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## Prolonging the Illusion

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PROLONGING THE ILLUSION

An exhibit in a science museum. Hot, humid, a tropical room. Thousands of caterpillars, butterflies, moths, dragonflies. You have to look in a full-length mirror before you leave, make sure you don't take one with you. That is, if one even lands on you. Sometimes they don't. Other times they want to stay, eat right through your clothes.

I walk into the exhibit, holding the hands of two children. Another on my back with her arms around my neck, and the last boy trailing behind me, pouting because he doesn't get to hold my hand. "Tell us what their names are!" the children cry aloud. "Read us their names, please!"

That's a Swiss Cheese plant, I say, moving my fingers slowly under the words as I read them. Caleb forces a laugh, "It look like Swiss Cheese, don't it?" That's a Ponytail plant, I say. I yank on Bella's hair and a smile splits her face.

Tonight I have a date with a man I've never kissed. Tonight I have a date with a man who wants to kiss me. I read him my stories, rip them off the typewriter and hand them to him raw. He listens all night long. He'll ask for more tomorrow.

This is a butterfly haven, I say to the kids. "Heaven for butterflies," Sydney explains, always a know-it-all.

Haven, Syd, I say. It means a shelter, a place that keeps them safe. She grabs for my hand and says, "Miss Maggie, remember yesterday when I was having an asthma attack and I couldn't breathe?"

I do, I say. But you're better now.

He's never kissed me but he held my chin in his hand once, and looked absolutely helpless. He unzipped my boot under a table at a restaurant while I sat with my legs crossed, listening to an old man's story of love lost and never found. He brushed snow from my hair while

I tried to light a cigarette on a gusty night. Took off my shoes while I watched television, lying on his living room floor on my stomach, my feet up in the air. He took off my shoes, gently.

"I love butterflies," Sydney says. "Do you love butterflies, Caleb?" Sexual tension at five years old. If Caleb says no, Sydney might try to make him hold one. And if he still doesn't love it, she might cry. If Caleb says yes, Sydney might take his hand and share her lunch with him, even the packaged cupcake.

Let's look for some, I say. Let's try to match them to their names.

These are skippers, I say. Brush-footed butterflies usually have orange wings. There's some gossamer wings over there. Yes, it does look like a moth, but it's actually a metal mark. Came all the way here from New Mexico.

A thousand butterflies in that room and I was suddenly afraid of them. So many insects, swarming. But I couldn't let the children know. Just like I can't fall asleep on the bus or eat my own lunch before making sure they eat theirs.

I knew they couldn't sting me, but what if they covered my arms and legs, every inch of my skin? What if they tattooed me, left some sort of permanent mark?

I tell him about visionary Italian philosophers, he recommends plays for me to read. We slow dance in our living rooms late at night, leave the curtains open. I wear high-waisted dresses and he buries his face in my décolletage. This is our new favorite word. We learned it from an old movie. I write stories and he directs plays. Sometimes we work as actors. Who will tell us what to do next?

Cabbage White butterflies prefer to eat garden vegetables. Dragonflies bite other insects but never humans. Flame Skimmer dragonflies are bright red, as you might imagine.

"You look great in red," John says. His name is John.

I want to say his name.

He was not great in the play about Rosemary Kennedy. That was a long time ago. He was wonderful as Pato Dooley. He kissed Lynda Newton in a kitchen; she in a black lace bra, her

belly fat spilling over her slip. He with a shaved head and a West of Ireland accent. A thousand butterflies in that room.

It's hot in the butterfly haven. All those artificial lamps, prolonging the illusion of daylight. I'm sweating through a thin tee-shirt. He loves when I wear thin tee-shirts.

"This say butterfly or dragonfly?" Caleb asks. My smartest boy, my badly behaved boy. You can read, I say. Sound it out.

"Please don't touch the butterflies," they tell us at the museum. If you take them between your fingers, they could lose their color. Touch them and they could die. Maybe this is why we see them clinging to the white walls. We try to coax them away.

"Come on down," Bella says. Sydney echoes: "Come on down!"  
Blue wings with black tips, orange with black spots.

He knows my clever topics, my most lyrical language, me in costumes. He doesn't know me as a camp counselor. I should tell him everything, I should warn him of my inadequacies.

No, I shouldn't.  
Yes, I should.

That's not entirely true. He knows me. He saw me in my first play. Came after an office Christmas party, wore a sportcoat. A friend of my boyfriend at the time. He said, "What was wrong with that play? Your character was only in it for one scene!" That was his way of saying I was terrible. I knew it and liked him anyway. I said to my boyfriend at the time, You didn't tell me how handsome he was. My boyfriend at the time said, "Knock it off."

He was there when I screamed at my boyfriend at the time: You kissed her? I can't believe you kissed her! Six years older, he looked at me with all the tenderness in the world.

The haven is an artificial environment, tricks butterflies into believing it's always summer. Every time it's beautiful. We haven't even kissed. Every time it's magic. What if he's disappointed? Every time it's heaven (or haven?) Every time we laugh.

Caleb says, "I gotta use it." Yes, we've been here long enough. I check every one of the kids for insects, search their shoulders and their backs. They look disappointed that nothing landed on them. But they are young yet, they have time.

A big one lands on my shoulder, a butterfly as big as a baseball mitt. The kids all scream in delight.

"It's a gossamer wing!" Sydney cries.

"A flame skimmer!" Bella argues.

I hold my breath and wait for it to move.

I have a date with a man tonight. A man I have never kissed.

Bella and Sydney are pushing each other now. Okay, let's go, you monsters, I say. "Can I sit next to you on the bus?" Caleb asks. As long as you don't drool on me, I respond. "I don't drool," he laughs maniacally.

He's not faking anymore.

Read that sign for me, I say to him. Show everyone how well you can read.

"Butterflies begin their lives as..." he begins. It's too tough of a passage for him, so I help: Butterflies begin their lives as vulnerable eggs, develop into small, squishable caterpillars, and then find themselves as defenseless pupae until they finally grow into fragile adults.

"Are you sad?" Bella asks me.

No, I say.

Yes, I am.

No, I'm not.

"Remember when that butterfly landed on you?" Sydney says.

I do.

I do remember that.