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Notes on the Life of a Mayfly

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Compared to a star, we are like mayflies, fleeting ephemeral creatures who live out their lives in the course of a single day.

– Carl Sagan

1. Egg

The round, whitish egg that was to become Dolania[1], the heroine of our story, was among a thousand-plus identical ones deposited by their mother as she dipped her abdomen into the river's water during flight, releasing a small batch of eggs each time. As their mother died and floated away, the eggs sank to the murky river bottom.

Dolania's egg would have normally hatched in about two weeks but the weather that fall and the ensuing winter had been cold, keeping the water temperature chilly. The unborn mayfly sensed this and, instead of rushing out into a hostile world, remained dormant, sheltered in the relative safety of the egg's enclosure, waiting for better conditions. Rushing ahead would have been perilous, and Dolania was already exhibiting the kind of common sense that Nature provides for the preservation of its creatures.

Around midsummer, the weather got warm. Dolania's egg cracked and the infant mayfly, now a "nymph," was released and immediately burrowed into the sediment of the river bed.

2. Nymph

As she developed, Dolania exhibited an elongated, cylindrical, and somewhat flattened body that passed through numerous growth stages, molting and increasing in size each time.[2]

During that period, which lasted almost a full year, Dolania remained burrowed on the bottom of the river, seeking plants, decaying organic matter, and other insects. She was in no hurry to emerge, for she was constantly at risk of being preyed upon by fish and carnivorous invertebrates, a threat that she avoided, unlike many of her contemporaries. For adolescence, in most species, is a turbulent period, and survival past adolescence is often the result of good luck rather than prudence; Dolania had both.

When her growth was complete, Dolania's skin split down the back and a winged form, called the *subimago*, or "dun," emerged.

When ready to emerge, Dolania rose to the surface, burst out of her skin, and flew upwards rapidly to a new life as *almost* an adult. Their emergence is synchronized and the males emerge first, about one and a half hours before sunrise. Male subimagos molt but the females, which emerge soon after the males, remain in the subimago form.

3. Dun

Dolania's final molt as a nymph had not been to her final, full adult form, but to a winged stage called a subimago or "dun," that physically resembled an adult, but was sexually immature. The dun had opaque wings; her eyes, legs and genitalia were not fully developed.

As Dolania emerged from the water, she sought shelter in a bankside crevice. It was nightfall, and she was exhausted from the last molting and the flight to dry land. She rested, seeking to dry her wings, and was vulnerable to attack from predators. Luckily, she survived the night, unlike many of her companions making the transition at the same time she did. For the road to maturity is, for many species, rife with perils, which many of its members are unable to overcome.

4. Spinner

As dawn broke, all signs announced that this was to be the most important period of Dolania's life. When light illuminated the spot where she had taken refuge, Dolania grew weary and, with a series of twists and turns, shed her outer skin and jumped a distance away to bask in the pleasant warmth of the sun rays.

Dolania had achieved her adult form (sometimes called a spinner). She was a delicate-looking insect with a pale, brownish-purple body and two pairs of membranous wings, extensively covered with veins, that did not fold flat over the abdomen, but were held upright, like those of a butterfly. She had three threadlike tails, as long as her body, and the second segment of her thorax, which bore the forewings, was enlarged to hold the main flight muscles. She had short, flexible antennae, large compound eyes, but no functioning mouth. Her last feeding had been as a nymph and she could only draw on her energy reserves.

Later that morning, the males that had survived the transition from nymph to dun and then to adult started swarming above the waters, moving around in large groups, or resting on every available surface. It was a synchronized hatch, and for the day or so they floated about in very large numbers. They congregated a few feet above the waters and performed a courtship dance, propelling themselves upwards with strong wingbeats and then letting go and falling, to repeat the maneuver again and again in endless variations.

Dolania and other females soon joined the swarm, rising and falling as the dance continued. The males used their large eyes, capable of detecting ultraviolet light, to spot females flying above them. Upon detection, a male would seize from below the thorax of a passing female and would inseminate her in midair. Copulation lasted just a few seconds, but occasionally a pair remained in tandem and fluttered to the ground.

Dolania coupled with a male shortly after joining the swarm. While brief, it was the most pleasurable sensation she had ever experienced. After copulation, the male released her, and Dolania descended to the surface of the water to lay her eggs.

Once she had cast hundreds of fertilized eggs into the waters, Dolania fell, spent, onto the water surface and died within a few minutes of dutifully carrying out her ordained task. Her corpse lay on the water, where fish picked at it at their leisure.

Dolania's winged existence had lasted minutes, but had been as full and exciting as that of creatures living many times longer. For it is not the duration of one's life that counts, but what one does with the long or short time one is allowed.

[1] Dolania is a monotypic genus of mayfly in the family Behningiidae containing the single species *Dolania americana*, also known as the American sand-burrowing mayfly.

[2] Larvae usually undergo numerous molts and the length of larval existence is usually three to six months but can be as short as two weeks or as long as two years.

Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and fifty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.

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