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The Gluttonous Toad

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

For the greedy, all of nature is too little. — Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Bufo was a tailless amphibian with a puffed-up body; rough, greenish skin with orange patches and prominent wart-like glands that gave the impression he was about to explode. His call was deep and resonant and had the effect of silencing all other creatures that inhabited the swampy expanse he called home. He was widely disliked around the pond; his menacing figure and cowering voice made other denizens of the waters squirm at the sight of him and shy away if they could.

Bufo had an unquenchable appetite and fed indiscriminately on all sorts of small invertebrates. He would stealthily approach one of his intended victims, seize it by projecting his adhesive tongue, capture it, and swallow the item whole, flexing his facial muscles to help push the meal down his throat. It was a gruesome spectacle, made worse because his table manners were deplorable.

Bufo's favorite time of the year was the period in the summer when mayflies end months of development as nymphs and rise to the skies to mate. Adult mayflies are delicate-looking insects with a slender body and two pairs of membranous wings that do not fold flat over the abdomen, but are held upright.

The males rise aloft, moving around in large groups; they congregate a few feet above the waters and perform courtship dances, propelling themselves upwards and then letting go and falling. The females soon join the celebration, rising and falling as the dance continues. Upon detection of a female, a male will seize from below her thorax and inseminate her in midair. After copulation, the female descends to the surface of the water to lay her eggs.

Bufo would lie in wait and fling his tongue at one after another passing female, devouring her before she could accomplish her biological mission. He would continue consuming the gravid mayflies as long as there were potential victims flitting around; his body would expand grotesquely and threaten to burst but he, selfish and narcissistic, would go on pleasuring himself without regard for the rules of nature.

He was expected to stick around to oppress his domain for an anticipated full decade.

* * *

One year, however, the swarm of adult mayflies failed to occur. Environmental stressors, including climate change, warming waters and pollution decimated the nymph population and delayed the emergence of adults, leading to a widespread swarm failure.

Bufo was incensed by the inability to satisfy his greed and shouted commands and imprecations to the lesser toads and frogs that were his subjects. He insisted, “I want my food! Get me something good to eat! If there are no mayflies to feed on, get me other flying bugs that I can trap with my tongue! I command it!”

Bufo’s minions were a pliant lot. They hastened to try to satisfy their leader’s demands within the limited means at their disposal. They vaguely understood that flying insects are attracted to flowers, the more colorful the better, and sought to remove wildflowers from the nearby fields and bring them to the shore.

This was a difficult process, since toads and frogs lack proper digging tools; they had to snatch the flowers with their toothless mouths, snap their stalks, and bring the buds to the edge of the water. Working under Bufo’s vigilant eye, they assembled a multicolored array of dying buds in a wide area near where their leader hid behind a rock, waiting for food to arrive.

The operation was at first unsuccessful. A variety of insects appeared over the horizon, flew above the waters, paused for a moment to inspect the shoreline bouquets and moved on without approaching. Flies of all kinds — gnats, wasps, hornets, moths, and other bugs — came and went, all either disinterested in the offerings or turned off by the decay of the once vibrant blooms.

Bufo became furious and excoriated his underlings: “I turn this cesspool into a big, beautiful lake, and this is how you repay me? Are you trying to starve me to death?”

He was busy heaping insults on his subjects when his eyes detected a shimmer above the waters some distance away. Soon the motion resolved itself into a swarm of large monarch butterflies with orange wings crisscrossed by black veins and fringed with rows of white dots. An objective observer would have described the butterflies as beautiful, but Bufo had no sense of aesthetics and saw them only as lunch.

He sat immobile, watching, as butterflies hovered above the cut flowers, briefly touching on the petals of one or another bloom; the insects’ keen eyesight associated the flowers’ colors and shapes with familiar sources of savory nectar.

A couple of butterflies, a male and a female, approached a bunch of purple cornflowers and landed on them, extending downward the long, straw-like tubes or “proboscides” that were coiled up in spirals beneath their heads.

They inserted the proboscides deeply into the flowers, seeking the nectary glands to suck up the nectar.

They were busy feeding when Bufo approached, whipped out his sticky tongue, and in a series of rapid motions captured, crushed, swallowed, and devoured the bodies of one and then the other butterfly, uttering a gulping sound after each butterfly had been consumed.

The swarm dispersed rapidly, but not before Bufo was able to trap and devour a third butterfly. Having done this, Bufo emitted a satisfied belch and prepared to lie in a post-dinner siesta.

His enjoyment was brief. The bodies of monarch butterflies contain toxic substances accumulated from a diet rich in poisonous milkweed. The ingestion of a single butterfly by a toad would result in temporary paralysis and convulsions, but Bufo had eaten three of them simultaneously, and the combined effect of the poison ingestion was to cause a cardiac arrest that led to Bufo's death in a few minutes.

Bufo was not mourned. He had ignored Nature's golden rule, and his excesses had brought shame to the pond population, which soon strove to forget he had ever lived.

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