

Butterfly in the Summer Sun

By J. D. Moss

“Stay on the sidewalk!” Faith shouted as she grabbed her son by the shoulder, stopping his forward movement and pulling his tiny body close to hers, as the traffic from the street sped by them. Her loathing for downtown showed on the many lines on her face. She was in as much of a hurry to get home as Bryce, yet his motivation was to go swimming in the apartment pool, while she just wanted to put an end to the misery of her day.

“Go, mom go.” Bryce pulled her arms as the traffic on her left surged forward.

Faith checked the green crosswalk sign before moving them both onto the street. The heat pushing upward from the smoldering asphalt hit them like a wave of steam escaping a boiling pot of water. She briefly glanced upward to the blazing sun, wishing she had brought a hat. When she left the unemployment office the temperature was 101, yet it always felt hotter downtown with the sun’s heat magnified by the tall buildings and absorbed into the dark-colored roadways.

Sweat slid down her arms and dripped past her fingertips. As she walked her legs stuck together where the bare skin met just beneath her shorts. When they reached the midway point, Bryce pulled his hand away from hers and ran out of the crosswalk.

“Get back here!” Faith lunged forward, allowing the tote bag on her shoulder to slip down her arm and land in the street, spilling the contents into the roadway. Faith reached her son as he was picking something up from the road. Her hand pulled him up by his hair, dragging him two feet back to her dropped belongings. “What the hell are you doing?” Her face, red already from the sun, was now developing white blotches as her anger soared. “Stand there and don’t move!” she warned as she knelt to pick up her things. “Shit!” Faith jumped up looking at the spot where her knee touched the hot pavement and a small patch of black asphalt clung to her skin. “Shit!” she repeated.

Wiping perspiration from her eye, she bent over and began stuffing seven years’ worth of crap she had collected from her old job into the tote bag. As she picked up the last item, a framed employee of the month certificate, a car horn blew in her ear making her jump and drop it. Realizing the light had changed she hurriedly grabbed the tote bag in one hand and Bryce’s hand with the other, leaving the worthless frame behind.

“Stay next to me!”

She quickly led him down the crosswalk, ignoring the horns from cars wanting to get past her. With four feet to go, another horn blast, in harmony with the sound of screeching tires replaced her anger with fear. She jerked her head to the right in time to see a car brake within centimeters of her leg. She could feel the heat from the bumper on her skin and the smell of burning rubber filled her nose. A second blast from the horn broke her fearful trance and she rushed to the corner with her son.

“You almost got us killed!” She yelled at Bryce, who still seemed unfazed by the street crossing. “What the hell was so important to kill your mother over?”

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Bryce unclenched his hand to reveal a tar stained penny.

“A penny!” Releasing her rage, she threw her hand toward his, slapping it so forcefully, it sent the penny flying back into the middle of the traffic.

Instantly Bryce began crying.

“Oh, shut up!” she said, pulling him down the long sidewalk. “Your shit-for-brains father should be watching you today – not me.” Faith adjusted the tote bag on her arm and continued to walk toward the city bus stop located halfway down the block, while Bryce kept looking in the street for his lost penny and wiping away tears with his free hand.

Every time Bryce wandered too close to the street; his mother jerked him away from the speeding cars. “When we get to the bench, I want you to sit down and not move a muscle, understand!” Bryce did not respond, though she knew he had heard and would obey, hopefully at least until the bus came.

When they reached the bus stop, she noticed a young man sitting at the far end of the bench, so she ordered Bryce to sit at the opposite end and placed herself between her son and the stranger. The scorching rays of the sun bombarded the three with unrelenting harshness. The temperature had climbed to 103 and sweat rolled off Faith as water in a shower. She bent her head downward, watching drops of water drip from her face to the sidewalk.

Slumped over, still angry, and fighting the need to cry, Faith suddenly sat up and took a deep breath, held it for the silent count of six and slowly let it out. A second deep breath followed and an equal release of hot stale air escaped her body. With it, she tried to force out all her hostility and frustration, yet they stubbornly clung to her.

A third deep breath was interrupted at the midpoint, as she turned to the man next to her. “You do any meditation?” The man hesitantly looked at her. “I was meditating just now – you ever meditated before?”

“No.” his voice flowed out in a low quiet tone.

“Well, I don’t think it works well unless you got your shit together first.”

The man’s only response was a slight smile.

“Somehow I’m supposed to find peace with everything.” She looked down at the bag resting in her lap. “Are you at peace with life?”

The man shrugged his shoulders as he looked at her. “I guess so.”

“Then you’re not.” She answered back. “If you had peace you would know. Right now, you just have a lack of drama.”

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Faith peeked into her tote bag.

“You know I was fired two months ago.” She looked over at the man and back to her bag. “I thought I knew them so well. Thought they liked me. I had friends.” Faith felt a droplet slip down her face that was not sweat. “I really need to be done with the crying.”

Faith reached into her bag and pulled out a silk rose in a vase, smiled and dropped it back. She then pulled out a Disney mouse pad.

“What the hell do I do with this?” She handed the mouse pad to the young man who rolled his blue eyes and pushed away from it. “My ex took the computer.” Seeing the man’s reaction, she withdrew her offer. “Not your cup of tea? Don’t blame you. If I wasn’t stuck with the boy, I’d have something more interesting.” Faith pitched it back in the bag and scanned the remainder of its contents.

“All of this seemed necessary at one time. Now it’s just a burden to lug around.” Faith placed the bag on the sidewalk and looked at Bryce, who was staring at the cars as they passed. “He’s why I was fired. Him and his father.” Faith turned toward the man. She could tell by his strained polite patience he did not want to talk to her, yet she needed to talk.

“I don’t blame my son. I suppose I don’t really blame my boss.” She wiped her forehead with the top of her t-shirt. “I missed a lot of days – I mean a lot of days.” Without turning her head, she pointed with her thumb at Bryce. “When his father left us, I didn’t have the money for childcare. I couldn’t leave him at home alone, he’s only five.”

She moved closer to the man who had now turned to face her. “I moved out here and away from my family for that bastard! I even dropped out of school, how dumb was that?” Faith took a few seconds to think, staring into the air as she looked back on the road that had lead her to this hot summer day. “I had a son I didn’t want, took a boring job, and no offense, but I hate this city!”

The man’s face seemed sympathetic, yet he said nothing.

Faith turned forward, sat up straight and took in another deep breath, letting the heat of her exhale merge with the hot air around her. “Holding on to any of this won’t do me any good.” She grabbed the tote bag and stood up. “It’s time for me to get rid of the past.”

Faith walked a few feet to the big green trash can next to the bench and dropped the bag into it. Both her son and the man watched her intensely. “I don’t need this junk! I don’t need the stupid job and I don’t need the idiot who left me or his son!” Faith turned around and leaned back on the trash can. “I feel better already.” She said smiling. For the first time the man also smiled.

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Noticing his mother was in a better mood; Bryce stood up and ran to her giving her a big hug. Faith responded by hugging him back and widening her smile. "Now that can make any day better."

For a short time, Faith's smile seemed brighter than the day, with mother and son embraced in their first real happy moment of the afternoon. Then Bryce spotted something on the brick building behind the bus stop that made him giggle with glee. Faith followed his gaze and spotted an orange and black butterfly clinging peacefully to a brick that was covered in shade from the shadow of the bus stop sign.

"Will you look at that!" Faith adjusted her posture, by raising her shoulders and back. "What are the chances of seeing something that delicate in this weather?" The young man turned his head and strained to see what they were looking at, yet was unable to focus clearly, so he stood to get a better view.

Bryce pushed off his mother's legs and ran to the butterfly.

"This is a bonafide sign." She beamed. "There's no way it isn't, you know that don't you." The young man said nothing. "What are the odds a butterfly being out in this sun and finding one of the few shaded parts of a wall this close to us?" Faith moved a few steps forward - placing her hands on the top of the bench. "Fate is telling me life is going to be beautiful again," She said with a smile.

The man smiled at her yet took a step back. "Maybe so." He answered.

As his mom talked, Bryce reached his small hand toward the butterfly, unfolding one of his stubby fingers so he could touch it. As soon as Bryce made contact with the butterfly it sprang into the air, its wings cutting through the humidity, moving away from the boy intruder. Bryce moved his uncertain feet in the butterfly's general direction, a smile stretching from one chubby cheek to the other, as he followed his newfound friend around the bus stop.

The young man stopped pretending he was listening to the boy's mother as Bryce moved closer to the edge of the sidewalk in his continuing chase. "Why don't you move away from the cars," he said gently placing a hand on the boy's back steering him back toward the bench.

"He's ok, he knows better than to go into the street." Faith said.

"Didn't seem that way when you two were crossing the street." He replied, as kindly as he could.

Faith felt the heat on her face rise. She was tired of people who obviously didn't have kids judging her. Still, she decided not to let his ignorance affect her.

"He can be a handful, but overall, he's a good kid. He knows what lines not to cross." She assured him.

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“No offense, I never said he wasn’t a good boy, but he is a child and they don’t always react the way we would like. It’s best to keep an eye on them, especially on this road.” The man moved a few steps away from Faith as he spoke.

“Well, a mother can always tell when her son...” Faith’s words stopped as her face turned pale, her eyes darting away from the man and to her son. “Bryce stop!” she yelled, as she stumbled trying to get around the green and rusting bench.

From the corner of his eye, the man could see why fear had enveloped her. The butterfly, weary of the chase, had flown over the road and Bryce was determined to follow.

The gray streak of a car had just rushed by them as Bryce took a tentative step off the curb. He did not look to see if any cars might be coming, his eyes were glued to the butterfly making its way to the other side. As he placed both feet in the roadway and then one step into traffic, a black and silver truck appeared, slamming on its brakes and burning rubber from its tires. The driver recoiled pressing his weight not only on the brake but on the steering wheel with such force that he had imbedded his body deep into the foam of the driver’s seat. All of this would not be enough to stop the truck in time and the driver’s vampire-ish pale face and horrified looking eyes showed he knew this.

The realization that Faith would not be able to get to her son in time reached her just as she cleared the front of the bench. The pain she saw coming made her crumble to the ground as a piercing mournful yell escaped her mouth and seemed to silence every other sound in the city.

Bryce was unaware that the truck was upon him, unaware that fear and shock had embraced the driver, unaware of his mother’s scream, and all were unaware that the stranger shared none of their emotions.

For the young man, all that happened seemed like a silent movie. He could hear no sound, nor did he pay any attention to the driver, mother, or butterfly. His whole attention had been on Bryce and his quick and delicate hands slipped under the boy’s arms pulling him back to safety as the truck skidded to a stop several feet past the spot Bryce had been.

The silent movie continued as the scene around the man and boy continued to roll. Another car behind the truck came to a sudden stop but the two did not connect. The driver bent his head in relief, though his white knuckles refused to release the steering wheel and his foot continued to press the brake to the floorboard. A mother’s tears turned from sorrow to joy and the butterfly settled for a new shaded spot in a flowerpot at a street-side café. The man and boy were detached from the rest. The boy, still unaware of the fate that might have been was temporarily content to rest in the man’s grasp. The man, who had sensed the boy’s destiny and prevented it, could not understand why he did not feel relief.

Then the silent movie ended.

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The sound of Faith's scream had rolled above the tallest buildings while the sounds of the city regained their normal place. Relatively few had taken notice of the tragedy that was not to be. The car that had braked behind the truck honked its horn before moving around it and the driver of the vehicle-of-near-death turned on his hazard lights before exiting on the passenger side.

"Is he ok?" the driver asked, still trembling in fear of what he almost had to live with.

The young man looked down at Bryce, who did not understand why he had been pulled away from the butterfly. "I think so." He said emptily.

"That was damned close." As the driver moved closer, another car skidded to a stop – with its horn blaring then moved around the empty truck. The driver stopped, concerned that a real accident might occur if he kept his truck there. "You need to keep a better eye on your kid." The driver advised as his fear began to subside.

"He's not my kid." The man replied, turning toward Faith and taking Bryce with him. "She's the one who needs to be watching over her child," he said as a tide of angry emotion began rushing over him.

Confusion covered Faith's tear-stained face as the two men talked. How could they be blaming her for what had happened? It was Bryce who disobeyed - Bryce who almost made her life one of misery.

"If he's ok, I better get my truck off the road." the driver said, as another car horn sounded.

Finding her voice, she spoke to the driver, "He's fine." Faith noticed for the first time how hot the sidewalk was on her legs and slowly stood up. "You can go."

The driver had already backed up to the passenger door and quickly climbed in. Her permission gave him relief, yet he felt weak as he slowly disappeared into the traffic.

The young man hesitantly released the child to Faith, his blue eyes clouded with anger, judgment seeping from every pore of his skin. Faith took her child and drew him close. She saw the young man's anger and it fueled her own. She felt his judgment and it deepened her resentment of him, her ex, and everyone who had made her life a burden.

"You have no right to judge me!" Her voice was defiant and rude.

"This is the second time you almost got your son killed." His voice spit out the judgmental laced words.

"You can't blame me for what he did."

"You're the parent, you're supposed to protect him."

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“You’re some stupid ass kid yourself.” Faith yelled. “You have no way of ..”

“I knew enough to keep an eye on him.” the young man interrupted. “Sad that a stranger knows your boy better than his own mother.”

Faith took an angry step toward the man. “You fucking asshole!”

The young man shook his head in mock disbelief.

“Why doesn’t it surprise me that you’re also a bitch!” The two adults each took a step toward one another, eyes locked and tempers aflame.

Bryce, still held by his mom, was more concerned about being free of his restraint than what was going on with them.

A soft hot wind encircled the three, as they stood motionless on the sidewalk. Neither sure of what to do or say next. Behind him, the young man heard a bus coming to a stop and welcomed the chance to turn his head to see if it was his bus. The lighted sign next to the door read; “10 Red River” and he quickly turned his back on the woman and child and moved toward it. As the doors opened, he noticed no one was exiting and that she was not moving toward the bus. He was relieved it was not the bus she needed, and he would not have to share an awkward ride with them.

“Your welcome,” he said allowing his anger to linger in his words.

“What?”

“For saving your kid.” He replied as he quickly boarded the bus.

Faith’s stunned silence lasted for a mere second. “Fuck you!” She raised her hand and pointed her middle finger at him as she followed his movement inside the bus. “You judgmental asshole!” She moved closer to the bus as it pulled away from the curb. “Son-of-a-bitch!”

Bryce attempted to pull away from her grip.

“You little shit, don’t you dare try to get away from me.” Faith’s hand clamped down on her son’s tiny hand.

Bryce’s face tightened as the pain in his hand deepened and despite his best efforts, he vocalized his anguish with a simple yelp, yet his own growing anger would not allow for tears.

“I will spank you so hard you won’t be able to sit down again!” Faith warned as she saw the growing defiance in her son’s face.

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With one quick kick to his mother's shin Bryce freed himself and ran toward the bench. "Get your ass back here!" she yelled as she pursued him.

Bryce's little legs were no match for his mother's, and he was quickly in her grasp again. This time Faith gave no verbal threats, only four quick slaps to his butt and followed that by throwing him on the bench.

"Stay there!" She roared.

Bryce did not cry at being caught. He did not protest the slaps and offered no complaint about being tossed around like a sack of garbage. Like his mother, his eyes were hot with anger and he was determined to do nothing his mother wanted. He would be free, as free as the butterfly.

As soon as Faith had removed her finger from his face, Bryce jumped off the bench only to be quickly caught and again thrown back to his seat and this time his mother's hand landed on the left side of his face. The hot pink handprint became visible almost immediately and Bryce remained where he had landed, yet his anger and determination also remained.

Months of frustration had turned to anger - anger became rage and the rage was now something Faith had never felt before. Sweat poured off of her, her t-shirt was soaked, and she felt weighed down from its heaviness. Everyone in her life had betrayed her, disrespected her or used her, and now her son was making her look bad in front of strangers and draining her of life.

Faith threw back her head, holding in a lava flow of anger. Even with her eyes closed the sun's brightness burned red blotches under her eyelids. Her breathing was shallow and quick. All she wanted to do was strike out at all the people who had placed her in this place; all she wanted was to be free.

Suddenly she threw herself next to Bryce yet could only bear to sit for a few seconds and was quickly back on her feet. The eruption within needed to be released; yet she had no idea how to let it out. Thoughts within her mind sped past faster than the cars on the road in front of her. She could not focus and began to pace. Short steps to her left – then short steps back to Bryce. Her mind could find no relief. Her body screamed with pain: muscles cramping, head throbbing, eyes burning, and skin ablaze. She continued to dart to her left and then her right, constantly looking for another person, another soul to release her anger on, yet no one came.

Bryce stubbornly sat, watching his mother move back and forth. She was distracted, yet still too close. His eyes darted back and forth, as if he were watching a tennis match, waiting for his opportunity. He watched. He waited.

On his mother's sixteenth pass Bryce darted behind her and leaped toward the street. Behind him, came angry curse words directed toward him and he knew she would not be far behind, yet he had almost reached his goal. Across the street, and between the passing cars, he

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could see the butterfly resting under the big green leaves of the potted plant. That is where he would soon be.

Suddenly, as he was ready to step out into the street, a red sports car honked its horn as it moved past. Bryce tried to stop his momentum yet lost his balance and fell forward toward the street and oncoming cars. His body stopped as if frozen in time. A familiar hand was attached to his neck and another held him roughly by the arm. Bryce resisted. He struggled against the solid grip yet stayed frozen.

“Stop it, you stupid kid!” Faith yelled. Her order was ignored as Bryce pushed his leg backward, kicking his mother in the shin. “Shit.” She screamed yet she maintained her hold on him. “You’re as much as a burden as that bag.” She shouted into his ear.

The sound of her words created a sudden peaceful silence around her. Gone were the sounds of the street. Gone was the noise in her head. Gone was her anger.

Noticing his mother’s changing mood Bryce stopped his struggle just as his mother released his neck and he could feel her other hand pushing him forward. A red BMW and Bryce’s forward momentum placed them both in the middle of the street at the same moment. Car and boy merged. Bryce was now as free as the butterfly.