



How the Death-Head Hawk Moth Got it's Marking

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Animals

When I was young, I was walking home with my grandmother through a woodland path. Before I knew what was happening I let out an almighty scream as something landed on my face, At the end I didn't know at the time this creature could be a friend. I still recall my grandmother's warm laughter as she scooped the moth from my skin. She pressed a kiss to it's head and set it free, a skull rising towards the heights reminding me of fairy tales.

My grandmother held my hand and promised when I was older, I would learn the secret of the moth. In bed one evening as my curtains bellowed I heard a voice carried on the wind and a death-head moth entered my bedroom, sitting next to me on my pillow I heard the story of how it got it's pattern and how moths discovered the light.

Somewhen long ago, or yesterday, or tomorrow or 20 years ahead or behind. Somewhere life bloomed.

Somewhere deep in the woods, where wild creatures roamed and devastating beauty was waiting for anyone who came across it, there was a moth. It was more or less the same as any other moth you would expect to find out in the wilderness. It had a head, thorax and abdomen. It had legs and scale covered wings that stretched

out like a shawl in the night. It was invited to events as the butterfly's cousin, drab in comparison. One was day and the other night.

Moth had been happy with its role and knew its place and yet when it dreamed it dreamed of something bright and unknown to it and all its kind. The only light they had known was that of the moon and stars.

Moth would argue it was the purest light, naked and unashamed, unable to hide in the way the sun could. Or so moth had been told, for moth had yet to see the sun with its own eyes.

During the day moth would settle underneath the great leaves of plants, nestled under bark or at the side of the tree. Moth's eyes would be closed for fear of what would happen should they by chance see the sun. If moth were to witness such a phenomenon with its own eyes, then moth was certain life would never be the same. This belief was shared amongst all its kind, they had been brought up in a way to respect the way of things and not to question it.

But moth was a curious creature. No matter how much the other moths agreed. Until one very special night, all moths had a pack mentality in a sense, never daring to reach beyond the woods in which they had been birthed.

The moth pondered why others were so afraid of it? Why did butterflies belong in the sunlight, their wings drying out under the canvas of a great wide sky, while moths were banished into the dark?

On this evening a great wind howled through the forest and moth was sure it could hear something in the leaves stirring, a distance voice calling out in the name of adventure. Now adventure was not something you could refuse, that was the law of the land. When it spoke to you, you must answer its call or else be banished. But adventure rarely called and moth had never heard its voice in their forest before.

It stretched out its wings, it didn't know why it decided to fly up towards the moon at that exact moment or where it was going, but the moth knew it was important, it knew it had to be somewhere at just a particular

time.

Little did Moth know that the moon had heard it's wishes and was so humbled and touched by the moth's curiosity and heart that she blessed it and all moths to follow. Moon had sent her blessing through the stars and broken clouds to be carried by the wind towards moth.

As Moth flew, it's wings beat fast against the cool night air, it flew up and up until Moth broke free from the canopy which had protected it and it's kind for thousands of years. As Moth travelled, ever spiralling higher, it heard the cries of others warning it against traveling too high and going away from the forest. But Moth knew, knew it had to keep going until it reached...well Moth didn't know what it was looking for but knew it had to keep on until the day broke if that was what it took for the world to make sense.

The moth flew towards the blood moon, she had blessed Moth that evening by changing colour so that it wasn't too overwhelmed with the light. And Moth flew across the forest so that the trees underneath were like match sticks, more furiously Moth beat it's wings, soaring across the world.

Moth came upon a field of barley, the smell warmed Moth and made it realise all the things it and the other moths had been missing in their lives. Moth flew down towards the crops and in-between the tall green and golden stalks, feeling more alive now than ever.

As the moth continued it became acutely aware of the landscape in front of it, entirely different to anything it had ever known. So alien that the moth from the day before surely would have turned back round and head deep into the forest once again. But something drove little Moth on. Deep inside Moth knew Moon was looking over it with her love and that she would protect her child. Moth flew over puddles where momentarily it caught it's reflection, surrounded by the blessing of hundreds of stars and Moon smiling down.

Moth moved forwards, towards a vast city, apartment blocks, an open window and knew this was home for the night. Something inside lured Moth inwards. Maybe it was the fact that clouds were gathering above and suggested that soon it would rain. Or maybe it was the fact that there was a warmth, a sweet smell and a sound

(of soft piano) that Moth had never heard before.

Moth stopped on the balcony to look upwards at the Moon, the Moon looked back just before it was tucked up for sleep and she nodded at her child. Moth looked towards the open window and flew into the warmth to greet it's fate. It landed on golden and black geometric wallpaper, the colouring of it's wings and body perfectly at home against the wall.

There wasn't a moments rest for the moth however as when it opened it's eyes a profound sadness overcame it as it saw on the floor a body that was no longer moving. The creature was far bigger than Moth was, but there was still warmth in it despite the heart that was not beating.

Moth flew towards the body and landed on it's forehead, hoping that if it tickled the creature with it's antenna or feet it would move. But to no avail, the body was still.

For a moment Moth thought that Moon had been mistaken in sending it here, but something urged it to move into the adjoining corridor (not that Moth knew what a corridor was).

It did so and at the end, inside another room Moth came across another creature, the same as the first but this one was moving. The creature had pale flesh and was thin and veiny. The creature hung it's head, seemed somewhat sad as Moth observed it's mouth upside down and puddles formed by what looked like rain coming from it's eyes.

Moth watched the actions inside the bedroom unfurl like ferns on a late summer's day. Moth remained silent on the wall and knew now it's job was to observe and follow, but not to intervene and all would be as it should be.

And the man, he knew before he opened the the other door. He knew because the signs had been there like exit signs on a motorway to a cheap motel. Had seen it and not acted, his own free will impeached by a desire to allow fate to take it's course.

Moth became aware of the rain that now lashed against the window, single glazed. The creatures inside had

meant to update their little home but money was hard to come by. The man would count to 100 and then he would get out of bed and move along the corridor into his future. But when he reached 100 he stretched out his arms and legs, focused on how every muscle felt and realised he wasn't ready.

Inhaled through his nose and out through his mouth. 300 now.

Daylight faded beyond his world. Quicker now the Autumn Equinox had passed. A dull grey replaced by inky black and still the rain fell.

He watched the raindrops fall down the glass and started to join them in his mind like dot-to-dot.

500. How had he gotten here? And Moth, Moth counted in it's own way as the creature did, concerned now for his well-being when he saw the other laying motionless on the floor.

Headlights and street lights, had there always been so many shades of orange and yellow? It was warm then like Desert summers against the bleak reality of a Sheffield skyline.

He started to curl his toes now, fingers gripping the bedsheets, he'd reached 600 and knew it was time.

He was nothing but a puppet on strings in that moment. As lightening flashed outside, illuminating the corridor for a second, he caught his reflection in the mirror at the end. The mirror had been a wedding present from his parents, it told stories in dust, fingerprints and lipstick marks.

They'd waltzed down this corridor, it was alive with laughter. Eliza Fitzgerald's voice carried up the staircase from the old thrift shop record player they'd acquired before they became popular again.

For a time, they'd lived in a dream.

He'd had a good life, they both had.

Some lives are shorter than others, he consoled himself with that. Sometimes it's natural and sometimes nature just calls.

His limbs moved like cautious spiders running across a thread-bare rug away from the imposing stomp of giants. Tiptoeing, knowing that whatever he found would be both a relief and a horror.

He reached the bathroom door.

The palm of his hand was placed flush against the door. Knowing if he opened it now his life would change forever.

As lightening flashed a silhouette was revealed. Moth floating behind him looking onward making sure that he was delivered onto his fate.

The door creaked as it opened, a lonely howl into the night that went unheard aside from the 80-year-old who wished now to bid goodbye to this life. Inside the room glowed blue, ripples through the air, it felt like silk to touch.

His love had left already, now it was his turn to follow and Moth was there to witness it all.

Moth witnessed death, that had been Moon's plan all along, she needed a creature on earth to help those in mourning, to deliver the sentence and carry souls over. Moth with his big heart had seen something that would stay with it forever, Moth would be both an omen and a comfort.

As Moth left the lovers and flew back into the bedroom it saw it's reflection in the mirror, a skull now adorned it's abdomen, a permanent reminder of both the life and death it had witnessed on the first night out of the forest.

Moth felt sleepy, both the wind and the rain now seemed to be singing a sweet lullaby and Moth allowed it's eyes to shut. Just a minute it told itself and then I will return to the forest.

When Moth opened it's eyes the sun was rising and Moth witnessed it's first ever dawn. The rain had cleared

and Moth rose towards the sky, bathed in orange and pink light as the calming blue on the horizon called Moth home.

And if you ask me, that's how the moth became attracted to light and how certain Hawk-moths acquired their unique pattern. All on one beguiling and beautiful night.

A full moon, two beings in love, curiosity and a promise.

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