

BUTTERFLIES

Phyllis Barber

Trying to get to the nursery proper and all of the blooming plants—bright colors, heady smells, early summer at its best—Mona almost walked past his table. It was one of those fold-up numbers with foldout legs. Portable. Impermanent. The young man standing behind the table was dressed in a gray plaid shirt tucked into neatly ironed chinos, hair neatly cut but not too short or too neat.

Maybe I should stop and see what he's all about? After all, Mona was in a gregarious mood. Today she was free from thinking about what needed to be done next. Without speaking or saying a word to anyone or anything, she celebrated this moment to herself.

The day was exquisite. Early summer at its best. Full, round sunshine. Clear skies. Mona could hear the birds singing in the trees, celebrating the season. But she couldn't help but wonder whether birds actually celebrated the season. What were they saying, if she were privy to bird language? Slowing her step, she stopped in front of his table. Their eyes met. They both smiled. He opened his mouth, ready for a customer. And she decided to listen to his spiel. Soon enough, she'd get back to following the path that led to the rows of plants stretching just around the corner.

Droplets of sweat on his lip, he seemed genuinely convinced in what he was promoting behind the felt-tip sign he'd made to attract customers. "You'll never believe what's in these bags." He held up a waxed-paper bag holding something that looked like the beginning of five fingers. "I'd like to show you . . ."

Mona wanted to listen even though the sun was begging her back, begging her to find someplace cool, to be on her way. But he'd set up the table with curious paraphernalia—collapsible net tubes to be

used for who-knows-what, the waxed-paper bags, and a money box, always money. Her sense of what-might-happen-next was aroused.

“These are cocoons, growing every day. And all you need to do is wait for ten days.” He held up the bag with the half-formed cocoons, then set it down and untied a string on one of the net bags, opening it to full length. It reminded Mona of a Slinky except it didn’t slink. It was a pop-up net contraption that could, untied, change from a disc to a four-inch-tall basket.

“Then put the bag into this tube. Fasten it to the top with the safety pin I’ve included. They’re hungry little buggers, and they’ll eat what’s in the bag for sustenance. After they’re secure inside this net, leave them alone for about seven days. You’ll be surprised, amazed, over-the-moon at what happens, but remember not to take the butterflies out before their wings have dried. Read the instructions. You’ll be good.”

“Butterflies?” she said. “These will really be butterflies?” The waxed-paper bag looked like something out of her own kitchen. Some half-remembered leftover. But she was in the mood to believe. She opened her purse, took out his asking price of twenty dollars, and handed it to him.

“You won’t be sorry,” he said, giving her the bag and one tied net tube in exchange—her kit for possibility.

She set all of this carefully into her purse, which she didn’t close, worried that something might be suffocated in the process. “Good luck with more customers.”

She continued along the path to the aisles of flowers and soon-to-be flowers and felt lighter somehow. She felt like skipping, though not quite. That was for the young ones who could bend like pretzels. Sunshine. Flowers. Gardeners. The smell of hundreds of promises.

Probably just a scam, but he seemed nice enough, she told herself. *Could be Saturday morning baloney, but I don’t care.* Then she looked around for something new and different to put in her garden. So many plants. So many tiny bodies that grew with sunlight and water. *It’s all a*

miracle, she thought. The way things start with a seed. The way the seed opens to water. The miracle of a stem winding up and out of the soil.

I'm lucky to be alive on such a day as this, she told herself as she walked past the signs that read Dahlias, Marigolds, Shasta Daisies. It's a more than perfect day even though it's hot. How amazing to live in four seasons after my childhood in two, barely. Mostly hot and then too cold for a few months. She loved being in the midst of these plants with their buds and blossoms, almost like some kind of heaven that couldn't be described by mere words.

She thought about her husband, Stefan, who couldn't be with her today, walking having become hard for him. He was such a specimen, such an athlete, and now he could barely walk. It hurt her head to think about him, all of the changes he'd had to accept in such a short period of time. Not fair. Not fair. So, she turned her thoughts to other things.

The nursery was busting at the seams that day—everyone wanting to be entertained all summer by the showy flowers that couldn't wait to strut. She finally picked out two geraniums, waited in a long line to pay her pittance, and felt satisfied that she'd thought about her garden and its possibilities instead of Stefan, if only for a small moment. The smells. The greenery. The rich soil. The people dressed in shorts, cutoffs, overalls. The endless promise of growth all around her. The stop at the nursery had been impulsive, a quick right into a space in the long line of parked cars at the side of the road. And here she was with the possibility of butterflies in her purse, two geraniums in hand, and a few unplanned hours. What a day!

There was a bird in a cage above the cashier, shifting about on its two claws, feet, whatever they were. Something like a white parrot with a topknot, she couldn't remember its name, though, did that matter? It was skittering across the rod with its two claws, not saying much except for a few squawks. It was a rather handsome bird. Maybe it was a keeper of the nursery at night, though it was probably covered by a sheet or a blanket by then. How did it come to be in this cage? Was it raised this

way on some kind of bird farm or was it caught in the wilds? And here it was, hanging above the counter, someone's pet, she hoped. A pet someone loved, cared for, and looked after.

A cage. That's where Stefan was. In a cage. It wasn't fair that he'd been given (by whom, she'll never know the answer) such a narrow range of operation, such limited movements, such trouble with his walking. His neuromuscular disease was cruel and more than cruel to Stefan, who had been such a child of movement, a man of strength because he had such an able body, King of the Gym, even. He had an athletic body: power in his legs when he bicycled for miles and power in his arms when he played tennis, football, and basketball. Exquisite to watch, though all Mona had seen in the past few years was a scuffling walk, a bent back, an unyielding body. She must remember. She must. It would be unfair to forget.

But enough of thinking about cages and Stefan, Mona told herself as she became first in line. She retrieved her wallet to pay the bill, her purse still open. "Thank you, thank you," she told the cashier who was too ready for the next person in line to pay much attention. Then she strolled back along the path, past the butterfly man once again. He was talking to someone else, so she decided there was nothing more to say, even though she wanted to ask him again. "Butterflies? Really?"



The waxed bag sat on the kitchen counter, tucked away in one of the less-lighted corners, still more theory than fact, even though the cocoons kept growing longer and the sticky substance on the sides of the bag kept diminishing in size. Something, somebody, was eating the so-called food that the butterfly man had left inside the bag, maybe by sucking it up, osmosis, or something. Mona couldn't figure it out. But she didn't pay much attention, busy attending to breakfast and dinner for Stefan, keeping the kitchen alive with smells and ideas for the next meal. Maybe even an exotic dessert.

She didn't say much to Stefan about the two bags that were tucked away—the waxed bag and the net bag. She didn't mention them because they seemed insignificant. When contrasted with his diminishment, they were unimportant. An afterthought. An impulse to be thrown away when they didn't amount to anything. The idea was fluff on her counter. Detritis. Instead, she thought about what could be done to make Stefan's life fulfilling when so much had been lost.

Stefan. How she dreamed he had wings and could lift into the sky and fly anywhere he wished. How she wanted the world to be a lovely place for him, no troubles, no worries. How she wished everything could be perfect and she could walk by his side and they could hike, bike, swallow the outdoors, the autumn leaves, the spring green, the paths to new places. How she desired to travel the world, as Stefan had always done, though now it was difficult to negotiate a walk to the bathroom.

"Eggs again," she said to Stefan when she served him his breakfast. "Sorry breakfast is boring, but hey, it's protein. Necessary stuff."

"No worries," he said, holding out his hands to receive the plate from his place in the reclining chair where he sat every morning. He pressed the button at the side to bring himself to a sitting position. Mona loved that the chair was mechanical, could change from laid out to sitting up, and had the right kind of arms to grab when Stefan needed to stand. It was a big, comfortable, brown velour chair, much better than the bulky, hulky, bombshell chairs they'd seen when they picked this one out. *Why*, she'd wondered in the store, *could manufacturers make such monstrous things? What could they possibly be thinking?*

"What should we do today?" Stefan asked, though there were very few things they could do and they both knew it. Maybe go for another ride, but they'd gone on so many rides and drives, some of them worthwhile, some of them a mere excuse to get out of the house. The movie theaters, which had always been an option, were dangerous places with the Covid pandemic, but maybe she and Stefan could go early, now that

the theaters were open again. They could beat the crowds. But maybe there were no crowds anymore. She didn't know.

"I need to run a few errands," Mona said, standing by his recliner, holding on to the reassuring handles of his walker as she talked. There were times when Mona needed to go out, not only to run errands but to keep her sanity, her sense of the world still running along beside her. But for now, she remembered to stand up as straight as she could, important to maintain some kind of posture between the two of them. Some sense of order. Uprightness. She always encouraged Stefan to walk as upright as possible even though his back often bent into a comma when he used his walker. But maybe she had too many rules, too many ideas of how someone should be when she herself didn't know exactly how he felt. What was it like to be him facing so many physical barriers? She was never sure where the lines of caregiver and receiver ended and began. She suspected she was overly attentive.

"Maybe you can be my wing man. Sound exciting?"

"Not so much," he said, checking to see if the TV remote was resting on the arm of the chair. *He's probably thinking about what show he can watch as soon as I clear away breakfast,* Mona thought. "I'll just hang out here until you get back."

"I'll get back as quickly as I can and shouldn't be long. You sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll just be sitting here."

"You sure?"

Her hesitancy stemmed from an incident in which Stefan had fallen. One black night. One dark, dark night, it seemed in her memory. Neither of them could figure out what happened, but he'd been half asleep, fuzzy in the head, and tried to make his way to the bathroom. He'd taken a blind fall onto the hard stone tiles of the bathroom floor. Luckily, there was a guest in the house who had helped Mona get Stefan back into bed, but there had been damage: jagged skin-splits on his arm, deep cuts, lots of blood, and the necessity of stitches in his hand where the thumb joins the fingers. Stefan sat on the edge of the bed

while Mona cleaned, medicated, and wrapped the wounds, blood leaking onto the comforter, leaving traces of the event behind. She tried to be proficient, efficient, sufficient—all of those things, though the sum of blood was almost more than she could take.

His skin is so thin, so susceptible to tearing, to pulling apart, Mona thought. It's like Stefan's body is a cocoon getting close to the end. It grows until its paper-thin walls collapse. Except a cocoon doesn't deteriorate into nothing. It becomes a butterfly. Something that flies. Away. Up in the air. It catches shades of light and dark as it finds a new place to light. Metamorphosis. Something from almost nothing. And Mona kept wondering. How does an old person emerge from his or her cocoon, the thin-walled skin, body, shrinking away? Maybe the spirit of man, of woman, flies away when the husk of the body dries up and is blown by the wind.



At the end of ten days, Mona transferred the paper bag to the net tube. First, she untied the string until the tube popped into its four-inch length. She sat it on its blue bottom, then opened it up with its zipper. Though she tried several times, however, she couldn't pin the bag to the top of the net without tearing the paper. If she tore it, then she'd harm the cocoons. Not a good idea. She placed the bag inside instead, on the floor of the tube, not what she'd been told to do. She zipped it closed. This would probably be a bad call, but this whole endeavor wasn't one of the brightest ideas she'd ever had anyway, listening to someone at an impermanent table on an impulsive day at a nursery. Listening to promises that good things would happen if she followed instructions. Did the world work that way anyway?



Seven days later, she saw some dark shadows in the net tube. Some one-winged shapes emerging from the cocoon, glued together, or so it

seemed. She remembered the instructions that said to let the wings dry before unzipping the tube, but she had no idea that these sodden wings would ever become unstuck, let alone turn into two that would fly.

“Hey, Stefan. I’m growing butterflies in the kitchen. Can you believe it?”

“Is that another one of your wild, off-the-wall projects?” Stefan said, sitting in his chair, flipping the channels on the remote. “You’re always trying something, aren’t you?”

“Well, why not?” she answered from the kitchen. “You never can tell when something might be worth the trouble, can you?”

“No, you can’t,” he said.

There was a thick pause in the room, the question of whether or not Stefan was one of Mona’s projects unanswered. He wouldn’t tell her what he was thinking in this regard, and she was afraid to ask. But he seemed to have a parade of thoughts going on in his quiet head. Mona was always wondering what he was thinking, always wanting to ask if he was tired of all of this or if he wanted her to leave him be. She never knew if he was interested in what she was doing or not.

But this time, she’d decided to do whatever interested her anyway, heaven or hell in the future. What was twenty dollars this time around? A paper bag full of what seemed to be cocoons? A net bag that popped up to full height before it traveled down the stairs, though her bag didn’t attempt stairs.

“Do you want to go to the gym today?” she asked, peeling some Granny Smith apples for a cobbler recipe from a cookbook that was usually reliable. Sometimes he liked to walk on the treadmill and pedal the stationary bike to keep in some kind of shape, though he usually paid for it the next day, his body reacting to any kind of demand. The piper must pay, it seemed, when it came to Stefan’s condition.

“Sure,” he said. “I feel pretty good today. Give me half an hour.

“You got it.” That would give her the time to get the cobbler prepared for the oven. She could bake it when they got back.

Stefan finally got up from his chair, shuffled to the bedroom, found his black gym shorts on the arm of a chair and made his way into them, something he could still do most of the time. Then he went to the laundry room and stepped into a large pair of tennis shoes that he left tied loosely so he could step into them without bending over.

“Let’s go,” he said, Mona just finishing the crumble crust on the cobbler, more complicated than she’d first imagined.

“I’m coming,” she said, knowing it would take her a couple of minutes more to finish this project. “I’ll be right along.” Stefan was waiting in the car when she finally emerged onto the driveway, not really dressed for the gym though it didn’t matter anymore. Gone were the days when men lusted after her svelte shape wrapped in lycra.

The gym was on the second level of the rec center. Mona took the stairs while Stefan took the elevator. They met at the top, said “Bon voyage,” and went to their respective spots at the gym. Mona walked around the nine-times-makes-a-mile track, did some sit-ups, and tried a few weightlifting machines while Stefan walked on the treadmill, which felt safe to him—King of the Gym—and rode the stationary bike. Rare were the moments when she wasn’t thinking of Stefan and how he was faring, but she needed exercise, too. There was also a time when he needed her to back off, to give him room to be what he was, to lighten the load of this unwelcome burden. There was a time when he needed her not to ask how he was doing, to treat him as though everything was normal.

The right balance isn’t easy to determine, Mona thought as she walked around the track on the blue lane provided for walkers. Too much, then too little. Interested. Disinterested. On the spot. Off the mark.

The people at the edge of the track worked out on mats, lifting their legs from a lying position on the floor, balancing on Bosu balls, wearing elastic bands around their ankles and walking sideways. One woman was swinging barbells overhead, puffing in between, the barbells looking heavier than she could ever lift. One man worked out in the boxing

corner, punching bags steadily, moving from the upper cut bag to the double-ended bag, dancing on his two feet. All of them were engaged in the flow of strengthening themselves, fine-tuning themselves. This was something Stefan might have enjoyed doing.

So much industry in one room, she thought as she made her ninth and last lap. Then she found a bench to wait for Stefan. *Leave him alone*, she reminded herself. He was a man who savored his own head, his own space, for a few minutes.



It was Father's Day the next day. Maybe it was a manufactured day to make sure fathers were remembered as well as mothers, and maybe it was a commercial enterprise, but nonetheless, Stefan was a father. He needed to be remembered, though he wasn't interested in gifts, not really. He wasn't a materialistic man who needed anything. He didn't wait to see what anyone had done to make sure he had a good day, except she knew that he noticed.

Mona had given him some slippers, but he told her he might trip when he was walking in them and therefore didn't think they were a good idea. Stefan was not easy to please, she knew that, and he kept to himself much of the time. *Oh well*, Mona thought, *at least I remembered him. He's someone's father, bottom line.*

While she was in the kitchen, which she liked to be in much of the time, Mona decided to see if the butterflies were really butterflies after all. They'd had a day for their wings to dry and so it should be safe to unzip the bag and let them out. Stefan was sitting on the back deck, the sun shining warmly on his knees that were always tan. Tan seemed to be second nature to him, though Mona's legs had become spotty and unpredictable when it came to sun leaving its mark on them. She rarely wore shorts.

Mona walked out on the deck and handed him the net bag. "You want to unzip this bag? There's supposed to be butterflies in there." She'd

asked him casually, not knowing what to expect, though probably there would be a flight of a few commonplace butterflies into the backyard air.

“Sure,” he said, all of a sudden coming to life and more interested than usual. Mona smiled. He held the bag, unzipped it, and looked at the movement inside the netting. Suddenly, without any warning, the butterflies emerged. One at a time. They fluttered into the air above Stefan’s head, above the back deck. “Painted Lady. That’s the kind of butterfly in these cocoons,” the man at the nursery had said. But to see them in their condition of being a butterfly was much greater than the words he had spoken. They were a thing of beauty. Black and pink, a slanted design across the wings. Stefan and Mona dropped their mouths as they took flight. Stefan watched them flutter through the air, scattering in different directions. As if they were attached by a string to his eyes, he followed them as they flew.

The last one of them landed on the geranium Mona had bought at the nursery, flitted at the edge of one leaf, stayed in place for the briefest of moments. Stefan and Mona looked at each other, their eyes full of surprise. There were no words that could be spoken, nothing more that could pass between them, except for a flicker of a smile on Stefan’s face.

“And they did this on Father’s Day,” he said, unusually animated. Then he sank back into his chair to watch and see if any of the butterflies would fly back to their deck and feel a kinship to the home where they were born. They were now his babies, Mona thought. His donation to the great outdoors. He and Mona sat in their chairs in the sun, in the warmth, and didn’t say much.

PHYLLIS BARBER {pnbarber511@gmail.com} has published ten books, her latest being *The Precarious Walk: Essays from Sand and Sky*. She has won many awards for her writing, one being the Associated Writing Programs Award Series Prize for Creative Nonfiction for *How I Got Cultured*. In 2016, she was also awarded for Outstanding Contribution to Mormon Letters, given by the Smith-Pettit Foundation and the Association of Mormon Letters.