

Lepidoptera
A Play in One Scene
By
Alyssa Jorgensen

December 13th, 2020

CHARACTERS

SHIRLEY, 38. Curator of Lepidoptera, her outfit is business casual—a cardigan and skirt.

JANELLE, 48. Head Curator. Wears a pantsuit.

HANNAH, 38. Shirley's deceased childhood friend. She died when she was 10 but appears as a 38-year-old woman. Her outfit is simple, plain, and casual.

PLACE

An American natural history museum

TIME

The present

NOTE

The "small black butterflies" are not perceived by any of the characters. They can be applied with sleight of hand and by taking advantage of the lighting. It is recommended that a cloak that can easily and quickly be put on and taken off be used when SHIRLEY becomes fully consumed. A partial cloak, possibly covering just the head and shoulders, can be used when SHIRLEY is only partially consumed.

Pronounce "v." like the letter (vee)

ACT I
SCENE 1

SETTING: Shirley's office. 8 pm. The wall is covered in glass-encased taxidermied moths and butterflies, at least one of which is an Atlas moth.

AT RISE: SHIRLEY sits at her desk typing, occasionally glancing at a sheet of paper. She leans back in her chair, sighs, and pulls out a framed spicebush swallowtail from her purse. SHIRLEY looks at the swallowtail and smiles. There's a knock as the door, and SHIRLEY puts the swallowtail away.

SHIRLEY
Come in.

(JANELLE enters)

JANELLE
Working late again?

SHIRLEY
Yeah. I want to catalogue the new acquisitions by the end of the night.

JANELLE
The silk moths?

SHIRLEY
Yeah.

JANELLE
Okay great. I actually got an interesting email today. Might be of some interest to you.

SHIRLEY

Oh?

JANELLE

Yeah. Apparently someone's grandpa died and they want to donate his collection to us.

SHIRLEY

That's...really sad actually.

JANELLE

Yeah. It Is. But he had quite the collection though. Look at this.

(JANELLE hands SHIRLEY her phone.
SHIRLEY swipes through the photos)

SHIRLEY

Oh wow.

JANELLE

Something the matter?

SHIRLEY

Yeah no um, it's nothing.

JANELLE

You sure?

SHIRLEY

Well I mean it's just kind of a weird thought you know. Like, one day you're kicking around enjoying life and the next day your family's clearing out your stuff.

JANELLE

Well let's hope that's not your case. I'm guessing you'd like to live a long-life like this guy. 102 years old and he died peacefully in his sleep.

SHIRLEY

How do you know all that?

JANELLE

That's how they opened the email.

(SHIRLEY checks the email)

SHIRLEY

Oh.

(JANELLE takes back her phone)

JANELLE

See at that point they're just bragging on their grandpa's behalf. A lot of people would kill to die like that.

(Beat)

You ever think about your own death Shirley?

(The lights fade out and back in)

SHIRLEY

I try not to.

JANELLE

Well, you should try sometime.

SHIRLEY

Okay...

JANELLE

I'd like to die in a fire, but specifically after saving a family, and then I'd go down with the house.

SHIRLEY

If you saved the family then why would you go down with the house.

JANELLE

I don't know. maybe I go back inside. Try to save a heirloom or something. I'll workshop it later.

SHIRLEY

Okay but also, why did you pick a slow and painful death?

JANELLE

It's just a heroic death Shirley. If I'm going out I'm going out blazing. Besides, I'll probably get hit with a support beam or something and die from hemorrhaging.

SHIRLEY

That still sounds awful.

JANELLE

Well death sounds awful Shirley I don't know what to tell you.

SHIRLEY

I'd like to get back to the collection if that's okay with you.

JANELLE

Yes right of course. Did you want the collection?

SHIRLEY

Yeah, I was just thinking it would be nice if we could put some of them up in the lobby, and maybe get a little "in memory of..." plaque to go with it.

JANELLE

I like it.

SHIRLEY

Well great.

(JANELLE checks the time)

JANELLE

Hey listen I got to go. I'll forward the email to you sometime tonight. Let me know if you need anything else.

(JANELLE begins to leave)

SHIRLEY

Well actually I have something else.

(JANELLE stops)

JANELLE

Oh?

(SHIRLEY pulls out the framed spicebush
swallowtail)

SHIRLEY

I was thinking we could do something similar with this.

JANELLE

For when you die?

SHIRLEY

No.

(lights fade out and in)

it's for my friend Hannah. She died when we were like 10. This was never her's but my mom did get it for me after she died because spicebush swallowtails were her favorite and we used to raise them together. This was actually what started my collection.

JANELLE

Yeah that sounds like a great idea.

SHIRLEY

Really?

JANELLE

Yeah we can make it a thing. Hell maybe when you die, we can put your collection out there too.

(the lights fade out and back in)

SHIRLEY

Yeah maybe...

(JANELLE checks the time)

JANELLE

Hey listen now I really have to go, but I'm really sorry about your friend. That must have been really tough.

SHIRLEY

Yeah. Really puts things in perspective you know. Even after all these years.

(The lights begin fading in and out continuously)

JANELLE

I'm sure it has. Listen I'm here if you ever want to talk.

SHIRLEY

Thank you, but this happened a while ago. I'm fine really.

JANELLE

Well my offer still stands.

(JANELLE leaves. The lights continue fading in and out. SHIRLEY looks down at the swallowtail, and then gets up and looks at her collection of taxidermied moths and butterflies. The lights fade back in. It's dimmer than before, with the edges of the room darker than the center. A small black butterfly has planted itself on SHIRLEY. HANNAH is standing next to SHIRLEY, BOTH looking at the collection)

SHIRLEY

God Hannah you would have loved this place.

HANNAH

Yeah I probably would have.

SHIRLEY

You've probably never seen some of these before. Like this one.

(SHIRLEY gestures to an Atlas moth)

Remember when we used to watch Godzilla movies together.

HANNAH

God those were crazy.

SHIRLEY

Yeah...apparently these guys were part of the inspiration for Mothra.

HANNAH

Oh god is that why you did your dissertation on Saturniidae eclosion?

SHIRLEY

Damn I never really thought about but I guess so.

HANNAH

Yeah like one of the subconscious things.

SHIRLEY

Yeah maybe.

(Beat)

HANNAH

Hey you know what—you should put that as like a fun fact about Atlas moths when you put the new acquisitions out.

SHIRLEY

I'll make a note of it.

(HANNAH continues looking at the taxidermied moths and butterflies. SHIRLEY goes to her desk and writes something down on a piece of paper. SHIRLEY sits down at her desk as if trying to get back to work, but she never touches the keyboard. SHIRLEY sighs)

Hey you know what we should do.

(SHIRLEY goes over to her bookshelf and pulls out a dvd of *Godzilla v. Mothra* (1992))

We should watch *Godzilla versus Mothra*. You were so excited for this. It's kind of sad you never got to see it...though you did also die before the 1998 *Godzilla* movie so—silver lining and all that.

HANNAH

Yeah. Maybe some good did come from building a playground next to some railroad tracks. But I don't think we should watch a movie right now.

SHIRLEY

It's just something to keep on in the background while I work.

HANNAH

You and I both know you don't plan on working.

SHIRLEY

Well I mean—

—Remember when we used to pretend to be kaiju monsters and fight each other.

SHIRLEY

Yes.

HANNAH

And how you were always Mothra.

SHIRLEY

Yes.

HANNAH

And how that was only pretend and you weren't actually Mothra.

SHIRLEY

Obviously.

HANNAH

And how you aren't going to just show up in *Gidorah* though you died in *Mothra versus Godzilla* cause you transferred your consciousness through your children or whatever.

(Another small black butterfly has
planted itself on SHIRLEY)

SHIRLEY

Okay I don't want to do this right now—

HANNAH

—It's not that hard. I did it and I was only 10.

SHIRLEY

Okay yeah that just made things worse.

(another black butterfly has planted on
SHIRLEY)

I'd like to move on to a different subject.

HANNAH

Sure. Let's talk about how Mothra died at the end of *Godzilla v. Mothra* except Mothra isn't some god and we're actually talking about you and this isn't *Godzilla versus Mothra*.

SHIRLEY

You haven't seen that movie.

HANNAH

"I'm" a 4-foot 11 reconstructed skeleton in the ground.

(Beat)

SHIRLEY

You were tall for a 10-year-old.

HANNAH

Shirley.

SHIRLEY

But I mean now that I think about it—did they actually put you back together or is that just one of those weird things I made up as a kid and never questioned until now?

HANNAH

I know just about as much as you do. But that's besides point. Do you realize that time is completely irrelevant to me now? For all I care it could have been five minutes since I've died or a million years and none of it makes a difference to me cause there's no me to process it.

SHIRLEY

I'm here to process it.

HANNAH

For now.

(Another small black butterfly plants
itself on SHIRLEY)

SHIRLEY

I guess...

HANNAH

Don't give me that you know I'm right. You know you're going to end up like that old man one day. You know you're going to end up just like one of your moths. Or that swallowtail. Except hopefully you'll be in a casket instead of behind glass. I'd hate to think of the unfortunate circumstances that would have led up to that point.

SHIRLEY

Yeah me too.

HANNAH

One day everything will just go black for you. Except not really cause there won't be any black to perceive because it will just be nothing. It'll just be an unimaginable nothing.

(Another small black butterfly has
planted itself on Shirley)

SHIRLEY

It's not like you even know what death is like. I mean I assume it's like nothing, but I can't know for sure—cause I'm not dead like you. And you can't tell me. Cause you're dead. And also, you don't know. Cause you're dead.

HANNAH

Yeah that sounds about right.

(Another small black butterfly plants
itself on SHIRLEY. SHIRLEY picks up the
spicebush swallowtail and looks down at
it)

SHIRLEY

You know it's just so weird. There's so many things you missed out on. And even though it's been like what—28 years? It still feels like you were still around for all of that. Just in another state maybe. Kind of like old friends who just lost touch.

HANNAH

Except not at all.

SHIRLEY

Yeah. of course, but It's just like...damn, you really don't even know who you used to be. Like...you used to love butterflies, and now they basically mean nothing to you.

HANNAH

That's right.

SHIRLEY

cause nothing can mean anything anymore. Like you don't remember your family, or your childhood bedroom, or anything really cause you're dead.

HANNAH

Yup. I don't even remember my death. You get hit by a train and you don't even remember it.

SHIRLEY

And the thing is...that's going to happen to me one day. I'm going to die, and then I won't even remember who you are.

(The lights cut off. A spotlight shines on the center of the stage where SHIRLEY stands facing the audience. More small black butterflies have planted themselves on SHIRLEY. HANNAH stands completely in the darkness. The spotlight cuts off, and cuts back on to reveal SHIRLEY who appears to have moved diagonally towards the front of the stage. SHIRLEY has become partially consumed in small black butterflies. HANNAH appears at the edge of the darkness. The spotlight cuts off again and cuts back on to reveal SHIRLEY has move the front of the stage. HANNAH stands behind her. SHIRLEY is fully consumed in small black butterflies)

SHIRLEY

Godzilla. Moths. The Museum. Nothing.

HANNAH

It's okay really. It's not like you can parse out those feelings when you're dead.

(Beat)

SHIRLEY

I miss you Hannah.

HANNAH

I know.

SHIRLEY

I'll always miss you.

HANNAH

No you won't.

SHIRLEY

I know. I know that.

HANNAH

I know you do.

(Beat)

You know Shirley. Experience is really all you ever are and all you ever will be. Death isn't really a part of who you are cause who you are has ended.

SHIRLEY

Yeah that's...the worst part about all of this.

HANNAH

Well yeah, but like—this is all you were ever meant to know, so whatever “happens” after death doesn't really matter cause you can't experience it. Cause you're dead. All that really matters is what you've experienced and what you will experience, and appreciating all those experiences while you can before you just stop existing. Because that's when it ends. Experience that is.

(Beat)

HANNAH

Hey remember when one of our swallowtails eclosed, and her wings were still a little wet so when we let her go she just sort of flew onto my leg and stayed there.

SHIRLEY

You don't remember that.

HANNAH

Yeah but you do.

SHIRLEY

Yeah...

(The lights begin fading in and out.
The small black butterflies begin
leaving SHIRLEY's body. HANNAH is gone.
The lights brighten back up to normal.
SHIRLEY is free of small black
butterflies. She picks up the spicebush
swallowtail and hangs it on the wall.
SHIRLEY picks up her purse, takes a
look at her taxidermied moths and
butterflies, pulls out her phone, and
leaves)

END OF PLAY