look left her facets and a dawning understanding slowly covered her lovely frons, and she wiggled her labial palps at me playfully. ‘Who’s a clever little blowfly then?’, she chirruped, and I could feel my aedeagus twitch. I let my abdomen drop to the ground; there’d be plenty of time for that later.

“Let’s get back and see if we can find where they’re planning to meet” I whispered. We crept back in time to hear the closing remarks.

“All right”, said the moth, “We meet tomorrow at the landfill. Make sure you have all your guys there when the temperatures are good and high. I don’t want to have too much time wasted in wing vibrating; we want to get going as soon as every one is assembled”.

“Everything’s going to be OK at the Basin too”, said one of the flies. “The weather is going to be calm and there’ll be no sailing, so the place will be full of the beautiful people”.

“You mean the soon-to-be, not-so-beautiful people?” The nasal whine of the moth was particularly unappealing.

“Are you sure no one knows about our plan?”, asked the moth.

“Those two broads won’t be talking”, sniggered one of the flies, “those drinks I gave them were spiked with organophosphate. They won’t be telling anyone anything”.

So, it was one of the Latrino brothers who had killed sick Ada and Midge.

The gang laughed. “Right, that’s enough”, snapped the moth, ‘Let’s go”.

“Roger”, said the latrine fly.

“What do you mean, Roger?” spluttered the moth, “The name’s Gladys, you keep your butch names for plain apple moths like those crude codling types”.

“OK, OK, keep your scales on”, sneered one of the Latrino brothers, “see you tomorrow, Gladys”, and they flew off cackling while Maisie and I quickly pressed ourselves back into the shadows.

“What does he mean, the Basin?” I asked Maisie. She shrugged. “I thought they were using a horse trough?”

Then suddenly it hit me. It wasn’t going to be the apple moth spray zone at all that was to be the target. It was going to be the Viaduct Basin. The flies were going to spray dung over the humans waiting for the yacht race. What better way to get back at the Btk brigade than add

another layer of manure to all the verbal excrement that had become so much part of their boat-fest. What an evil, clever plan!

We made our way back to the car and drove back to my office to make our own plans.

The next morning was still and clear, one of those days when all you want to do is go and bury your frons up to its ocelli in a carcass, but preferably before some of the tertiary flies get there first. Their eating habits are quite disgusting. Anyway, I put my hopes and dreams aside realising there was a big job on this morning. And once that was dealt with I had to think how I could get close to Maisie, if you know what I mean, without becoming lunch. That gal was really getting to me.

We'd been up all night talking, making calls, and slowly a plan was forming.

"We need to get to the landfill early" said Maisie, "There are a lot of things to get in place, and I need to swing past my place and change into something a little more practical, this green number is just a little too sheer if you know what I mean."

I knew all right. The glimpses I had been getting of her tergites had not done my respiration rate any favours.

Maisie had a nice little pad on the edge of town, all very leafy and in a quiet neighbourhood, although I suspected her dining habits might have contributed to the small local population, rather than it just being an exclusive address.

She came out wearing a dull-coloured brown number that looked as if it could stop a pellet out of a slug gun. "Wow", I said admiringly, "That's some outfit".

"I got it from a longhorn who was just a little too clever one day, but it's a perfect fit, although perhaps a little snug around the pronotum. You don't think it makes my terminal abdominal segment look big do you?"

What a broad, I thought, tough, practical, but still vain enough to worry about what a blowfly from the other side of town might think. "Maisie", I said admiringly, "Your segments could never look too big to me".

I picked myself up from a pool of spittle-bug froth with one of my antennae askew and a couple of acrostichals missing. She sure packed a punch in those forelegs.

"That wasn't what I asked you, you little green creep. You've got a lot to learn about females".

I couldn't help but ruefully agree, as I still couldn't work out what I had said to annoy her, but

maybe I could ask later when she was in a better mood.

We reached the landfill just as the sun was starting to warm the air and stirring a whole spectrum of delicious odours over my receptors.

“Stop drooling fly boy” she snapped. “You’re blowing bubbles again”.

“I can’t help it Maisie”, I pleaded, “It’s adaptive behaviour”.

“Well keep your mind on the job in hand or I might just forget to control aspects of my adaptations. Understand?” She flexed her femur and the sun glinted off her tibial hook.

I understood all right, gulped back the bubble and tucked my labellum back in as far as it could go into my oral cavity. It might make me talk funny, but that was the second time I had annoyed her, and my plans for us both were starting to look as flimsy as a mayfly’s life span.

As we gazed out over the landfill we could see squadrons of filth flies making their way to a paddock adjacent to the rubbish collection area. The paddock contained a small herd of dairy cattle, a water trough, and lines of dung beetles who, even at this early hour were trundling dung balls up a plank and dropping them into the water trough. Flights of crane flies were also bringing lumps of dung from pats that a small herd of cattle were producing at regular intervals. Other beetles were clustered around the piles and forming them into balls. Some of the crane flies were dropping their loads directly into the trough. Small flights of flies were beginning to take off and were flying low over the dung beetles, encouraging them to greater efforts. The scene had all the elements of pyramid building and I felt a surge of pride as I suddenly realised that us insects had done it first.

“I’ll do a short flight”, I said to Maisie, “And check out what’s happening. They won’t notice me with so much activity”.

“OK”, said Maisie, “But be careful. I don’t want to lose you”.

That made me feel good. It seemed that maybe she cared for me after all.

I buzzed over to the trough, carefully moving around the edges of the squadrons of filth flies and had a look into the trough. It was slowly filling with dung balls that broke up and sank as the water softened them, leaving the surface looking murky. I started getting cocky. No one was taking any interest in me so I alighted on the edge of the trough close to where the beetles were completing their long haul up the plank.

‘Hey, buddy’, I called to the nearest beetle, “What’s going on?”
He stopped briefly, holding the dung ball with one hind tarsus, slowly wiped a bead of sweat

off his vertex with a fore tibia and looked up at me with a suspicious eye. I could see myself reflected a hundred times in the facets.

“What’s it to ya, fly-boy? You don’t look as if you’re from around here”.

“Sure I am”, I said, “Born and bred on the landfill, me. Mum brought us up on a chicken carcass after the old man flew off with a cute little hairy maggot fly he’d met on a flyblown sheep in the paddock here”.

“Well, whatever,” rasped the beetle. “If you are from around here you should know what’s going on. Now beat it before I get one of the Brown Power Stygia chapter blowflies to lean on you. You wouldn’t look so pretty with a haltere ripped off.”

I took the hint, one last look around, and a powder. The Brown Power boys might be slow thinkers but they were big hairy brutes and the way they got their females to squirt maggots at you was enough to make me think twice about giving the old dung-trundler any more labrum.

I flew back to where Maisie was waiting. “They’re just about ready to go babe. The water’s got to just about the right consistency and the dung-sucker fly squadrons are getting all excited; just about buzzed out of their occiputs.”

“Right”, she snapped, “Let’s roll”, and she rose heavily into the air, the brown elytra just slowing her down a bit. I had to keep flying round in circles to stop getting too far ahead.

Soon we were in sight of our objective. From what we had heard at the carpark the night before, and what we had pieced together during our long talks afterwards, we knew what the target of the painted apple moths and their latrine fly allies was going to be; the Viaduct Basin! They were going to hit the humans where it hurt, right in the middle of their big yacht race venue. What a plan. However, it was very shortsighted and what the plotters hadn’t considered was if it came off there was a good chance it wouldn’t be Btk the humans would spray next. They’d be so insecticidal that the next flyover they made could be with an organophosphate, and then all of us insects would be in the shit.

Yes, the moths’ big plan was to get all the filth flies to fill up from the trough and spray dung solution all over the shops, the dresses, the lattes and the boats in the Basin. Fake sun-tans wouldn’t be in it! We had to do something, and we would!

“Wait there”, snapped Maisie, all assertive, “And keep your eyes peeled for any suspicious activity. I’ll be back soon”.

“You’re beautiful when you’re angry”, I simpered sycophantically.

“You wouldn’t want to know me when I’m really angry”, she snarled, and flew off to a nearby building and disappeared into a hole under a roof overhang.

I waited, keeping my facets peeled and thought how perfect it all was. Fine, warm and, uncharacteristically for Auckland, no wind. The boats would be in dock and there would be maximum crowds eating, drinking, presenting a perfect target. Perfect conditions for a perfect painted apple moth retaliation.

Maisie returned, swooping in low and landing a little awkwardly. “Take it easy babe”, I said, you don’t want to injure anything”.

“It’s all right”, she smiled, showing a perfect pair of mandibles. “I’m no bumble-bee, but I’m just not used to these elytra, but I’ll be back in my usual ones soon enough. But thanks for worrying anyway Lou”.

I quivered as she said my name, but she was too busy looking around to notice.

“Everything set” I asked.

“Everything is set”, she said confidently, “Just let those little suckers and squirters come”.

And come they did. At first I noticed what looked like a small cloud low down to the west, then it grew darker and I knew what it was. The first wave was coming in.

“Here they come”, I squeaked, my hypopharyngeal muscles had tightened up with the anticipation and my voice had gone up a couple of octaves.

“I see them”, Maisie said excitedly. “We’ll let them get within about 100 metres and I’ll give the signal”. It’ll be too late for them to turn back then”.

Another few seconds passed and the cloud resolved itself into individual dots. They were getting close! All of a sudden Maisie raised herself up on her hind tibia, spread out both elytra and semaphored wildly in the direction of the shed she had visited earlier. For a second or two, nothing happened and then, first singly and quickly, in ever increasing numbers, black and yellow objects emerged from under the roof and climbed high into the sky above the Basin. It was the First Vespidae Squadron; the famous yellow jackets. Veterans of campaigns in Beech forests up and down the country and now preparing to fight an urban battle to safeguard the future of insect-kind. I could feel a lump in my proventriculus and my facets misted over. They might be common or vulgar wasps, but right now they were my heroes, even though in the past only a couple of quick rolls and a looping stall turn had saved me from contributing to their winter protein store.

Now I could hear the approaching dung sprayers and the attendant apple moth observers and a sound that at first I couldn't discriminate, but then I heard clearly. It was a war chant. "Btk, Btk, how many moths did you kill today?" Then, more ominously, the opening notes of Beethoven's fifth Symphony, "Dung, dung, dung, dung—dung, dung, dung, dung". This was psychodid warfare like I have never experienced it before. Every bristle on my mesonotum stood up until I looked like a tachinid.

Then suddenly, it was all on. The yellow jackets came out of the sun and straight into the middle of the fly formation, just before they reached the cafés and promenading humans. Struggling bodies fell from the sky, and pieces of fly and moth settled like ash on the ground below. Those wasps really were lords of the wings. I briefly considered that that could be a great title for a movie, but there was too much going on to be distracted like that. Soon it was all over. The flies and the agitator moths were either dead or dispersed, and the wasps did a quick reconnoitre for any stragglers before heading back to their nest. We, and they, had saved the day. It was ironical that we had saved our worst enemy, the humans, from a dirty day out. Operation Brown Rain had been a failure, but the rest of us insects had been saved from even worse excesses of human entomophobia, and, besides, we could still continue to annoy them in more subtle ways.

Maisie and I finished up at her place, curled up on a twig, and I knew my time had come at last. She had put her green elytra back on and was looking fit to kill. "You know kid", I said, we could make a good team; The Green Team. We could put the world to rights".

"Maybe you're right Lou", she looked longingly at me, "Maybe you're right, but right now I'm hungry. Let me just kiss you on the vertex and then I'll go and fix myself something".

I smiled up at her, giving her the full benefit of my palps and haustellum. "Go for it doll", I said, "I'll eat later".

"Sure you will kid", she smiled, "Sure you will". Then she bent over and gently nibbled at the back of my head. Wow, I thought, what a gal; sex before dinner.

Broads; don't they just kill ya?

Allen Heath, on the occasion of the 52nd Annual Conference and Dinner of the Entomological Society of New Zealand, 15th April, 2003.

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