

# Butterflies

## I

She was a typical, North American monarch, enjoying the sunny back roads that she had learned well over her eight long months of adulthood. She spotted a deer across the road, and went to her. She did not make it, though. The windshield of a speeding sport utility vehicle smashed the poor girl to death.

The bulky, goateed anglo-jock in the fitted, backwards ball cap turned on his wipers and scraped her guts off the glass.

“That reminds me,” said his fiancée, “is everything good with the butterfly house?”

“You mean the butterfly release.” He corrected. “Yeah it’s all good.”

“No. I mean the butterfly house, honey.”

“What do you mean by butterfly *house*?” he asked.

“What do you think I mean, Jackson?” Her tone was abrasive.

“I think you mean a butterfly *release*, where we open little boxes and let ‘em out, no?”

“No, Jackson. I mean a butterfly *house*. A house of butterflies.”

“Baby, I’m not sure that people actually do that.” He felt intimidated.

“You’re not sure that people do *butterfly houses*? What does that even mean, Jackson?”

“I just –.”

She interrupted, as she was prone to do. “Look around. Butterfly houses are real. They are real and we need one. That’s, like, our whole theme, Jackson.”

He tried to speak again. “I know, but, like -.”

“No buts! Our whole reception is supposed to be *in* a butterfly house. We talked about this, Jackson.”

“Baby, I just thought you were just – you know – brain storming; fantasizing.”

“*Fantasizing*?” A tiny red light turned on in her brain. She poised to strike.

“Why *fantasize* about something that is real that people do everyday? Why do you think daddy spent twenty grand on those two big tents, Jackson?”

“You know, I just – I just thought it was – it was where you wanted to have the reception.” His thought process was failing.

“It was where I wanted to have the reception? In a tent? You think daddy paid twenty thousand dollars just so I could have a reception in an enclosed tent on a yard?”

Jackson tried to defend his blindness to her wishes. “Baby, I just -.”

She interrupted again. “The answer is ‘no,’ Jackson. He did not pay twenty thousand dollars so we could have our reception in a tent. He paid twenty thousand dollars so we could have our reception in a *butterfly house*.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll call the butterfly people tomorrow and change the order.”

Jackson arrived to work thirty minutes early and attempted to call them, but of course, a butterfly company has no reason to be open that early. Their answering message stated that they opened at noon so he napped at his desk for a while and clocked in at eight o’clock. He sat in his cubicle, making calls and filing papers with some

autopilot of second sight. The front of his mind, however, was strictly anxious to seek resolution for his fiancée's expectations. At noon, he broke for lunch and immediately attempted his call again. He reached their answering message once more. He sat the phone down, closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. Releasing it out slowly, he watched the clock for two minutes and then dialed again.

A connection was made and a man spoke. "Butterfly Supply, this is Roy."

Jackson trusted his southern drawl immediately. He could tell that Roy was a good ol' boy, like himself. "Hi there, Roy. This is Jackson Mills. I have an order in with ya'll for a release box and a dozen butterflies."

"Mills...Mills..." spoke Roy as he flipped through a large appointment calendar on the cluttered desk in front of him. "When's the wedding?"

"It's this Sunday."

"Oh. Yep. There you are. Your order is scheduled to be sent out for overnight delivery on Friday afternoon," reminded Roy. "You'll get 'em on Saturday."

"Well it looks like I'm needin' to change my order."

"Okay. No problem. You want to add another dozen?"

"Probably," spoke Jackson. "Do you all do butterfly houses?"

"I'm not really sure what you mean," said Roy. "We've provided a few different species to butterfly houses at a couple botanical gardens, but we don't set up any kind of thing like that ourselves."

"We have a big, square, enclosed tent already rented. We just need someone to fill it up."

Roy tapped his fat index finger against the date in his schedule book. "Well, you're current order is a dozen monarchs. How many more do you think you might need?"

"Um." Jackson knew they were working with two tents that were each thirty feet by one hundred feet. When erected side-by-side for greater space, this would make their total dimensions sixty feet by one hundred feet. That meant the area was going to total six thousand square feet. He guessed a height in the tent of about ten feet, but rounded down to eight just to keep his estimates conservative. This made his total density forty-eight thousand cubed feet. With no particular logic behind it, he arbitrarily figured he should inquire about one butterfly for every five cubed feet. "Could you do ninety-six hundred?" he asked.

"Ninety-six hundred?" repeated Roy. "By Saturday?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry for the short notice. It was a misunderstanding."

"I presume you mean ninety-six hundred individual butterflies, right? Not ninety-six hundred dozen?"

"That's right."

"Boy, that's still a tall order to fill and a short time to fill it in," said Roy. "We definitely couldn't do all monarchs. You'd have to settle for a mixed variety if we could do anything close to those kinds of numbers."

"Oh, that's fine," said Jackson, "Whatever you could do anywhere near that would be really appreciated. My wife – she's a bit of a hard ass and I really dropped the ball on this one. I'm just trying not to spend my honeymoon in the doghouse."

“I feel ya on that, buddy.” Roy considered his own failed marriage and felt truly sympathetic. “I’ll tell you what. Let me get your number and I’ll talk to my partner, see what we can do, and I’ll call you right back. That alright?”

“That sounds good.”

Roy’s partner was his younger brother, Henry. They inherited their company from their deceased mother three years prior. Both men were plump and middle aged, with mustaches. Henry was grayer, though, and wore glasses. He had been standing at Roy’s desk, listening to the call and fidgeting with a calculator. “Ninety-six hundred is eight hundred dozen,” he figured. “That would be forty-eight thousand dollars at full price.”

“We couldn’t charge the guy that much,” insisted Roy. “We would have to give him a considerable break in the price for ordering such a large quantity.”

“Well of course, but I’m just sayin’ that we have a lot of room to work with on that number,” said Henry. “Remember he’s at our mercy, especially considering that he wants all these by Sunday.”

“Yeah, but whose mercy will *we* have to deal with in order to get that many butterflies that quick, ourselves? I mean, even if we gave him every butterfly we have in stock, we wouldn’t even come close to that number – even if we gave him the ones that have already been reserved for other customers.”

“I understand what you’re saying. We have to outsource. But that means we can also drop ship, too, though.”

“That’s true.” Suddenly it didn’t feel so heavy to Roy and the answer came to both men at once: Lala Okeke.

“Alright. You should call him,” posited Roy.

“What the hell? Why me?”

“He loves you. You know that. You can get us the better deal.”

Henry felt awkward. “Well he ain’t my type. That boy is a little too celebratory for me.”

“Oh get over it, Henry. He may give you a hard time, but he will definitely give you the better price. You know that.” Roy was correct. “If you feel weird about it, then just consider it the cost of doing business.”

“Goddamnit, I new I should have moved out west after school. Gimmie the goddamned phone.” When it came down to money is when anything became black and white to Henry.

“Happy day!” spoke Lala when the call connected.

Henry rolled his eyes. “Hello, Lala? This is Henry over at Butt-.” Interrupted.

“Oh Henry! How are you?” Lala stretched out nearly all of his long vowel sounds. “It has been so long, my friend. So long.”

“Yeah. Well look.” Henry got right down to it. “Any way you can do eight hundred dozen to the states by Saturday evening?”

Lala laughed. “That is a crazy amount, o’ Henry! You tell me early and it’s no problem, but this is very late, man.”

“What can you do then?” asked Henry.

Lala took a deep breath. “I will try for five hundred.”

“Five hundred dozen?”

“Yes. Six thousand butterflies, only for you, Henry. It is a lot you are taking. I cannot guarantee the species or age. You understand?”

“Of course. How much?”

Lala took pause to scratch out some numbers on a small notepad. His final price was fifteen thousand dollars, shipping cost and all. “Only for you, Henry.”

Yet Henry still asked, “Could you go lower for me? Maybe thirteen?” The way he spoke sounded unintentionally flirtatious, which was the real reason he pretended he did not like speaking to Lala. It was not Lala’s boisterous, effeminate nature that he despised, but his own inability to hide his own latent homosexuality when he engaged with that nature. Lala had really ever only loved him out of pity, in fact, the way one may love a wounded deer, dying on the side of the road.

“I am so sorry, dear Henry, but I can go no lower than fifteen. It is my floor, my friend, and there will be much work for me to do.” Lala was not a person who could easily be taken advantage of, but his force field was a very polite one. “Even the post is quite a drive and the postman does not come every day. You understand.”

Fifteen was more than fair and Henry felt a sense of guilt to have even tried to talk Lala down on the price. “Okay. Fifteen it is. I’ll have to confirm it with our client and then get back to you on the payment and shipping address. Mind if I call you right back?”

Lala laughed. “You’re going to have to, aren’t you?”

“Right.” Henry disconnected the call feeling far beneath Lala. He handed the phone back to Roy. “Lala can do six thousand - that’s five hundred dozen - for fifteen.”

“That’s great,” said Roy. “What should we sell ‘em to this Mills guy for? Twenty?”

“Twenty-five,” stabbed Henry.

Roy whistled. “That is quite a killing from one simple drop ship. If he goes for it, of course.”

Roy called Jackson back. He went for it.

## II

The facility was housed down island on the edge of the Ifaty Forest, northeast of Tsifota. Set back from the road, it appeared to be a boring, beige, blocky building surrounded by a chain link fence crested with razor wire. Beyond the sterile exterior, however, stood a compound of actually four separate buildings surrounding a large, glass atrium in the middle. The back of the property consisted of nearly a dozen acres of undeveloped fields, heartily coated by milkweed and wildflower.

The property was paid for in full by a joint effort between the governments of Burundi and the United States. It was granted to Lala as diplomatic reparation of sorts. His sister had been a political activist turned cabinet member for Melchior Ndadaye, the first democratically elected leader of Burundi. She was also among those murdered with him; by officials within their nation's own military ranks; which opened the door to a decade of genocide and civil war.

Lala took custody of his niece, Mahera. This was natural, as he had already assisted with her upbringing through most of the previous year, after her father (a Tutsi) was shot in the street for loving her mother (a Hutu). With assistance from his sister's political ties, they were able to flee to America as refugees. It was there where Lala learned both English and capitalism. Only a handful of months after arriving, he was working steady cash jobs and able to afford a modest but decent apartment in Bethesda, Maryland for he and Mahera. They remained in the United States until the war in Burundi was just beginning to wrap up. By that time, he had made several connections within the American government and media. They not only kept up with him as a political refugee, but also genuinely appreciated him for his straight-shooting communication and hard-working nature. And so when Burundi finally extended to him a compensation for the loss of his sister, America was convinced to match this funding with very little persuasion. In some large part, the outpour of money came down to the fact that Lala had never applied for a green card and, though he should have otherwise faced deportation much earlier, none of his constituents in the US government wanted to send him away in such harsh fashion.

A large cash amount was initially offered, with the stipulation that Lala resettle back in Burundi and assist the new government with peacekeeping efforts. This was another positive attribute in the eyes of the Americans that lobbied for him. He would not just leave the United States with dignity, but would also be quelling aggression on the African continent – a place that President George W. Bush staunchly wished to assist as some personal atonement for the quagmire that his administration had been making of the Middle East. And so Lala's deal was casually earmarked deep inside the text of a larger bill written to fight the AIDS epidemic there.

Lala collected five hundred thousand dollars and moved he and Mahera back to Burundi. His stint with the government was to last five years. Once completed, he was to receive another five hundred thousand, and retire. However, after only two years into the term, his position was no longer needed and so his relationship to the deal had become gray. After another relatively simple, honest, discussion between the three parties, it was agreed that, instead of a prorated payout for his time, he would take the property in Madagascar. It was, after all, a former scientific facility that had not been

occupied or funded since the late 1980s, something that the Americans were happy to remove from their asset ledger.

The atrium was the only structure on the property that was constructed after the relocation. Lala and Mahera would eat breakfast every morning there, among a variety of fluttering butterflies, a fishpond and natural light. On this morning, over fresh fruit and chocolate pudding, Mahera was informed that her lessons for the day would be cancelled, and instead she would engage in some hands-on training. "I have a very large order to fill," informed Lala, "Six thousand of our little friends!"

"Six thousand!" repeated Mahera.

"I know – and by Saturday, also! Crazy order, but not impossible, and a good bit of money, too. But I will need your help, my dear Mahera."

"Anything, Uncle Lala."

"It is a job that I know you love already."

"Catching?"

"Yes! It is all catching! So when we are done with our meal, I will need you to sweep all that you can today. There is no limit to how many we need. There is no limit to the type."

"I can't wait!" she squealed.

And so the two completed their breakfast and went about their respective duties for the day. Mahera began a slow walk out into the fields, armed with a pistol (for aggressive wild animals she may encounter), headphones (accompanied by American pop music), a net, and a large, ventilated, plastic receptacle – this with a spring-loaded trap door on the top. As she traversed the landscape, she collected loitering butterflies with nearly every yard. At times, she would acquire three or four with a single swoop of her net. A variety of sizes and colors, all were ushered through the small trap door and into their plastic cell. She kept this up for hours.

Lala, in the meantime, took inventory of his massive collection, organized by species into large, decorated, glass tanks. He attempted to figure how many he could spare from each type while minimizing the gap in reproduction that would be caused in doing so. He settled at three thousand for the moment, separating them out and mixing the species into two, large, central tanks – these plastic. This cut his inventory down by slightly more than one third.

Once his selection of three thousand was secured, he walked out into the field to assist with further catching. Eventually, he and Mahera found each other there, worked within one another's orbit for a couple more hours, and then carried their keep back into Lala's laboratory. To count each butterfly as it was added to the larger mix was no simple or perfect task, but Lala had managed to top out just short of around three hundred of them. Mahera had accumulated well over a staggering eighteen hundred, replacing her container with an empty one, half way through the day.

As they transferred and tallied, a particular butterfly caught Lala's eye. It was bestowed with rich, almost navy, blue wings, each adorned by small, orange polka dots. "Do you know what this one is called?" he asked as he lightly tapped the glass.

"Yes. That is the Rune...something," replied Mahera. She stopped thinking and cleared her mind. It came to her quickly. "It is called the Rune Emperor."

"Yes, it is," affirmed Lala. "It is called the Rune Emperor. Very good, my dear!" He continued. "This is a very special butterfly, you see. Her species is undergoing an

evolutionary mutation at this very moment. You see, some of them are born with blood that is toxic to their predators. These orange spots on their wings are a darker shade than the ones who do not have the poison blood. The toxic ones carry more of a *burnt* orange. If a bird or rodent eats these types, then that animal will become very sick. So the birds and rodents, they learn. They know to stay away from the darker color of orange. But now the lighter colored Emperors – the ones with blood that does no harm – they are dying more rapidly. They have no defense. In only a few more generations, only the darker Rune Emperors will remain and they will be so much stronger than their ancestors.”

Mahera smiled. “They are a very beautiful species. The colors compliment each other well.”

“To me, their evolution is evidence of God.” Lala returned the smile and then to the business at hand. “We still need nine hundred more specimens for the order. Tomorrow after breakfast we will work together to collect them. How about that?”

Mahera nodded in agreement.

“With luck, we can get the rest collected in the morning, quick enough to get to the post before the sun goes down.”

### III

Slightly more than six thousand butterflies arrived just hours before the ceremony, packed together in a set of four breathable, plastic bins. They had been stowed away with some tables and chairs on the back of Jackson's truck since only a few hours after their delivery early Saturday evening. Now they sat awkwardly stacked in front of the wedding party's table, awaiting their proper designation.

Jackson was supposed to have been assembling his tuxedo and preparing himself mentally for the giant leap he was about to take. Yet there he stood, half dressed and pressured to take care of business. "I don't have time to deal with this right now," he conveyed to his brother, Reagan. "Do you think you all can get these butterflies in the tent for the reception?"

"Absolutely," affirmed Reagan without a second thought. "Don't even worry about it."

Donnie, a lower groomsman, was a bit more cautious of the duty. "How do we do this, though? Just dump 'em out on the dancefloor?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Jackson. "I imagine they'll fly out when you open the lids. Right? I guess just let them go where they want to go, so long as they are in the tent. I mean...right?"

Reagan could feel his brother's stress. "Go relax as best you can. Do what you have to do, and Donnie and I will take care of the butterflies," he ensured. "We'll have them all in the tent and ready to go before the ceremony. Don't worry about that."

"Thank you so much, brother." Jackson gave them each a quick hug and then sprinted back to the staging area.

Reagan and Donnie carried the bins on to the dance floor. "Should we just open them all up here?" asked Donnie.

"Probably not. Why don't you take two bins over to the other side? That way we can get an even density."

Donnie carried his to the far end of the tent and sat them on an empty table there. Without fanfare or a countdown, the men dropped the plastic latches and lifted their respective lids. Both men jerked back a bit, as though expecting the butterflies to come flocking out at once and swarm their faces like bats. This was not the case. In fact, only a tiny smattering of the little creatures actually emerged on their own.

"How do we get them all out of the box?" Donnie hollered.

Reagan stared intently into the colorful cube. After a brief contemplation, he lifted it into the air with both hands, and spun it in his palms so that the open side faced down. Donnie did the same and they stood across from one another, shaking their bins and tapping the bottoms. The result of both actions was, indeed, a departed conglomeration of the arthropods. Some remained suspended in the air, curious, startled, or perhaps looking for a fight to avenge their displacement. Others navigated themselves to the first perch that they could find, saving their energy and observing their new surroundings. Several others, still, simply dropped out like leaves and lay dead or dying on the floor. The anti-climatic nature of the release led each man to shrug at the other before repeating his dump for the remaining bins.

“Looks like we have a couple piles of casualties here.” Reagan mentioned the obvious.

“Should we sweep ‘em into the trash?” asked Donnie.

“I’m not sure. This is Emmie’s deal and I wouldn’t want to be on her bad side if we do the wrong thing.”

“Right.”

“Lemme see if I can figure it out.”

Reagan exited the tent and walked across the yard into the large stone building where the nuptials were to be traded. He stepped to the bride’s dressing room and tapped lightly. Sandra, one of the bridesmaids, cracked the door just enough to expose her face. There was a bit of back-and-forth between them, with occasional pauses so that she could consult with Emmie – the bride – on the matter at hand. Her final instructions were not to sweep the dead butterflies into the garbage, but to spread them out across the floor as though they were decorative rose petals, intentionally placed for the guests to walk upon. Not one butterfly was to be wasted. Not at that price.

Reagan grabbed two brooms from the custodial closet and darted back across the lawn to the tent. He gave one to Donnie and the men began spreading the grounded butterflies out across the plastic, foldout floor. Per the request of the bride, they strived for even coverage across the area. Hence, they were the first to actually step *on* the butterflies as they worked.

Second to crush the butterflies underfoot were the caterers. The two robust women were, in fact, quite apprehensive about entering the tent. Reagan assured them that the butterflies on the ground were all dead. Their hands were full so they ultimately did not wish to question him. They did, however, rely on him to scrape an abundant lot of the butterflies off one of the tables so they could sit their food dishes there. Surely they noticed a few living ones still falling to the floor with this action, but by that time were somewhat accustomed to walking on the tiny bodies and so continued to carry in the rest of the food. Each time a new load was brought in to the tent, Donnie and Reagan had to push butterflies off of the table space for it. They remained there longer than intended for this purpose only. Once the caterers had situated all of their covered dishes and assortments of drink, their hands were free to fend off butterflies, themselves, and the groomsmen ran back to the staging area.

The wedding ceremony, itself, was ironically devoid of all butterfly iconography. Apparently, Emmie had wanted the butterfly reception to be a surprise and a climax to the evening. Trading the vows, as far as she was concerned, was not much different than signing the marriage license at the courthouse. The minister, to her, may as well have been a county clerk. The real meat of the event, as with any wedding she could fathom, was going to be the reception.

As the guests trickled out across the yard, the caterers removed the covers from their dishes. It did not take long for butterflies to begin settling on the food. The women tried to shoo them away, but they were an abundant, stubborn and confused lot who would only flutter up from one meal to drift down upon another. The caterers had no choice but to end their futile attempts and agree between themselves that the butterflies were not their responsibility.

Sharon Shipley, a co-worker of Emmie's, was among the first people to enter the tent. She stopped in the doorway, her husband and son behind her. "Oh my. Are the butterflies on the floor real?" she asked, hoping they were not.

"You know, I am not really sure," lied one of the caterers. "But it's okay to walk on them. You're supposed to."

Sharon stepped lightly into the room, doing her best to tip toe around the little bodies. Her husband and son tromped through with much less regard, but equal surprise. Each other guest that entered was also visibly taken aback by the carnage, and each handled it in his or her own way, evolving each step along that spectrum between great care and total indifference.

Several guests had to clear their seats of butterflies before sitting. There were an unfortunate few who did not think to look first at their chairs and whose trousers and skirts collected new color as they ground wings, blood and tiny limbs into their ass cheeks. Some swept their tabletops before sitting, and others refrained from disturbing the creatures so that they could be more closely observed. Still, all stood and applauded the arrival of the wedding party. A good deal more butterflies were smashed unknowingly when seats were taken again. One man, Jackson's mustachioed uncle, even pounded one into the tablecloth with his fist, amid the ovation.

As the line formed for food, everyone remained rather casual about dining around the butterflies. Though some flatly refused to eat, most scooped out their portions from around them, usually startling them into flight. None of the guests had ever thought to view a butterfly as a filthy animal, and so very few of them minded much for their food to be touched by one. For them to see a butterfly hoist its body up and down was not considered startling or grotesque. They uniformly presumed that flapping of such colorful wings could only be majestic and beautiful. This species blindness, however, meant that the guests were unaware that some butterflies had laid their eggs in the salads. Others actually copulated there, and in other dishes as well. These were, however, the minority of the butterflies that had taken up ground on the food. The majority, though, had at least urinated and defecated there – a few vomited and died there as well. The guests kept eating.

The best man made a speech that everyone laughed at, though "comical" would be too strong a description. Most of it was sentimental pap that bordered on insult. The high point came in the parts that he did not write while stoned and drunk the night before. The high point came as he joked improvisationally about the copious amount of butterflies around them and, in particular, on the floor. "You know what they say," he quipped. "If you want to make an omelet, you've gotta break some eggs!" The sound of laughter encouraged him to go forward with his next "zinger," starting with a cringe worthy and stereotypical comedic catch phrase: "But seriously, though..." He proceeded, "The ones on the ground that are still moving – they're sick! Terminally sick! So when you squash them, just know that you're doing them a favor by putting them out of their misery!" More laughter. "No offense to you, Uncle Bob!" he shouted, perhaps trying to make a genuine apology for the joke. Seated in his wheelchair in the back of the room, breathing heavily through a plastic mask that was hooked to an oxygen tank, Uncle Bob never heard a word of it anyway. Everyone else laughed heartily.

The wine flowed and the evening moved on a little more smoothly after that. Emmie had her romantic bride's dance among an assortment of butterflies, sweeping them up in the train of her dress, just as she had planned. She then danced with her father, and Jackson with his mother. She threw the bouquet over her shoulder and it was caught by her little sister's bitch friend, whose name she didn't even know. They skipped the garter toss because it offended their Christian values. They danced to Michael Jackson and Color Me Badd, "The Macarena," and then they cut the cake.

By most whispered accounts, the cake was a tacky, horrid thing; four tiers, with navy blue icing, trimmed and decorated in burnt orange. Atop the grotesque mass were the tiny bride and groom figurines, each wearing little football helmets that brandished their college letters, *A* and *U*. Though Emmie came up with the design herself, she thought of it as her single wedding concession to Jackson, though still ultimately symbolic of their relationship. For it was there at their mutual alma mater, dressed in those school colors, that they found each other. They met at a Tigers home game and followed their team all the way to a bowl victory against the Cavaliers that season. It was concreted into Emmie's memory banks as a time she considered to be magic and, though she knew the cake would raise mixed opinions, it did not bother her. Any other criticism surely would have set her on edge, but the cake was the one aspect of the event that she considered to be for she and Jackson alone - everyone else aside. It was the one visual element that roused authentic nostalgia and sadness in her and so she was excited to destroy and devour it.

The bride and groom cleared some butterflies off the large bottom tier and, together, dropped the knife on to the open space. They made a second cut and then extracted the piece. He served a bite to her. She served a bite to him and smashed it into his face. Everyone laughed as though surprised. More butterflies were removed and the caterers took over the cutting.

There was one butterfly that was overlooked, however. The Rune Emperor sat spread across the soft icing surface, sucking up sugar and, otherwise, minding his own business. He saw the other butterflies face ejection from the cake by the predator caterers. Yet finding himself in such a rare moment that his colors blended so well with his surroundings, he knew he was best to stay calmly in place until the threat had passed. By some strange fate of this stillness, the caterer cut around and not through him. He remained right there, on a little cake triangle atop a paper plate, continuing to feast as he was passed from human hand to human hand. At last he and his vehicle were lowered back down to a new table top, placed directly in front of Sharon Shipley's son.

Both overwhelmed and bored as any six year old would be at his mother's officemate's wedding, the child paid no mind to details of dessert as he plunged his fork into the cake. The motion was quick so that the Rune Emperor first endured the brunt of the stabbing. His wings were pierced and his body bent and pinned down into the mass. With an exaggerated upward motion, the child lifted the full content of the fork up into the air, and then down into his mouth. The sweetness of the cake completely obscured the bland taste of the Emperor, who was mangled in the little boy's mouth and damned to the pits of his stomach.

Some guests exited directly after the cake. A few others took to the dance floor with the bride and groom. Most people just lingered and conversed. Such casual arrest prompted the DJ to encourage more dancers with a charismatic, amplified plea spoken

over the beginning of “The Electric Slide.” It worked, and the floor filled to near capacity.

Not everyone knew every step of “The Electric Slide,” and so there was a bit of drunken collision at times, but nothing terminal. Sharon Shipley’s son knew the dance very well for his age and was quite emphatic about his own presentation. He knew the adults were watching him and fully grasped the moment to shine. It was easy to garner attention from adults by being a *cute* child, but a *charming* child earned their actual respect. So he used the opportunity to do what the adults were doing, and made certain that he was doing it better. He kept dancing into the next song and, as he had planned, an adult complimented him.

Emmie, the bride herself, leaned down to him. “I really like your moves,” she said. “Who taught you how to dance like that?”

“Television” was the correct answer, but this was a grown woman he was speaking to, and so he replied, “I just practice a lot.”

Emmie threw her head back in a hearty, fake laugh. (She didn’t actually even hear what he said.) “Do you want to dance with me?” she asked, extending her hand.

The little boy smiled. “Okay.” Both he and Emmie had already been dancing, even as they spoke. The difference now was that he was holding her hands as they moved.

She lifted him from the floor and spun three circles with him. He began to feel a bit queasy, though not from the motion. He felt queasy because the blood of the Rune Emperor was mixing with his own. He felt very warm and removed his sports coat and tie as he danced, tossing them against the wall. The nausea came in greater and greater waves, but Emmie looked so beautiful that he could not bring himself to stop the interaction. His stomach sloshed the Emperor’s broken body back and forth – back and forth with stomach acid and soggy cake. Yet he kept dancing, agitating himself; becoming warmer and sicker. His plan was to maintain his composure to the end of the song, kiss the bride once on the cheek, then walk casually to the men’s room and take care of business. Unfortunately, business came first and suddenly. The boy, at once, defecated in his pants and spewed blue vomit across the front of the bride’s dress. His chance for a kiss was ruined.

“What the fuck?” she first asked, immediately apologizing and then following up with, “Are you okay, sweetie?”

He opened his mouth to say “no” but discharged once again instead. He tried to veer it away from her dress this time, but still sprayed the train when she turned away. She wailed incomprehensibly and fled the dance floor to the far side of the nearest table.

Sharon and her husband ran to their son’s aid. The boy continued to vomit and defecate. His parents could not engage him in any way, as the fluids flowed with very little hiatus – regurgitated food to bile to blood. Sharon looked at her husband. “What do we do? What are we supposed to do?”

“Get him out of here!” screamed Emmie through black mascara tears. “Get him the *fuck* out of here!”

## IV

The bride and groom each took two weeks of leave from work. The first week and two days were spent on their honeymoon in Orlando, Florida. They used the remaining time to recuperate and enjoy domesticating together in the home they had already shared for the past two years. It was one such blissful, quiet evening that they sat at the kitchen table together, preparing thank you cards for the wedding guests. They each signed every one, but Jackson alone addressed them. Emmie took her attention, instead, to their freezer, from which she removed a bloated, plastic shopping bag.

Inside the bag was a mass grave - a variety of stiff, butterfly corpses. It was all that she could drunkenly gather for herself at the end of the reception. Her plan then, just as it was at the kitchen table, was to preserve as many as she could in photo albums, entombed between laminate paper and thick card stock. It was on her agenda. She had already purchased the albums, even - but it would have to wait. At the moment, they were working on the cards for the wedding guests. The reason for bringing the butterfly bag to the table was strictly for the sake of personalizing one particular card for one particular pair of constituents.

This card was different from the others. It was larger, with nothing but a print of painted flowers on the front. The colors were in earth tones, which was an intentional choice on Emmie's part. She wanted to embellish the card with a butterfly, but did not want to sacrifice one with wings especially bright or bold. She dumped a small pile of the lifeless bodies on to the table and sifted through them. Some of them were in bad shape, but had really magnificent colors - something she would have to make decisions about later. For now she needed something in gray or brown, preferably in between - to match the card, of course. "And gray and brown are kind of more boy colors anyway, right?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," started Jackson.

"I mean, loud colors don't really go with boys," she interrupted. "Camouflage is more for boys. Like army guys, right?"

"Sure."

Finally Emmie came across a butterfly that she found to be dull enough to exclude from her personal collection. It was a dusty color and possibly just a large moth. She spread its body out in the upper right hand corner of the card and stapled it there, one in each wing, and one around its thorax.

Inside the card was blank. Emmie had intended to pour her heart out there, but could not help but keep her words concise. "We are so sorry for your loss," she wrote and then read aloud to Jackson. "Forgive us for missing the funeral while we were on our honeymoon. It had been booked many months in advance. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to help in this time of grief. God bless you."

"It's simple. Sounds good," affirmed Jackson.

"Then I drew some Xs and Os and signed both our names," explained Emmie.

"I could have wrote my own name, baby. I signed all these other cards."

"Too late now," she smiled after licking the red envelope and sealing the card inside. She then slid it across the table to Jackson so he could address it to its intended recipients: Sharon Shipley and her husband.