

## The Butterfly

Melissa

It was late August and Lizzie had been gone for three months. Her door had been put back up and her furniture remained, but I overheard Mom on the phone saying she was going to sell it. I had gone into Lizzie's room twice since she left. It was quiet, oppressively hot, and felt odd, hostile, and broken. I didn't feel comfortable in there anymore.

I perched on my bedroom windowsill in the old farmhouse which sat on half an acre in what was left of the original swath of some farmland being swallowed into the Chicago exurbs. Soon it would all be wall-to-wall strip malls. I sighed and watched the afternoon fade into dusk and felt the evening breeze rustle through the trees and across my skin, thankful for the reprieve from the sticky August heat.

Lizzie hadn't written or come by. She'd called once or twice but I hadn't talked to her, in part because I was afraid to, in part because I simply didn't know what to say. In a way, I hated my sister—blamed her for the mess the family was in. But now that the family was almost completely separated, with Dad and Lizzie both gone, I couldn't decide if the family had broken or if it had finally been fixed.

My sister had those weird dreams that came true, and stuff happened around her, like you'd hear whispers that seemed to come from nowhere, or she'd know something was about to happen right before it did...a premonition I think it's called. You couldn't really lie around her because she'd somehow know. But the hardest part of being around my sister was that she just couldn't go with

the flow. If she thought something was wrong or unfair she either fought against it or just ignored it and did what she thought was right. Lizzie was a constant source of stress and a huge part of me was glad she was gone.

I wanted a big sister to protect me, to be my friend, someone I was proud of. But instead, I got her. Why did she have to have such a mouth on her? Why did she always have to stand up for everything all the time? It was true, I had stood up to our mother recently—but it was one time and there were no consequences. Our mother was too weak to bring about consequences. If only Lizzie had stayed, if only she'd been quiet. Then we would still be together. Maybe she'd have learned, maybe we could have made it work. Then I wouldn't be alone.

I clenched my fists and shook with rage, as a tear trickled down my left cheek while dozens of emotions whirled together in a soup of sorrow and frustration. Despite the frustration, Lizzie's success in banishing our father made me feel safe in the now still house. I took a quiet satisfaction with our mother having to do the shopping and errands on her own. She also had to cook and clean because I refused to do her job the way Lizzie had.

The dishes had piled higher and higher in the sink and gnats were around them when finally, mom looked straight at me and pointed to the dishes. I went up to my room and locked the door. Mom silently did the dishes, dusted, ran the vacuum, mopped, and scrubbed the bathroom.

Mom had been trying to do more things for me lately and it made me secretly glad that Lizzie was gone. I got new furniture, clothes, and jewelry. What

I didn't get, I learned how to steal. I had a friend who taught me how to get in and out of a store in 20 minutes with no fewer than three outfits and accessories. I'd also managed to get away with a couple of pairs of shoes. Shoes were more difficult to manage. Make-up was pretty easy and so were CDs. But stores were starting to put those magnetic strips on everything now, or magnetize the bar codes or something, and it seemed all of the stores were putting in those detector things by the exits. So, it was getting more and more difficult to get away with it. I figured I'd have to quit sometime soon. It was 1994 and soon every mom and pop would catch up to the latest trends in security.

I felt no guilt about this, though I knew it was a crime. I figured Dad had been right about one thing, you had to watch out for yourself and take what was owed you because nobody was about to give it out freely. How exactly the general public owed me these items I stole, I could not articulate. But it did seem like I had somehow been denied something I should have had, something it was up to me to claim. If I thought more about it more deeply than that, it made my stomach hurt.

Lizzie never would have approved of the stealing. She thought she knew everything. But she didn't. She was just a slut. Lizzie always thought she was better. But since she'd left, I had felt a distinct feeling of superiority, and I enjoyed it.

They'd all got what they deserved. Dave, who I was refusing to call 'Dad', was gone, Mom had to fend for herself, Lizzie was turned out of the house where she had to prove she was as good as she thought she was. Well, mom wasn't

totally on her own. She had a new boyfriend. He bought me things and was nice to me. His name was Jarrod Mason and he was well-off. He had a big house with six bedrooms and a library, and he was remodeling the kitchen the way Mom liked it. I thought maybe he and Mom were moving a little quickly. They were talking about moving in together and they'd only just begun dating, but he seemed to need a family just as much as Mom needed someone to help take care of her. They were old, I guessed, in their mid-forties, and that meant they could do things faster, I supposed.

Jarrold had only heard of Lizzie, and he didn't like her. He felt it was right for Mom to have turned her out. When I heard him say this, I bristled oddly but could not say why. This man did not know Lizzie. He did not know what it was like to live her life or how our father had hated her. This new man didn't really understand how helpless Mom had been, how Lizzie had taken care of things. It wasn't really fair of him to say that about her. But I couldn't really protest to the new man's statements, because after all, I was glad I was finally getting a little bit of the good stuff family life had to offer, and I had a hard time reconciling the fact that it was OK for me to be glad about Lizzie being gone, but mad that he felt the same.

None of my self-satisfied feelings would settle. Instead, they stirred me up, made me nervous, restless, like something was off. I hated that sensation and tried to force it away. All the tangled thoughts about stealing, about Jarrod hating Lizzie, about me hating her and thinking she got what she deserved...those I could live with. But the sense that something was wrong with the way Lizzie was

treated cut straight through everything. If I let it in, if I tried to examine it, it would wash away all the good that had happened since Lizzie left.

I looked out at the afternoon sky and wondered where my sister was and what she was doing. I hoped Lizzie was OK. I had a sneaking suspicion that Mom was lying, that she was not with friends. Since graduating, Lizzie just didn't have that many friends. This made me weep.

I tried to hold it back, but it would not stay in. Whatever all the crazy emotions were, they'd decided to all come out in the form of tears because my sister had few friends. My mind began to race. What if Jerrod left and we ran out of money? Mom's credit cards were already close to the limit and Jarrod was helping pay them off. We planned to move into his house this fall after renovations were completed. What if he left us? We would not qualify to rent a nice house like this one. We only got this one because Dad's income had been included on the application. We would have debt and no good place to stay. I doubted Mom could make it on her own...she didn't know how. We'd have to move away, and Lizzie would have no place to call if she needed us.

I lifted my face and rested the crown of my head against the window casement. I let the tears fall and stopped bothering to wipe my eyes or nose. What was wrong with me? Did I miss my father? Why would I? He had never loved me. Did I want Lizzie to come home? Why would I? With her gone, there was more for me. Was I worried about money? What for? We would soon have a stable house. Not being able to answer any of these questions only made

everything feel heavier. I cried until the sky darkened, dusk settled in, and there was nothing left in me to cry out.

My head hurt and was stuffy. Despite my eyes being closed, I knew evening was coming because the air was cooler. But I did not open them. I wondered how it would all work out. I remembered how Lizzie and I would play together when we were children. Lizzie always knew how to fix stuff when it broke, and I would listen to her ideas and together we'd invented the best games ever. I used to dream that she would make a big glider and use old-fashioned sails from a boat with sixteen sails for the wings. We would fly away on the glider and go live by ourselves. Maybe on an island. We could have a little garden and get water from streams and build a log cabin and make friends with the natives.

The thought made me chuckle. It was so silly, yet a small part of me wondered if an island like that really existed and if we could sail there instead of flying. Would we? Could we? Did I even want that anymore? I had no idea. I felt like I understood nothing, and all I wanted was for everything to be OK, though I wasn't truly sure what that meant anymore.

I prayed quietly, not sure who or what God was, but thinking someone had to be out there. Someone had to have dreamed up this whole strange, sadistic thing called life, and maybe they would listen. Maybe things really did happen for a reason. All I asked was whether Lizzie and I would ever be OK.

The air was filled with sounds of early evening in midsummer. The breeze cooled down more, making it quite pleasant in the windowsill and something tickled my nose.

I opened my eyes and my mouth quickly followed suit. There, perched on the tip of my nose, was the most lovely, delicate, brilliant blue butterfly I had ever seen. Its wings opened and closed, and its tiny feet felt like strands of a spider web blowing across the tip of my nose. Then the butterfly seemed to bend its little knees—if they have knees, I wasn't sure—and jump off the end of my nose. It flew out into the evening. The sun sank deeper and I watched it flutter away.

It was nothing. Just an insect. Just a coincidence. But somehow, it made me smile.