

Butterfly House

When I was just a little girl I saw a small black creature like a tiny worm, and saved it from a greedy jay who wanted it for lunch.

I carried it inside, safe on its wide green leaf. My grandpa said it was a larva and soon would be a butterfly.

We laid the larva carefully on thistle leaves inside an empty jar, put in a twig for it to climb -- then made a lid of soft white paper all stuck around with glue. My grandpa knew exactly what to do. "I raised a butterfly myself," he said, "when I was just your age."

How strange to think my grandpa once was young like me. "We would have been best friends if I'd been there back then," I said. My grandpa smiled. "It worked out anyhow. We're best friends now."

Up in his room we found a box. I cut a window in its side, then covered it with screen. Soon I could look inside and see my larva looking back at me.

What would she see? A human face so big and scary, strange and starey? What would she think?

"I want it pretty till she goes," I said. And so Grandpa and I drew flowers on colored paper. Cone flowers, purple-blue, and marigolds, lantana, bright as flame, and thistles, too.

We wedged a garden twig inside the box for her to walk on, so her wings could dry once she became a butterfly.

My grandpa knows the flowers butterflies like best. The ones where they can rest and drink the sweet, clear nectar.

We glued the painted flowers inside the box so it was bright with color. Made a sky above the lid all blue with small white cotton clouds, and green with tops of trees that seemed to sway in soundless air.

I made a curve of rainbow like a hug to keep her safe while she was there. We set the jar inside and closed the painted lid. Through the screened window I could see the garden house. A place of flowers and space and waiting stillness.

Each day I put out leaves for food and watched my larva change.

My Grandpa knew when it was time to gently pull away the paper top she hung from. I taped it to the wall inside her house and let her be. She would hang free inside the chrysalis that kept her hidden from the world.

Inside that magic place she grew, transformed herself, came out, drooped, limp and slack, with crumpled wings. She was a butterfly, all spotted, orange, black, and brown as if someone had shaken paints and let the drops fall down.

"Our Painted Lady," Grandpa said. "It's time." He meant that it was time for her to leave for her new life. I swallowed tears. From the beginning I had known today would come. Now it was here. My grandpa took my hand. "Cry if you like," he said. "We understand."

We carried out the box and raised the lid. I watched her falter as she felt the first warm touch of sun, saw trees, felt breezes brush across her wings. She rose, then rested on the fig tree branch. I saw her fly.

"Good-bye."

So many years have passed.

I am as old as Grandpa was that spring when I was young. I live in the house that once was his.

The garden glows with cone flowers, purple-blue, and marigolds, lantana, bright as flame. And thistles, too.

Now every spring the Painted Ladies come. They float and drift like blossoms. When I walk they flutter by to kiss me with a painted wing. Sometimes they cling as though I am a flower myself.

My neighbors cannot understand. "Our flowers are the same as yours," they say each time they visit me. "We even planted thistles to invite the butterflies, but they don't come. They fill your air like autumn leaves although it isn't fall. It's such a mystery."

I smile. It's not a mystery at all.

I think my Painted Ladies talk among themselves of how their great-great-grandma, too far back to say, was saved from being eaten by a jay.

"This young girl made a house for her," they whisper as they fly. "A painted garden in a box, so she'd see beauty as she hung in that half sleep that we've all known."

"This is the girl, but older now. We visit her each spring to give her back the love she gave to us so long ago."

It's not a mystery to me. I think I know.