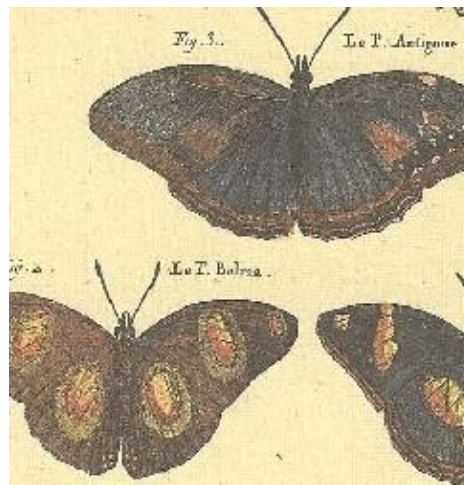


The Butterfly in the Attic

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The short and tragic story of a butterfly in a jar.



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The Butterfly in the Attic

I happened across the butterfly in the final melancholy moments of its life. It was an astonishingly gorgeous Saturday afternoon, and I had been tasked with cleaning out the attic - a chore which I adamantly protested, but got stuck with anyways. My wife insisted that it needed to be done, and despite my dismissive attitude towards the horrendous assignment, I knew she was right. The attic had become a place where no one in the family dared tread. Far from sight and mind, it had been allowed to grow thick with musty boxes of forgotten Christmas and Halloween decorations, as well as countless others filled with old report cards, books there was no longer room for downstairs, and a seemingly endless collection of photos. Amidst all this chaos, in one of the farthest corners, near the only window, was a lone glass jar.

The jar jumped out at me across the dust laden valley of forgotten knick-knacks, its glass surface immaculate despite what I could only assume had been months of stagnation while it waited for discovery. It was the first distraction to materialize, and without hesitation, I found myself wading towards it. The reflection of the daylight obscured it just enough to hide its contents. What could be possibly be lurking inside something discarded in such a remote corner? I hoped for a long forgotten change collection, or maybe some sort of food preserve, but when I finally made it to the jar and gazed inside, what I found there stopped my heart cold in my chest. Nestled still against the bottom lay a butterfly.

Butterflies had always fascinated me, even as a little kid. The impossibility of something that struggles through its early days as a caterpillar, and then cocoons itself away from the world, only to emerge as a flying tapestry and dazzle all of nature with its beauty, captured my interest. Now, that same impossibility lay prisoner in a jar before me, robbed of its life. How had the damn thing gotten there? I would never find out. The logical assumption that it was caught and then forgotten by one of the kids stands as the prime suspect, but short of dusting the jar for prints, I was powerless to accuse them.

I hoisted the jar into the light and carefully looked over the intricate pattern of the stricken insect's wings. Artists spend their whole lives trying to create things so simplistic yet brilliant. This particular butterfly was a masterpiece of blue, adorned with what I assumed to be every different possible shade, perfectly patterned as though painted with the finest tipped brush. Like all butterflies, the wings were symmetrical, though each baring unique imperfections earned over a lifetime of flight. A lifetime cut tragically short.

Not entirely sure what reaction I was expecting, I tapped lightly on the jar's side, and to my surprise, the butterfly moved. That something so small could startle me like it did baffled me. Maybe it was just the sudden rush of adrenaline at seeing something I was so sure was dead suddenly reanimated. Though however faint, some spark of life remained in this tiny sky-goer, which lifted itself onto its overtly frail legs and slowly pulsed its wings up and down, as though testing to make sure it still could.

Like I always had been, I found myself again amazed with the butterfly. How long had this jar sat idle, forgotten in the wasteland of our attic, with its tiny prisoner trapped inside? Butterflies do not have marathon lifespans, and the longer I sat and watched this particular specimen held captive in my own hand, the more and more overwhelmed by it and its plight I became. To be so ill-fated, to be sentenced to be forgotten and slowly waste away, but at the same time to be charged with holding the immutable grace

The Butterfly in the Attic

expected of itself as a member of its species, seemed an unreasonably torturous destiny.Â

Â Â Â Â Â In sudden desperation, I quickly opened the jar and the dusty attic window and offered to the butterfly what it had undoubtedly dreamed of since its imprisonment. But faced now with the blue sky it had reached out towards for so long, it could not draw the strength to fly. I found myself whispering to it, urging it to summon any energy it had within itself and finally be free for whatever time it had left, though I quickly realized that its time left was unfathomably short. The eternity it had spent caged in its transparent jail had left it morose and drained.

Â Â Â Â Â With as gentle a motion as I could manage, I slipped my hand through the mouth of the jar and slowly removed the butterfly. It made no attempt to fight back against what it surely recognized as the same loathsome being that had trapped it in the first place. At that moment, all I wanted - more than anything in the world - was to give that doomed creature enough strength to lift off, though I knew that nothing I could do would help. At the end of my outstretched arm, I offered it the sky, but all it could muster were a few excited sways of its wings. Then, with nothing further, it collapsed in my palm.

Â Â Â Â Â I stood there for the longest time, staring into the entrancing colours of the butterfly's vibrant, worn wings laying flat on my hand. Though still in death, I felt as though I could see them blur with the movements of flight, as one may claim to see the eyes of a painted portrait follow his or her movement from its perch on the wall of an art gallery. After what felt like forever, I set to work at rummaging through the sea of boxes and, after an exhaustive search, unearthed an envelope from an old Christmas card, and tucked the butterfly safely inside. I cleaned the rest of the attic in silence, lost in the oblivion of thought stirred by having watched a life â so innocent and unassuming â disappear in my hands.

Â Â Â Â Â Though I eventually asked the kids whether they had any recollection of any castaway insect, I never explained to them what I had found. I never told the story to my wife either, though she could tell when I finally emerged after a long afternoon of cleaning that something was bothering me, besides the infinite mess. The envelope was tucked away into the corner of the top shelf of our bookcase downstairs.Â

Â Â Â Â Â The next day, I rounded everyone up and, as a family, we visited a local butterfly sanctuary. The impromptu outing baffled all except me, but we had a nice afternoon anyways. We learned about how climate change was hurting the butterflies, and we watched clouds of them drift over our heads. They flew so close that we could have reached out and touched them, but we didn't. After we got home that night, the spontaneity of the trip was quickly forgotten, and no further questions were asked about what had inspired it.Â

Â Â Â Â Â The following Saturday was again beautiful and radiant, with a gentle but persistent breeze that rained cherry blossom petals over our yard as though they were snow. While the rest of the family was out, I reclaimed the envelope from the bookcase and took it out into the back yard, and as gently as I had when it was still alive, I slipped the butterfly out into my hand. I again let myself become lost in the myriad details of its wings. When I was convinced that the breeze was strong enough, I lay my hand flat and held it out towards the afternoon sky. With one swift gust that sent goosebumps up my exposed arm, the butterfly lifted, and one final time, took flight.

The Butterfly in the Attic

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^ ^ ^ ^ ^ I have never believed in the afterlife, but in that moment, watching the butterfly become a distant spot against the rays of the sun, I wondered if maybe it was heading off to again be reborn into the world. Once before, as a caterpillar, it had shut itself away and then become metamorphosed, emerging as a new being. Would this extraordinary ability, to change and continue its existence as something altogether different, again offer it the opportunity to be free, finally escaped from the cocooning confines of our attic?

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Before long, the butterfly had drifted beyond my sight, and I let myself believe that out of the reach of my prying eyes, it again coursed with life. Against the wind, against all logic, it had reclaimed its place in the world. With all of its beauty and elegance and strength, that any jar would be powerless to contain, it was gone into the endless sky, in no particular direction, that the world would one day know it as the hurricane to which it aspired with every desperate flap of its paper-thin wings.

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