

Death and Painted Ladies

By Holly Lisle

So we got our kid a Painted Lady butterfly kit as part of his science education this year—if you watch kids' or educational channels, you've seen these kits on TV.

The ads appeal to the scientist in kids, and to the “hey, cool” factor in parents, so we willingly sent off for the butterfly treehouse, and when we got it, filled out the coupon and sent for the live caterpillars.

The first Painted Lady caterpillars arrived a week later, five of them, all about the size of mouse droppings (I have lived in some exciting places in my life, and know what these look like), and unfortunately, all DOA (dead on arrival).

The kid took it pretty well, considering.

Warily, because while the first batch was cheap, the refills were expensive, I sent off for a second batch.

These arrived in wonderful shape, vigorously munching away in their safe, moisture-free container, and within a few days, we had five chrysalids ready to be transferred to their treehouse, where they would complete the change from lumpy, ugly caterpillars to lovely butterflies. All was well, the kid was thrilled, I was relieved.

The kid and I pinned the paper on which the caterpillars had attached their chrysalids to the inside of the butterfly treehouse, and carefully following instructions, found a sturdy surface where they would not be in direct sunlight, would not get knocked over, and would be able to complete their transformation in peace and safety.

We imagined a future scene something like this:

In a perfect world, this is the way things work.

In the Deep South, however, we have fire ants.

If you can drive a riding mower over an anthill and have the anthill stall the mower, welcome to the Deep South. If you can do it twenty or thirty times in the same yard (I do not have a lawn, I have a yard) welcome to my world. Fire ant mounds get to be about a foot-and-a-half to two feet across, and can hit a foot in height. The mounds, furthermore seem to have territories with about a seven-to-ten foot diameter, so if you're mowing 3 acres of barely-converted pasture, you'll hit a lot of them.

Don't step on them, don't mess with them. Be a little careful about ever going to sleep. And, if you have a well and value the drinkability of your water, learn to live with them.

BUT ALSO...

Ignore every carefully-detailed instruction in the pamphlet on raising butterflies that in **any** way suggests you should keep your butterfly treehouse on the floor.

We came out today to one of those Wild Kingdom lions-ripping-the-innards-out-of-zebras scenes in miniature that makes you more than a little queasy. The fire ants had found the chrysalids, and were tearing into them with the sort of gusto they'd exercise on us if we couldn't get up and run.

Looking at that mess, I figured our future butterflies were all dead. I dragged the thing into the kitchen, with the kid trailing me, and started pulling everything out of the treehouse. The kid was tragic-stoic on the outside and mad and on the edge of tears, his hands balled into fists.

Two of the chrysalids had gaping holes in them. A third did not, but did not wriggle when touched—odds are he was dead right then. Two others still wriggled, and I passed this news

on to the kid, who underwent the sort of transformation I was hoping for from the damned bugs. He became radiantly happy and full of hope.

I killed all the ants in the treehouse (with my thumb—anything that would kill ants would certainly kill butterflies), shot their corpses out of the mesh with a can of compressed air, put a napkin on the bottom of the treehouse, put the three chrysalids that didn't have holes eaten into them into the ant-free treehouse, and my hubby and I hung the thing from a knob on a high cabinet door, with the door swung open to be out of convenient reach of ants. I hope.

It may not help. By the time we got the chrysalids into the treehouse, none of them were still moving. So now we wait ten days, to see if any of the potential survivors survived. The kid knows that, in spite of everything we did, they're probably all three already dead. We're giving them a chance and hoping for the best, but this is one of those life lessons where the outcome will almost certainly hurt.

We aren't soft-selling this. We didn't shield the kid from the holes in the two partially-devoured chrysalids. I didn't hide the nastiness from him when I cleaned out the mess. And he and his dad were with them when the last two stopped moving.

Life has consequences, we screwed up by not considering that around here, we have ants, and they're nasty. We were responsible for the Painted Ladies' lives, the kid and I, and we were responsible for their deaths. Something I've learned from personal experience as well as watching the parade of tragedies that came through my various ERs was that people who don't learn how to deal with the consequences of little tragedies—who were shielded by their parents throughout their childhoods and who grow up thinking life is soft and safe—are people who fail to prevent preventable big tragedies, and who don't have any tools to deal with **any** tragedies—preventable or not—when they happen. Kids who have had to deal with the

pointy end of life early on, whether it's butterflies-in-waiting devoured by invading predators or old cats who finally give out, are a little better braced for the bigger tragedies that await every one of us.

Go with grace, enjoy the beauty of the day and every sweet breath, because life is an amazing gift and a wonderful opportunity. But preview your actions for possible consequences—think before you leap. And watch your back.

It's still a jungle out there.

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