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Mariposas

Lea L. Downing

Cardboard, with white mesh windows on three of its sides, the box had been purchased from a neighbor child who sold them for her sixth-grade class fundraiser. The top was printed with *Butterflies! Mariposas! Papillons!* in jaunty fonts.

Standing on his front stoop, Jake had peered inside the box. “Where are the butterflies?”

“You grow them,” the girl said. “That’s the fun part of it. See?” She pointed to the bottom of the box where there were five squirming caterpillars. “They’re caterpillars right now. But after they eat a bunch of food they turn into chrysalises, and then they are butterflies after that. You want to buy one?” She smiled wide. “Only fifteen dollars.”

Jake gave the girl fifteen dollars and she handed him the box and a little bag. “All the information you need is in there,” she said. “So is the caterpillar food. Thanks!”

Jake took the box inside. He sat down at the kitchen table and unloaded the bag. There was a little canister of goopy food and a booklet titled “Caring for Your New Pets.” The kit was clearly intended for a child: the first instruction in the booklet was, “Find an adult to help you get started.” Jake didn’t read any further.

He got two saucers out of a kitchen cabinet and put a little food in one and water in the other. He then moved the box to the back corner of the kitchen counter.

The next week he worked doubles at the truck plaza, and entirely forgot about the box. While driving home one night, he remembered, and was surprised by the worry that he felt. Had he left enough food in the saucer? What about water? He pressed his foot a little harder on the gas pedal.

At home, he rushed to the kitchen and pulled the box from the corner. The food dish was empty and four of the caterpillars curled in tense, dried-out balls at the bottom of the box. Jake looked around the box for the fifth one and noticed a compact form hanging from the top. It was a tight crescent, the color of an autumn leaf at the end of the season.

Jake shook the box lightly, and the chrysalis wiggled. He felt a wash of relief and stepped away from the counter. After finding the booklet that came with the box, he sat down and read it. The box should receive indirect sunlight, no

extreme temperatures, and if nothing damaged the chrysalis, the butterfly would emerge in ten to fourteen days. Under a picture of a chrysalis stuck to the underside of a leaf ran the words, “What’s inside each of the eggs will be many different things before it gets to be a butterfly. It’s got to start out someplace small, or it doesn’t have anywhere to grow.”

Jake shivered as he fished out his uniform polo from a laundry basket heaping with dirty clothes and pulled it over his head. His water heater had been broken for almost two weeks now. As fall came into full effect, the cold showers he’d been enduring grew more and more trying. He’d call someone to get it fixed that afternoon, while he was on his lunch break. He tried to smooth out the wrinkles in his shirt, his hand passing over the left side of his chest, where his name was embroidered. He walked to the kitchen.

As Jake poured himself a cup of coffee, his gaze fell to the corner of the kitchen counter, next to the microwave, where his butterfly box sat. Jake stopped mid-pour and leaned against the edge of the counter and studied the unchanged chrysalis. He moved the box a little farther away from the window; it looked like it was going to be a sunny day and he didn’t want to oversaturate it.

Jake’s official title at Quicko’s Truck Plaza was “Customer Sales Specialist,” but all he did was run the cash register in the convenience store section of the sprawling building. Quicko’s was much more than a gas station: it had a barbecue restaurant, an ice cream parlor, an automotive shop, full-service showers, and a 24-hour gym. Beyond that, however, it was the only service station adjacent to the interstate for more than 75 miles in either direction. Billboards along I-40 counted down to its arrival: “30 miles from Quicko’s!”; then “23 miles from your last chance for gas!”; and finally, in giant, neon text, “Wait’s over. You’re here! Exit now for Quicko’s!”

State Road 15 intersected the interstate at the Quicko’s exit and continued across to Marshall’s small town center. Jake had grown up in Marshall. He’d only left the county a handful of times, mainly to visit his grandmother in Cranston. Marshall wasn’t a place that people moved to; it was a place that people were born into.

Jake took the job at Quicko’s earlier that year after his scholarship wasn’t renewed at the community college. He had been studying a smattering of subjects, hadn’t yet nailed down one to concentrate on. College made it clear to Jake that there was a great big world outside of Marshall. There was a giant world out there, and he was a little part of it.

But now Jake worked at Quicko’s, which, while fascinating in its own way—as a little microcosm of life stuck on the side of one of the country’s main

thoroughfares, where travelers, truckers, and transients abound—didn't quite satisfy the way his studies had.

Jake pulled into the Quicko's parking lot and drove to the rear of the building, where employees were expected to park. He entered through the delivery bay, stopping briefly to clock in and collect his cash tray before he continued on to the front. Jake smiled at Kimmy, a graveyard shift worker standing behind the cash register.

"What're you smiling at?" she snapped. "You're late."

Jake looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter. "Only two minutes."

"Two minutes I could be asleep, asshole," she mumbled as she took her cash tray out of the register and pushed past him.

Usually Jake would not be so disturbed by Kimmy's poor mood, but in that moment he found himself oddly affected by it.

He didn't know anything about Kimmy. They had worked at the same place for a year, and he knew absolutely nothing about her. For all he was aware, she could be growing butterflies in her kitchen as well. Instead of that thought making him feel comforted, less alone, it made him feel isolated. He couldn't even maintain friendly relations with a coworker.

A young woman wanting ten dollars on number four shook him from his daze. Jake took her money and turned on the pump. His day continued busily, which he was thankful for.

At lunchtime, Jake left his post at the convenience store cash register and headed to the Bottomless Pit, the truck plaza's 24-hour barbecue restaurant. He ate there every day, and Marlene always had his plate ready when he took his lunch break.

"Afternoon, Marlene," Jake said, as he sat down at the Formica counter.

"Jake," she said, smiling as she set his food down in front of him.

He was taking a bite of baked beans when someone sat down next to him.

"Could I see a menu?" the man asked.

He was young, no more than twenty, wearing a crisp white tank top and tight black jeans that looked spray painted on. His auburn hair was combed meticulously, parted on the side. He wore grubby, once-white jogging shoes. He wasn't a trucker; that was clear. He also didn't fit the look of a young road-tripper. He wasn't with anybody else so likely not traveling with family.

Marlene pitched a menu on the counter in front of the young man, giving him a sidelong look as she walked away. She returned with silverware and a glass of water, which she smacked down, sloshing water over the side of the glass and onto the counter. He looked at the glass, then Marlene, then back at the menu.

"So?" she asked, leaning onto the counter, palms pressed flat.

"Lemon meringue pie," the young man replied. "Please and thank you."

Marlene snatched up the menu and walked down to the pie case.

Jake eyed the man. His jaw was strong and his skin porcelain. His chestnut eyes held a relaxed gaze across the counter to where the chrome soda machine sat.

“I can see you looking at me,” the man said, pointing to the broad, mirror-like side of the machine. “Anything you like?”

Jake’s cheeks flushed, and he turned away.

“It’s okay,” the man said, “I know I’m pretty. You can look if you want to.”

Jake realized what the man was. The truck plaza, being a locus for semi drivers and other road-dwellers, had a robust and revolving population of female and male prostitutes: lot lizards, sleeper leapers, pavement princesses, asphalt cowboys. And while Jake could usually pick them out with ease, this man was different. He looked fresh, glowing, even—not as worn out as the others.

Marlene returned with the young man’s pie and set it on the counter. She then turned away and walked to the kitchen, where she stayed.

“You can call me Ro,” the young man said, with a mouthful of pie.

“I don’t know that I’m going to call you anything,” Jake scoffed. He immediately felt guilty for treating Ro with such rudeness. Jake bit his lip while several moments passed.

Ro took a crumpled five-dollar bill from his pocket, flattened it, and tucked it under the edge of his plate. “We’ll see about that,” he said. “Tell her thank you for me, won’t you?” He nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

“Sure.”

Jake watched Ro stride across the restaurant toward the front doors. Before he walked out, he stopped at the jukebox. He dropped in two coins and, after a brief flip through the possible selections, punched a combination of buttons.

“Sam Cooke makes everything better,” he said, winking at Jake. He turned and walked out the glass doors.

From the jukebox, Sam Cooke implored,

If you ever change your mind

About leavin me behind, Oh!

Bring it to me

Bring your sweet lovin

Bring it on home to me

“Sorry he was bothering you,” Marlene said. She had returned from the kitchen and was collecting the used dishes. “Want me to turn his music off?”

Though Jake wanted to turn back to the counter, he watched Ro, the fabric of his shirt caught rippling in the breeze as he crossed the parking lot toward the diesel bays.

“No,” Jake said. “Leave it on.”

The afternoon passed slowly for Jake. As the end of his shift neared, he saw Ro get out of the cab of a semi parked at the back of the lot. The truck shook itself to life and rumbled out onto the road, leaving Ro standing in its exhaust. He brushed himself off, tied one of his shoes, and walked toward the convenience store. Jake’s arms tensed. Something scurried in the bottom of his abdomen.

Ro entered without looking up at Jake and proceeded to walk to the back of the store, where the refrigerated cases were. He took a bottle of water out of a case and brought it back to where Jake stood behind the register passing time with his coworker Mike.

“You know,” Mike said, “my uncle can take care of that water heater problem for you. He works down at Harry’s Fix ’Em. I can call him right now if you want.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Jake replied. “If you think that’s ok.” He turned toward the counter, where Ro stood.

“We meet again,” Ro said, leaning across the counter with a kind of comical menace.

“Looks like it,” Jake said, concentrating on sounding casual. He took the bottle from Ro’s hand and scanned it. “Two-oh-nine.”

Ro held out three dollars, and as their fingers met, he bent forward and touched Jake’s hand. “You got problems with your water heater?”

Jake pulled his hand back, flexing his fingers. He made change for Ro and placed it on the counter.

“Look,” Jake said, glancing about to make sure no other customers or employees were watching their exchange. Mike was occupied with a young, blond girl at the opposite end of the counter. “No offense or anything, but I’m not, uh, I’m not in need of your services, you know?”

Ro laughed. “You should be so lucky. I know a bit about fixing appliances.” He waved a hand back over his shoulder. “Did it for work back in another life. I could do it for you cheap. Cheaper than his uncle.” He gestured toward Mike.

Jake didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t sure that he wanted Ro in his house, but he also needed his water heater fixed, cheaply at that.

Ro pointed to where Jake’s name was embroidered on his shirt. “Jake, right? Listen, when do you get off, Jake?”

Jake answered instinctively. “Half hour.”

“OK. Meet me out back when you’re done with work. We’ll get you fixed up.” Without waiting for a response from Jake, Ro took his water and strolled out of the store.

What had he been thinking? If he was lucky, maybe Ro would be late and Jake could slip off before Ro even saw him. But then again, maybe Ro would be waiting for him outside the delivery bay, wearing those perfect clothes and disgusting shoes.

Even while Jake told himself that he preferred to avoid taking Ro to his house, he was aware that part of himself wanted Ro to be there when he got off. Nights alone in his empty house drained him, and at least if he was with Ro, he wouldn’t be alone. But the desire for simple company wasn’t what drove his growing fascination with the man, and that awareness startled him in a way that made his skin shimmer with waves of goose bumps. As Jake stood at his cash register in the wake of his clumsy conversation with Ro, he concluded that he actually did hope to find Ro waiting for him at eight o’clock. He expected that realization to bother him more than it did. But instead Jake found himself anxiously—almost giddily—awaiting the last minutes of work to be over.

Ro was standing outside the delivery bay, wearing a backpack, when Jake came out of the building. A few of Jake’s coworkers sat on the ledge of the loading dock, smoking cigarettes and watching them. Jake hadn’t planned on having an audience.

“What’s in the backpack?” Jake asked. It was a forest green, standard school backpack, threadbare in many places. Jake figured it was probably full of condoms and lube. He hoped he wouldn’t have to touch it.

“My life,” Ro responded, hitching up the straps.

As they walked away from the delivery bay, Hermán, one of the older men who worked in the automotive shop called out, “*Mariposa*.” He then flicked his still-lit cigarette in their direction, hitting Ro on the back of his left calf. Ro didn’t show any sign of having felt the impact of the cigarette, though Jake knew he must have. Jake looked back at the group of his coworkers, who stood laughing.

“And proud of it,” Ro called sharply over his shoulder.

Jake led Ro to the back of the parking lot where his car was parked. After they both had gotten in, Ro put his hand out to stop Jake as he reached to shift the car into drive. Ro’s hand was warmer than Jake expected—rougher, too.

“I have an idea,” Ro said, reaching into his backpack. He took out a tiny bag of white powder, holding it in one hand while he flicked at its bottom with the other. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know about that,” Jake said. He pulled away from Ro a few inches. “Haven’t touched the stuff since I was nineteen.”

Ro reached into his shirt and pulled out a key that hung around his neck on a thin, blue ribbon. He opened the bag, scooped a bit onto the end of the key, and brought it to his left nostril. Jake watched as Ro inhaled forcefully, then leaned back and shook his head, eyes closed. With little more than a few seconds respite, Ro took the key and scooped another small mound of powder from the bag, holding it out to Jake.

“Here you go,” he said.

Jake snorted the coke, followed by a burning sensation, and the bitter drip coating the back of his mouth. He stared at the speedometer before him, wondering how exactly he arrived where he was. Doing cocaine in his car with a male prostitute, no horizon beyond the moment he was in.

“Fuck,” Ro said. “Guy I got this from said it was good, but they all say that. He seemed like the kind of guy who would sell you stuff cut with shit. But this is good.”

Jake was struck with the need to drive, to move. “Where do you want to go?” he asked. “I want to be going somewhere.”

Ro looked at Jake. “Take me to the most beautiful place you can think of. The best place. I want to see the best place you know.”

“The best place...” Jake considered their options. There were the bars down 15, but he didn’t want to go there. He was feeling too good to put himself in a situation where some jackass could dim his high.

“Someplace where we can be outside. I’d like to be outside,” Ro said.

There was only one place Jake could think of that would allow them to be outside without potentially crossing paths with someone who would bother them.

“Well, there’s a state park just up the road, Coyote Trace. People camp there sometimes, and the gates are always open, but for the most part it’s pretty empty. There are some hills and a lookout where you can see all the way to Millsburg.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

Jake pulled out onto State Road 15 and picked up speed. It felt like going to Coyote Trace was going to be the best experience he ever had in his life.

Jake guided them to the park effortlessly, if a little quickly, and he parked near the campground pavilion, which hulked as a dark mass in front of them.

“Let’s go to that lookout,” Ro said, zipping up his backpack.

Jake took a flashlight from the trunk of his car, and they set off toward the trailhead.

“It’s going to be so nice,” Jake said as they walked. “It’s one of those places where you can see so far, it kind of forces you to feel small. You know?”

Like you see Millsburg, and it looks small, but you know there are a few thousand people there, inside that small space. Which makes you feel small too.”

Ro laughed. “Yeah, I think I know what you mean. My favorite places are all out in the desert, with mountains and clear air where you can see farther than you can really comprehend. It forces a kind of perspective that we just don’t normally walk around having.”

Jake smiled. He felt strong feelings of affection toward Ro. He knew it was the drugs that made him feel that way, but that didn’t lessen the feelings.

The walk to the lookout took about fifteen minutes. As far as Jake could perceive, it could have been as much as an hour. It felt so full.

A steep incline dotted with loose rocks brought them to the top. Ro reached the clearing first, entering an outcropping of boulders. A dark valley spread out below. Small, bright grids of towns dotted the foreground. I-40 cut across the darkness. Cars moved along the predetermined paths; the tiny dots of light came together as veins of red and white on the indigo landscape.

“That’s Marshall,” Jake said, pointing to a closer grid of lights. “That, over there, that’s Millsburg.”

“What’s in Millsburg?” Ro asked, tugging his baggie from his back pocket.

“Not much. It’s kind of like Marshall. That’s where my family lives though.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Ro asked, serving himself.

Jake shook his head. Ro extended the key to Jake, who gladly accepted it.

“Boyfriend?” Ro asked.

“Does that key actually go to anything?” Jake asked.

“It’s to my home,” Ro answered.

“Where’s home?”

“Far away from here.”

Both men sat facing the valley. Jake worked the edge of his Quicksilver’s polo with his thumb. Ro fingered the key that hung around his neck.

Every time his high reached a lull, and before Ro offered him more, Jake fell into a brief realization of where he was, who he was with, and what he was doing. He expected that it would shock him, but it didn’t.

Their conversation felt effortless. It floated back and forth between them like a baseball in a casual game of catch.

“There was this one man,” Jake said, “that hung around the plaza for a while. He was a traveler, you know, but also a little loose in the head.”

“I’ve met more than a few of those.”

Jake nodded. “I’d imagine so. Anyway, he would panhandle every day outside the convenience store, and once he’d gotten enough cash, he’d go into the barbecue restaurant. He always had this sack. A brown paper sack. He’d sit down

at a four-top and unload his sack. It was filled with troll dolls. You know, those raggedy naked dolls with the big hair?" He raised a hand above his head.

Ro laughed. "Yeah. My sister had a bunch of those."

Jake also laughed as he continued. "Well, he always ordered the same thing, ribs, and he would share it with his dolls. His 'family' he called them. He'd pinch off little bits of meat and smash it against their plastic mouths. Then at the end of the meal, he would wipe all of their faces off and load them back into the sack."

Jake's laughing ceased. So did Ro's.

"Now that I think about it," Jake said, "it's actually pretty sad."

Ro told Jake stories from the road: how he'd been working it for almost two years, that he was tired of it but not sure what to do to break out.

"I've almost died a bunch of times," Ro confessed. "Or, I've almost been killed many times."

Jake nodded.

"When I get into a cab, I never know what the guy is going to be like. He could end up being friendly, or he could be violent. Lots of them just want to be held, more than anything else. Lots of them cry."

Jake didn't know what to say, so he stayed silent. He imagined Ro naked, tangled in a lustful frenzy inside the cab of a semi. The image was shocking to Jake. Somehow he had a hard time placing Ro in such a scene.

"One of the most touching ones was actually a woman."

"A woman?" Jake asked, betraying his surprise.

Ro chuckled. "Don't look so shocked," he said. "I'm equal opportunity. Anyway, she picked me up on her way out of Albuquerque. One of the first things she told me was that she had cancer. Lung cancer. She wheezed when she talked. She said that years of smoking while driving her rig had finally done her in. That she didn't have but a few months left, most likely."

"Wow. Intense."

"Yeah. We talked for several hours, she told me about her family, where she'd come from. Eventually she stopped and said, point blank, 'I just want to be fucked one last time.'"

Jake choked a little. "That is not what I thought you were going to say. Did you do it?"

"Yeah, I did. We stopped at a little motel outside of Tucumcari. It was actually kind of beautiful. She seemed so grateful, just to be touched." Ro flicked at the key and looked toward Jake. "More?"

"Sure."

Jake wanted the nighttime to expand, to stop and open up and allow them to keep doing what they were doing, feeling what they were feeling.

He found himself smiling painfully wide and turned to Ro, who was already looking at him, his face closer than Jake had anticipated. Ro smiled back and reached forward to put a hand on the side of Jake's face and stroked Jake's cheek with his thumb.

Jake didn't push it away. Ro leaned closer and kissed Jake, who parted his lips to speak, and Ro slid his tongue into Jake's mouth, where it moved slowly against Jake's tongue. Jake felt as though they had closed a circuit, made something whole. He welled with desire.

Jake pulled back, his body pulling away before his face did. His lips lingered.

"No," Jake said, looking at Ro. Jake gestured in front of himself as if looking for the right thing to say. When nothing came, he repeated, "No."

Ro nodded and pulled away.

Jake's face burned with embarrassment. He wanted to say something to Ro, something that would make the previous moment funny, or lighthearted in some other way.

Both men turned back to the valley. Its edges grew light. The stars flicked off, one by one. They were quiet. Ro didn't offer Jake the key again.

They left the lookout just before sunrise. The walk back was easier as the ambient brightness from the early sky made it possible to see the path without the use of the flashlight. The drive to Quicko's passed with little conversation.

"Thanks, Ro," Jake said as Ro climbed out of the car. He leaned on the door frame, looking out across the parking lot.

"Sure," Ro answered.

"How much longer do you think you'll be around?"

"Not long."

"Well," Jake said, "we should have lunch or something before you leave."

"Yeah, maybe."

At the other end of the parking lot, a semi flashed its lights three times.

"I should probably go," Ro said, turning to walk away.

"OK," Jake called after Ro, who gave a quick wave without looking back at Jake. Ro crossed the parking lot and climbed into the cab of the semi, disappearing into the darkness of the vehicle.

Jake was coming down hard. A visceral sadness filled him up from the inside out. He wanted more than anything to return to the belly of the night before, when possibility was palpable and he and Ro were caught in the safety and security of the darkness.

As Jake drove home, his despair increased. It was as if a shade had been pulled on the world. Everything looked pallid, feeble, and noticeably grayer than it had hours before. At home, Jake headed to the kitchen for some water. He swished it around and spat into the sink, rinsing out the sour taste that was in his

mouth. Leaning heavily against the counter, he looked around the kitchen. It, too, was gray, lifeless. The butterfly box caught his eye. He walked over and bent down so that the chrysalis was at eye level: it was split open, hanging empty from the top of the box, the butterfly crumpled at the bottom of the box.

It was yellow and orange with spots dotting the edges of its furrowed wings, which folded down into themselves, like little accordions. Jake opened the top of the box and picked up the butterfly, cradling it in his palm. Lying on its side, it was still, as if it never lived.