

MAYFLIES by Paige Maylott

1995 - Caledonia, Ontario

As we reached the train bridge, the setting sun flashed amber across the choppy peaks of the Grand River below. While the tracks were old, and the dark-stained wooden sleepers weren't narrow enough to fall through, between each remained a foot-sized gap that could place you in a compromising position if a train emerged between the huddled trees on the distant shore.

We assembled at the bridge's edge, the five of us staring across the elevated expanse.

Ivette said, "I think we should go around."

She was petite, with short, peroxide-bleached hair so dry you could snap it between your fingers. That night she wore a sleeveless band shirt to show off her shoulder tattoo and stomped about in ass-kicking boots up to her knees.

Matty growled at the setting sun. He was the lead singer in a local horror punk band that once opened for The Misfits. His head was shaved, which stressed his dark, unkempt eyebrows and toothy grin. He also believed he was becoming a werewolf. As a stocky, hairy guy that sometimes howled at the moon, it seemed plausible. He aired out a trench coat that looked like it was wrestled from wild dogs. When he flapped its coattails against his legs, he freed a cloud of trapped armpit funk, which overpowered the notes of latrine wafting from the river below.

"Boo on that," Matty said. "It's too damn hot."

The alternative to crossing here was a couple of clicks away across Caledonia's iconic arched bridge. Besides opening our group to the scrutiny of townies, fishfly season had made the prospect additionally undesirable.

I asked Ivette, “Did you forget the flies?”

Not everyone called them fishflies. People who didn’t have to smell them called them mayflies.

Annually these mayflies darkened the skies of our otherwise quaint town, drawn to the nexus of bridge lamps and river water. In amorphous clouds they exhausted their transitory lives by mating in swarms. They say mayflies are the only insect that grows wings before they mature. Privately, I’m jealous of any creature whose life ends moments after they achieve peak happiness.

While their short, tragic existence resonated romantically, their legacy endured long after. In hundreds of thousands, their desiccated corpses floated to earth in a blizzard of cellophane wings, then gathered into drifts. Townsfolk swept these drifts out of doorways and onto already blanketed roads. It soon became unavoidable to crush them under your shoes or hear their ruined bodies crunch and pop as cars rolled by on peanut-butter tires, smearing the insects into greasy oblivion. Their destruction overwhelmed the air with fishy stench and created a surface so slippery they could cause a person, or a car, to lose their footing with equal ease. It was a civic emergency that usually ended in snowplows.

Ivette’s lip curled in disgust as she considered her new boots. “Let’s cross here.”

I led our pack across single file, taking the unenviable largest risk. We passed the point of no retreat, keenly aware of potential trains. We were lucky and weren’t forced to leap the nearly hundred-foot drop to the shallow, mud-banked river below.

In those days, we were pale, sunless creatures that hid under the stairs. We stayed up and awoke late and only left our homes after dark. Besides being conducive to our nightwalking

lifestyle, leaving the house at sunset meant I could often avoid becoming an unwilling sitter to my baby brother, if my father was already drunk enough to sneak out.

Today my brother Jade reached for me from his crib when we left. My dad was curled on the couch nearby, his face buried in the cushions. Leaving Jade with Dad made my chest ache and, as I closed the door, my heart reached back for those little hands. I could tell I was changing. However, this blossoming sensitive side wasn't the change I fantasized about.

Though we slept through the worst of it, you could tell the day was a scorcher by the heat radiating from the corroded rails and that familiar stink of dirty pocket change and oily wood. By the time we reached the other side, the sun relented its reign and sank beneath the tree line.

Our sky deepened to indigo, and a blanket of night chased the daylight over the horizon, and then we were cloaked in it. A refreshing cool breeze hissed through fields of tall grass and caressed over the bee-visited wildflowers that surrounded us. We followed the tracks to the outskirts of town and past chain-link fences protecting the manicured backyards of settling yuppies. Illuminated by deck lights and the glow of their televisions, it was too dark for those migrating city people to see us in the darkness, but we observed them through their windows and monitored their foreign, mundane lives.

Sometimes they spotted a glowing flare from one of our cigarettes and called out, and we would walk on, but usually we were free to scrutinize their activities while smelling their lavender-scented laundry exhaust. They relaxed, unaware as they zoned-out in front of televisions to eat dinner in their air-conditioned living rooms. A father chased his son up cushioned, carpeted stairs with a Nerf sword.

Sometimes, we even observed their embarrassingly tame intimacies.

How could they know that steps away, across cooling lawns still dripping from sprinklers, we hunted monsters?

Mostly, we hunted ghosts. They were common since any mysterious sound, smell, or semi-ethereal shape could signify one, but we were also open to the idea of vampires, werewolves, or even demons. A fairy ring would do if we happened upon mushrooms. However, I suppose it isn't accurate to say we hunted monsters when we merely wanted to bear witness.

If you saw us that night you might have snickered, or pointed, or shouted *freak* as many often did. Like other small-town rebels, we thought ourselves elevated because we knew things that mundies could never understand. We recognized our status as outsiders and ensured we stayed that way. We must have looked like reject rock-and-roll roadies, or stand-ins from a Lost Boys film shoot.

There were five of us walking the tracks that night, The Pack as Matty called us. Matty and I shared leadership duties, so we were always in front, scanning the darkness for potential supernatural entities—well, Matty also sniffed, like a dog.

Rue dated Matty and was the only Indigenous goth girl I'd ever met. She was tall and willowy and beautiful, like a somber Neil Gaiman character with her long dark hair and sad doe eyes accented with painted curls. She carried a zip-lock baggie of salt in case we needed to cast a protection circle. She sometimes saw the future in her dreams, and last night she dreamed I had changed, became a vampire, and I had burned my face in the sunlight.

I couldn't wait.

From our right came a frantic flapping and the grass exploded as a startled night bird took flight. Ivette yelped and stumbled into Matty. They glanced at one another and hurriedly moved apart, still apparently struggling with friendship after what happened.

It wasn't long ago that Ivette had found her way into the back seat of a friend's car. A week later she phoned me from Matty's house, explaining how she couldn't handle loneliness. Two days later my phone rang and Ivette sobbed into the receiver. I waited for her to calm so I could tell her to go away, but then she said, "I saw it."

I hoped she wasn't offering sexual details.

"Your troll was angry at me."

It started on my ninth birthday. My parents took me to Chuck E' Cheese, back before animatronics were considered nightmare creatures, and my parents commissioned a photo of me and Chuck E' on a birthday button. That night my sister and I went to bed angry for reasons I can't remember.

She awoke to a sense of dread. She was about to escape to our parents' room when that birthday button caught her eye. Illuminated by the pastel blue glow of her Care Bear nightlight, my eyes focused on her, and my goofy buck-tooth grin turned sinister. My lips drew back, and I smiled until the corners of my mouth split my cheeks.

She attempted to scream, but only a croak escaped her strangled throat. Across the room, a cupboard squeaked open and within it crouched a small, squat creature in a top hat. It was hairy, with human-like features, saucer eyes, and a ferocious, split-cheeked grin. The creature stared, then held a single finger to its lips as if to say, 'shh.'

The troll has since appeared to my partners after arguments. I came to think of it as my protector, though I had never seen it, and grew accustomed to hearing stories of a short hairy thing watching them from the darkness. So, when Ivette told me she had seen it, especially after what she had done, I wasn't surprised.

I began to tell her as much, but she cut me off.

“I couldn’t breathe. It was sitting on my chest. Please forgive me.”

We’ve been dating again for two weeks now, much to Matty’s disappointment. It is interesting that even relationships bled into the supernatural those days.

I appeared that night like a Victorian re-enactor with straight, box-dye-black-number-one hair under a top hat, a tailed coat, and frilled white cuffs hanging over black gloves. The tip of my skull-handled cane tapped gravel and wood as I walked. Back then I thought it was edgy to pair that look with skin-tight pleather pants and knee-high buckled boots—no wonder people yelled.

At the back of the pack was my best friend Kris, who listened to Pantera on my Walkman so loud we could hear Phil Anselmo’s screaming above the swish of swaying grass. His blond hair hadn’t been cut in years. He was a freak on a parallel path from the rest of us with his love of metal, but we put up with his sneakers and sports jerseys because he was still one of us. He was often stoned, and never saw monsters, but I believe he placated us to cut the tedium of being young and poor.

None of us talked about why we did this every night. I believe it was important for us to know there were meaningful and unknowable things still left in the world. Maybe we also wanted to justify our frustration of a banal society that pushed us, ever more insistently, to join it. In retrospect, it was easier to believe we were vampires and werewolves than acknowledge the traumas gnawing at us from within.

I should have gone to therapy. Instead, Dad had paid for me to see a psychic.

Dad had seen Gina the Psychic the week before, probably to know if Mom and he would get back together. A doubtful prospect after my brother Jade came along following a drunken fling with a woman from the local dive bar.

I was genuinely excited to see Gina. I told The Pack and, armed with their questions, I felt prepared to receive the secrets of the universe from a grownup that was one of *us*. In her home, surrounded by cats and collectible teapots, Gina held my hands. Her wrinkled thumbs traced over the lines on my palms. She said, “That’s strange” a lot, which I expected. She let go of my right hand and scrutinized my left. I remained silent out of fear of influencing her visions. She then pressed down a button on her tape recorder. The tape inside squeaked and turned and she laid out a spread of tarot cards.

Then she asked if I was a girl.

The skeptical part of me, which as you can imagine was not very large, got up and ran from the table. I thought I was prepared for anything and expected Gina to confirm I had something supernaturally wrong with me. I wanted her to tell me why I was sad all the time, and hoped she would confirm that I had a haunted soul, or that someone had cursed me, or that I was, fingers-crossed, a vampire. But a girl?

I had recently, for perhaps the fourth time, navigated a month’s long inner debate about why I kept wondering if I was a girl. I had concluded that I *probably* wasn’t. It was the nineties, and trans women were just jokes you heard mentioned in every sitcom—they couldn’t be me. Besides, my no-internet brain reasoned that I liked girls too much, and life wouldn’t be cruel enough to make me both transgender and bisexual in such a small town.

I told Gina that I didn’t know what she was talking about. I reasoned she must have read the cards incorrectly.

Gina gave me a loving, grandmotherly smile with her yellow teeth and asked, “I thought you said I could tell you anything?”

After I calmed and assured her that she could, Gina explained that people's guardian spirits typically matched the person they protect. She said there were two women and a man watching over me who apparently said I no longer needed to hide.

"I won't," I lied.

To break the awkward silence that followed, I asked if Matty was a werewolf, as per his request. Gina told me that werewolves don't exist, and then she had a conversation with my guardian spirits about how many children I would have, and if I would be successful in life.

We were like anglers of the supernatural with dry spells and windfalls. Most nights, one of us would spot something unusual in the darkness, and as we gathered to witness the-thing-behind-the-tree, we would find only shadows, or 'we just missed it.' This past week we found nothing, and we feared that we might be outgrowing our link to the supernatural, and soon we would all join the ranks of living room television eaters.

So, when Ivette asked, "Do you see that shape up there?" I was skeptical, but hopeful.

"No," Kris said. "I never seen a damn thing any time I've been with you."

"I see it too." Rue pointed down the tracks. "Right there."

Kris scoffed and shoved his hands into baggy jean pockets. "I think your minds are playing tricks on you."

I walked ahead of the group to get a closer look.

Something in the darkness squirmed, and the temperature plummeted. I couldn't ignore that skin crawl, goosebump-inducing, stomach flutter that accompanied one of us spotting something real. The thing moved again. Black on black, discernible only by its silhouette.

I said, "There really is something."

Ivette flinched and backed into Kris. "I think it's coming this way."

Rue threw her bag of salt, which exploded on the tracks like a snowball. Then she turned and ran, her lace-trimmed dress fluttering behind her. She was a hundred meters behind us before anyone realized she had left.

The thing was now close enough to see that it moved like an animal. Shifting haunches and plodding steps outlined in the lighted cracks of the distant forest. It weaved back and forth across the tracks, head down. "It looks like a panther," I said.

Kris said, "There's no panthers here. It's probably a cougar."

"Run," Matty shouted and bolted past us, arms pumping and coat flapping.

Ivette followed, boots smashing gravel as she disappeared into the night.

I now recognized that skin crawl. It wasn't some Spidey-Sense of the beyond, but mundane, instinctive fear. My flight response. I heeded it, backing away, and I was about to join the others in running until I realized Kris was still with me.

Kris pressed stop on the Walkman, and the play button snapped home with a plastic clack. "If it's a cougar, we're already screwed."

He was right. While close to civilization, we were far enough to be mauled by a cougar. I doubt I would have made it to the fence before it took me down. Given my options, I decided I would die here and, in a day or two, there would be rows of people combing these fields for our bodies. As my heart raced, I realized that if I died, it would be with my best friend doing something I loved. I grabbed Kris's arm for support and waited for the cougar, or monster, or whatever it was to catch us.

The cougar changed shape, and out of the darkness loped a shaggy black sheepdog. It turned its mop-like head, and with bloodshot eyes, it regarded the two of us as it trotted by. We watched it lumber down the tracks and disappear into the black.

I collapsed and grabbed the cold, vibrating metal rail. “I can’t breathe.”

Kris pulled my elbow, helping me to my feet. We laughed it off, then nervously retraced our steps until we found The Pack waiting for us before the train bridge. When asked, they said they hadn’t seen the dog, and as Matty led us back across, we agreed it must have been a ghost dog.

We had nearly passed the halfway point when a light fell over our backs and cast ghastly thin shadows down the tracks ahead. I assumed it was the police harassing us again, but then the bridge shuddered, and an unearthly horn shattered our exhaustion. The siren like blast echoing down the river.

None of us jumped like we should have. We just ran.

I carefully leaped across the wooden sleepers, deftly avoiding the gaps as I hurried across. I thought I was doing well until Kris yelled from behind to hurry. Risking an upward glance, the Pack had outpaced us, and was nearly safe on the far side.

When the train blasted its horn a second time, accompanied by squealing metal on metal brakes, my ears ached as the wall of sound vibrated my skin and shook my bones.

Kris yelled something unintelligible, and I turned to discover he had trapped his foot.

I stopped. The train did not.

Kris tugged his white socked foot from his shoe and waved me onward as he stumbled. His shoe fell away below the tracks, briefly illuminated, tumbling in the train’s headlight before the darkness swallowed it.

I ran, heedless of my safety, and nearly lost my top hat to the wind. I grabbed the brim and ran as fast as I could. Sometimes my heels missed the sleepers, sometimes my toes, but I ran and prayed I wouldn’t catch my toe and stumble—because, if I did, there was no way I could tug

my foot out of a boot buckled to my knee. Despite the overwhelming chance I'd trip and be squashed like a bug, something pushed me forward and guided my footfalls.

When the train unleashed its horn for the third time, it was now so close behind me that it nearly stopped my heart. The Pack desperately beckoned me from the bridge's end. Their mouths moved, but I couldn't hear them. Perhaps it was the promise of those waiting arms, or the unseen hands that guided my steps, but with a last burst of speed I leapt the last few sleepers, and dove into the gravel.

The engine thundered past. From high above, out of a small window a red-faced train driver shouted something unintelligible. As I stood, I became aware of the ache in my shin, how I had torn through the elbow of my jacket, and that I had snapped my favourite cane. I was otherwise whole.

A seemingly endless rumble of graffitied train cars passed. I nervously laughed at my good fortune and grabbed my knees, catching my breath. I allowed my heartbeat to slow and thanked the unseen forces that helped me to escape.

Then I realized Kris wasn't with us.

I dropped my broken cane and called for him, yelling above the cacophony of trundling train. The Pack joined me and we yelled long after the last car had squealed and clacked and disappeared into the darkened arch of trees behind us.

I rushed to the bridge, looking for the shape of my friend. I called Kris's name across the expanse and only my voice returned to me again and again down the river.

The others soon gave up calling as well.

Matty consoled Rue as she sobbed.

Ivette asked, "Why did he stop?"

“He got stuck.”

Nearby there was a park streetlamp, its bulb obscured by a swarm of mayflies. The insects frantically attempted to fulfill their purpose, bumping into each other again and again as they blinded themselves in the light, their bodies dimming the gravel path below as they attempted to find each other, and themselves.

A crunch of gravel drew my attention to a lone dark figure who appeared on the hillside. His hands hung limp at his sides and damp hair clung to his face. His oversized jeans were torn, and heavy and hung like towels from his legs.

After noticing our stunned expressions, Kris said, “I had to get my shoe.”

Rue threw herself against Kris and embraced him. Kris struggled to avoid toppling down the hill as Rue cried against his face.

Rue suddenly leapt away, looking aghast. “You’re wet!”

“Yeah, I—”

“I want to go home,” Rue said to Matty.

We hugged each other, went our separate ways, and soon it was just me and Kris following the now distant train home. We didn’t speak. Cricket skree and Kris’s shoe squelches filled the night as I limped.

When I opened the door to my house, a wave of Old Spice and alcohol struck me. Dad was already gathering his jacket and keys.

“You could have said you were going out,” Dad said.

“You were sleeping.”

Kris slogged past and trudged down the stairs to the basement where he had been sleeping for the past month.

Dad sighed in exasperation. “You need to learn how to be more responsible. I’m going out. Jade is sleeping.” He slammed the door as he left.

A wail erupted from upstairs.

I climbed the stairs and turned on the bedroom light to find Jade standing in his crib wearing purple Barney pajamas. He stopped crying the moment he saw me, his face red and wet, and he reached for me with grabbing hands.

I picked up my brother.

Jade smiled and grabbed a handful of my hair.

I wiped away his tears with the sleeve of my coat.

“Mumma,” Jade said.

“I’m not your—”

“Mumma.”

“Okay.”