

The Butterfly Effect

The Butterfly Effect, n. the phenomenon in which a minute change in a complex system can have a significant impact on the system as a whole. Ex. The death of a single butterfly could reshape the course of history and lead to catastrophe.

Dead silence. A cough. A whisper. The dull *thump, thump, thump* of a middle-aged monster climbing the stairs to the icy attic. A muffled scream. *If you scream, they will find you.*

Silence.

Opossum tucked her knees up to her chin as she fell silently to the rotten floor. She knew not to respond. She knew not to fight. Not anymore. Her hollow eyes—once a vibrant blue, now scarred with yellow jags—stare down at the floor and avoid the monster. She dared not look at it in case it punished her. It hated her.

Do you want to be found, little opossum? The sonorous voice came from the walls, the floor, the tiny skylight above her chair, but she knew it was the monster talking to her. It was the only voice that ever spoke to her. Opossum shook her head. A long time ago, she would have cried, but she had no more tears inside of her to come out. The moisture pooled in her scars and sunk back into her body where it consumed her.

The monster hated her, yet it loved her more than the world did. The monster told her so. They burned witches like her at the gallows and cut out their eyes to hang as trophies. The monster told her so. The monster hated her; it kept her safe.

Opossum stayed curled on the dead wood floor until the sound of the lock told her the monster had left her and then another hour in case it came back. When she rose, her unstable ankles wobbled under her weight. From her emaciated arms, the warm hands of a bright young woman reached for the wall to support herself. When she fell, she dared not yelp and attract more attention to herself. Now crawling across the floor, Opossum could feel every rusted nail and soggy patch of mold she crossed. Her bare feet had long lost their sense of feeling, but her hands knew everything they touched. Once again, she pulled herself to her feet, where the dread of the attic was no longer in the forefront of her mind. Unlike the floor, the walls were clean and warm, covered in rich lacquer and free from dust. The feel of the smooth wood beneath her fingers calmed Opossum while she paced across the attic. She had learned to walk dragging her hands across a wall very similar to this one. Nearly identical. But it was so long ago she couldn't remember how similar they actually were. It was so long ago she couldn't remember any life outside the monster's attic. Opossum shivered.

A shadow passed over the only light in her tiny apartment, casting darkness across much of the room lit by the window in the ceiling. Casting herself away from the wall, the girl ventured into the remaining light and peered into the blinding blueness of the sky. Her long arms reached up to tap at the glass and scare off her intruder, though they were not long enough to reach the pane. A hiss rose in her throat, preparing to snap at the shadow, when she recalled that she no longer knew how to make that noise.

In a languid motion, the shadow began shifting across the window, first widening the light, then plunging Opossum into total darkness. Fearful, Opossum scurried behind the chair and fell to the ground, uncaring of the sharp splinter that scratched her naked back. Then, she heard the sound of muffled words from above. These words were unlike the monster's words. They were fast and bright with a source Opossum could point at with her finger. They came from above, not around. They didn't sound like they hated her. But still, the words were outside, and she knew the outside hated her more than the monster. Maybe if she stayed still closed her eyes, the outside words wouldn't see her and they would go away. It worked with the monster. She didn't want to die.

The words soon disappeared, but the shadow didn't move away. It only parted for a second to welcome another shadow to her skylight, where the pair continued to peer into her solitude. The words resumed, also joined by a second set of words that were equally confusing but much closer in pitch to the monster. Still, Opossum dared not look up at the shadows. What if they saw her? Would they punish her, too? Would they take her to the gallows and cut out her eyes as prizes for capturing a witch? No. Her eyes remained cast to the black wood, her neck bowed low so that her close-shaven head blended in with the pitch and the dust.

When the screeching came, Opossum's ears nearly burst in pain. She couldn't remember ever hearing such a high sound and the noise...the noise pierced the very core of her head, driving a needle between her eyebrows. She doubled over at the pain. And the light. It was brighter than she'd ever experienced, even with her eyes closed shut. The world was exploding, it was the only explanation, and the shadows were demons come to drag her away to her final judgement.

A crash. A scream. Silence. The *thump, thump, thump* of wings as a black and white butterfly flitted between the girl and the shadows, dancing through the blinding gape in the window and settling on the top of Opossum's pale head. As she thrashed her neck to rid herself of the foreign and horrifying new entity, her eyes were cast open and she saw the shadows standing right in front of her. Opossum opened her mouth to scream again when she felt a hand over her mouth. Out of years of instinctual submission, Opossum fell silent and dropped to her knees, dry, silent sobs filling her chest. Then the sound of footsteps on the stairs of the attic began to rumble.

"We were never here. Don't tell anyone. Please?" The taller shadow begged, as it dropped its hand from her mouth. It was talking...to her? Opossum's head bobbed in a nod from her prone position, unable to raise itself to meet the shadow. Then the shadows were gone and the blinding light was pulled back with a slightly duller screech than before. When the monster entered the room, all was quiet.

You are to remain SILENT! The monster's voice bellowed in the space, filling Opossum's ears from all sides. The monster hadn't been this angry since...she couldn't remember. She couldn't remember a lot of things anymore. *Do you think I want to have you stowed away in my house?*

Opossum shook her head. Her eyes shut with a flutter. They blinked back open and the monster was gone. She should have told him about the shadows; it would have saved her the lashing out. Opossum didn't move a muscle despite the respite she received from the monster. It could have been much worse to her if something wasn't on its mind. She could sense the disorder in its voice. It was too busy to deal with her. Too busy.

Opossum's eyes felt heavy as she curled in the corner later that night. Small tendrils picked against the pliable skin of her eyelids, forcing them down like they used to when she knew how to sleep. She'd forgotten that, too. Her broken fingernails scratched at her broken eyes in an effort to remove the unbearable weight. It was too heavy. Too much like sleep. Suddenly the pressure was lifted and a white flash broke Opossum's vision. Then it disappeared and the pressure resumed on her finger, this time much less painful. On her finger sat a small butterfly with silky wings, paper thin in places and thick as wire in others. The main body of the wings was the color of Opossum's room—the blackness of the void—but the spots glowed in the pale light of sunset as a brilliant whiteness, a freedom of brightness.

Frozen in shock, Opossum stared at the little beast on her finger, ignorant of its name. "Shadow," she whispered, her lips forming the word as she stared at it. The more she watched, the more the animal reminded her of the shadows in her room. It was much smaller than her visitors, but it matched the same balance of darkness and light that they carried with them. "Shadow."

The butterfly seemed not to care about Opossum's nickname, in fact seeming to enjoy the attention the woman devoted to it. As she purred its epithet over and over, the little beast waved its beautiful wings in mesmerizing beats in rhythm with her song. Only once Opossum lifted her finger to more properly greet her new friend did the butterfly fill with fear and escape to a safe distance.

"Shadow!" The woman cried out again with a pure sorrow at the spurn. The

butterfly's antennae twisted in acknowledgement. "Come back," she ordered, mimicking how she imagined the monster felt when it told her what to do. If the monster had power over her, she believed she could have power over this small little thing. When the butterfly ignored her demand, Opossum tried again.

The rest of Opossum's evening went something like this. The butterfly obstinately refused her demands and Opossum grew increasingly frustrated by how an insignificant shadow could ignore her. She couldn't ignore the monster. She was nothing compared to the butterfly.

When the thought clicked in her mind, Opossum fell over, unable to support herself. She could crush the little beast with her own bony elbow, yet it did not care for her. It didn't care. She loved it and it didn't care. The monster hated her and she cared. Why did she care? Opossum's eyes shut.

Thump, thump, thump. Click. Opossum opened her eyes and staring back at her was the dark eyes of her butterfly. The emptiness of its soul poured into her. She didn't remember much about eyes, but she didn't think they felt much like this. The monster always told her about her wicked blue and yellow. Nothing about the beauty of the black. It called her in. No one ever met her eyes, not until the butterfly.

"Tell me about your eyes," she whispered. "Tell me about mine."

The butterfly hopped forward.

"Tell me about the window. It is an eye, too."

The butterfly opened its wings.

"Tell me about the monster's eyes."

The butterfly stopped moving. All motion from the light whoosh of its antennae to the soft click of its spindly legs ceased, turning the beast into a picturesque statue.

"Tell me about the shadows. Not you. The shadows that brought you here. Do they have eyes?"

The butterfly relaxed, lifting its wings again and rising up into the air towards the fading light from above. It circled around the skylight and then fell back down to Opossum's side.

The woman sat up and let the butterfly skip onto her crossed knee. Her sight followed its path to the light. Noticing her intensity, the butterfly rejoined the skylight, casting a large swath of darkness across the far wall of the room. A silent shadow. The small body tapped against the glass with determined clicks, each time failing to make an

indentation on the thick panes.

A faint hissing noise. Soft, caressing thumps from above. A tap on the skylight. The room filled with red light as the grating noise returned. It was the sound of death, but it was not accompanied by the same pain she remembered from earlier that day. Neither were the shadows as small as she remembered. Their bodies seemed to stretch all the way around the room, the way the monster did when it came upstairs. But the monster always came from below. The shadows came from above.

This time, Opossum didn't look away. She stared the demons right in their heads, but she could not see their eyes if they had them. They just looked dark. Like her chair. She couldn't even see the butterfly anymore.

There. Behind her was the soft flicker of the little beast's wings as it hid from the shadows.

"Myra?"

Who was Myra? Opossum couldn't remember. She knew the name, but from where escaped her. The name was a dream she could not touch.

"Are you the opossum?" The shadow asked. Its voice was warm like the evening sun. It was the same voice that spoke to her earlier, but there was a whisper of familiarity this time. Something she knew.

Opossum cast her eyes around the room until they latched on the source of the voice. It was not the darkness that spoke to her but a person like her. He was young, no older than she remembered to be and not nearly as aged as the monster. He had a shape like hers and eyes—eyes like the sun as it set. A deep amber that she'd never seen before. And they looked at her. Not through her, not past her, not above her. They loved her like the monster's eyes could never.

Then the eyes turned from her and the voice spoke again in a muffle that she could not decipher. Then a clap like thunder echoed in the room and the young man and his eyes returned to her.

"Are you coming?" The man asked, his voice a hasty whisper. Leaves in the wind as they brushed over the roof. Opossum shook her head. The world hated her, no matter how the fiery eyes lied to her otherwise. The monster was the only one that loved her even a little. They just wanted to kill her.

A flash of light and darkness encircled the rope. The butterfly. It stared at her with its empty beauty as it rose into the unknown nothingness of the sun. Every twist it made mocked Opossum.

I'm leaving you. You don't want to be free of the monster, you pathetic, little opossum. It breathed in its scathing voice. She loved Shadow. Why did it hate her so? Why did it sound so much like the monster when it berated her?

"Hurry or he'll will find out we helped you, Myra," the man urged. Did it not hear the butterfly and know she couldn't leave this place?

Thump. Silence. Stares into eyes. He looked at her eyes and didn't scream. He looked at her and didn't run.

Thump. The monster was wrong. The world loved her. This man loved her.

Thump. Opossum made her decision and grabbed hold of the rope, rising into the sunset.

Thump. That was one thump too many. A hand gripped the base of the rope.

No! The monster's voice filled the room, cracking the panels of the walls as Opossum was tugged onto the roof and out of his reach. The screeching of the skylight blasted Opossum's ears, but the man held her tight to his chest, muffling the sound.

A strange, unrecognizable ringing passed through the man's body and into her ears. At first it was a dulled high pitch, growing closer and closer until it was almost on top of them. The butterfly rested on Opossum's eyes and then blackness. Nothing. Just the revolving scream she could not place and a soft ringing.

"Myra Stern, for the crime of witchcraft, we the town of Westbrook sentence you to death by public burning until dead. Your accursed eyes will be removed for the purpose of determent of such activities in future generations. For nineteen years you have been a fugitive from the state and for that, the sentence has been scheduled for three hours from now."

Opossum blinked up, coming into her sense in the blinding light of a courthouse. She was alone in the room. No. There were two others. The woman who spoke to her and the man with the sunset-colored eyes. Her shadow. He sat at a table beside her and grinned in relief. In front of her sat nothing but the dead body of her butterfly.

"No," Opossum whispered. The four living eyes in the room darted to her. Eyes that she thought burned with love burned with pure hatred worse than the monster.

"No." She said more loudly, looking down at Shadow. The light didn't bother her now as the love for the deceased filled her heart.

"No?" The woman at the front of the courtroom asked, laughter crossing her

voice. Light, airy laughter. "You get no say in this, Myra. Your eyes betray you."

"No!" This was the loudest sound Opossum made in her life. It shook the walls and knocked dust from the ceiling above them. There was no light but fake bulbs that immediately shattered at the sound. The ground began to shake below her, trembling with Opossum's gaunt body. The woman and the man with the loving, hate-filled eyes fell from their chairs as a fierce whoosh encased the room and fire fell from the cracks in the wall. The room was engulfed, the doors barred, and the butterfly perfectly preserved.

In the wreckage of the courthouse sat the black and white body of the butterfly and a pair of blue and yellow eyes. It sat in the ashes and cried at what was left of my terrifying, monstrous little girl.