

Mamaw Butterfly

by Camden Whitlock – September 22nd, 2022

My mother's mother, my grandmother, had always gone by the name Mamaw. I knew her for eleven living years. When Ovarian Cancer took her from us, we believed she flew on the wings of a yellow butterfly to the golden gates. And that she stays with us in that form, these three Whitlock women forever seeking the Sleepy Orange of forgiveness.

"Child, do you know the bible? Have you ever read 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7?"

My Mamaw had always and forever been the most devout, the most caring, the most giving, the most spiritual woman. She lived about three yards from her church and went every Sunday. I was often dragged along, as a newborn-to-eleven-year-old, spending the holy day in a ransacked, too-brightly-painted (forced cheerfulness, the core principle of good evangelism) nursery that may or may not have had some type of rainforest animal(s) painted on the walls. I think I ate Goldfish there, a forbidden, carbohydrate-heavy snack, and drank regular milk (the kind that comes directly from a cow's udders – also forbidden in her tiny condominium). Then, after her grown-up service, she'd come pick me up, apologize on my behalf for the ruckus I had inevitably caused, and we'd venture the three yards back to a tannish complex housing (mostly) older individuals.

Love is patient.

She loved plays, musicals, the general theater – stuff she passed down to my mother and middle sister, but never me. When she started to die, my mother dragged my middle sister and I to every small, horrible, last-minute production within ten miles of Concord. She'd be so high-spirited, so falsely happy and ecstatic in a way that meant one of two things, from what I could discern: 1. My grandmother's Ovarian Cancer was spreading to her bowels, or 2. There was a good reason we were able to get such last-minute tickets to Concord Community Theatre's production of *Alice in Wonderland* (and it wasn't because of the Old Courthouse Theatre's charm or the Concord Community Players' talents). Due to my hatred of all things acting, I believed strongly in the latter. The former was the real truth. Afterwards, we'd always go to some rundown ice cream shop and Mamaw would insist that we got cones as big as our faces. Mama would oblige, because how do you say no to the dying woman who raised you? She'd be the one to deal with the outrageously animated sugar-highs of an eleven- and nine-year-old on the way back to our Uptown Charlotte home.

Love is kind.

Mamaw also liked a good museum. She had an otherworldly fascination about the past – I only cared about the present, and only worry about the future. What people did before my time never concerned me, but the more I think about her, the more I wonder. We'd go to the most ridiculous exhibits, old houses and barns and churches converted into relics detailing different kinds of ancient living situations or communities or religions from prior years. She admired, and I stared at, art pieces that I was convinced, in my little eleven-year-old brain, I could recreate

myself (not for lack of trying – it was probably the first thing I did when I got home). She praised brush strokes and painted glass and old artifacts that I wasn't even tall enough to see, sometimes, and found her way into every room, scoured every corner, walked down every hall. When I think back on it, I ponder on her fascination. Perhaps she was trying to figure out how she wanted to be remembered. What museums her artifacts would end up in. My mother agreed with her while my middle sister and I ran around the displays, generally causing a commotion. No one really cared, though – they were fixated on either the physical art on the walls and pedestals or on the intense emotional image of a daughter and her dying mother, standing in front of a picture depicting a young, happy, dancing maiden and crying.

Love does not envy.

There were these two crocheted, perhaps hand-sewed or knitted, lace bunnies that populated the bed I always slept on when I stayed in her condominium. One was yellow, I believe, and the other blue – I always liked the yellow one better, probably because it was bigger, prettier, and, most importantly, more expensive. The bunnies were the one thing I wanted to keep when she finally passed. Ripped to shreds by my fitful sleeping patterns and sewed up again by her loving hands, the bunnies were the physical incarnation of all of the love I'd ever received from that woman. They sat, unmoving, on the trundle bed – but in my mind, they played the most ridiculous, outlandish games with me. They were the prettiest princesses, the most delicate fairies, the oldest, most begrudging wise women. I really loved those bunnies – I wonder what they're up to these days, where they are now. If I had to guess, forgotten like the rest of my

childhood toys, they're in the musty attic space only accessible by a small hand-painted white door behind my winter clothes, which hang at the back of my closet.

Love does not boast.

My Mamaw and I would always draw together – I was a huge paramour of the crafts, stickers and string and beads and such, and she a huge paramour of I who her daughter and God, in union, created. She would sit patiently, although obviously, as an adult, she always had something better and more meaningful to attend to and watch me work on something I would forget or discard before I visited her again. She would help me string my plastic necklaces and buy me new, wet markers when I unavoidably dried out the old. She would sit quietly with that damned God-fearing spirit of hers as I snapped a Crayon in frustration over a dog drawing that I thought looked more like a cat. She would provide the needed compliments on my glue-sticky, feather-heavy alleged 'work of art' just like it was an original Picasso. And she would help me clean up the mess when I was finished thirty minutes after I began.

Love is not proud.

She never kept carbs or sweets in her tiny apartment – she just couldn't, she said, because she'd gobble them right up and get too heavy. I don't think that sentiment mattered much in the days when she weighed less than eighty pounds and had to feed from a tube. There was always a nut I was never able to identify (I now know it was a pecan) in the freezer – they were better when

they were cold. There was also always a funky milk around – my eleven-year-old brain called it ‘funny milk’ – that I’d be forced to sip on as opposed to the more oft-desired apple juice or bone-building cow milk. It was almond, I later understood. The only time I ever saw sugar in that place was every year when she baked a red velvet cake for Mama’s birthday. She’d force the layers of the cake together with toothpicks, and in later years, invariably forgetting with fogged Cancer brain to take them out, frost the cake in such a way that us kids would take big, hungry bites and get stabbed in the back of the throat. The rouge toothpicks embarrassed her and scared my mother. I think that’s part of the reason they decided on hospice.

Love does not dishonor others.

There was also a little pool my middle sister and I loved to swim in right at the middle of her complex. We’d only go in the summer, only when it was hot, and never in the deep end – that scared my Mamaw, as she was getting too weak to save us if we started to drown. We’d play with toys we brought, barbies we fought over and sinking toys thrown in the shallow end we’d race to get, satisfying my competitive nature and my middle sister’s desire to please me. On her birthday, we’d get her a five-inch cake and sit poolside as we sang the increasingly sadder ‘birthday song’ around a more and more imminent death. She always changed our moods though – when she blew out the candle, she’d be so happy, so fun and so vibrant. She was so good at making us smile.

Love is not self-seeking.

There were other things I remember about her too – changing flags (dependent on season, holidays, special occasions) on the back porch, similar to the little one in the front yard of my own house. A nearby porch swing that eventually got cushions, in the ending days when the wood became too hard for her bare bones, that we'd (my middle sister and I) mess with and throw off and generally ruin. There were a lot of pictures on that swing – I don't know if it was the outdoors or the movement that made her happy, but I guess I got a little of her in me after all. There was a light-gold 2001 Honda Accord that she drove, lesser at the end, to and from work (because even though work was right across the street, that street was too busy to cross and lacking the necessary crosswalks for a sixty-year-old woman) and anywhere else she needed to go. I got that car as my very first when I turned sixteen. When I turned seventeen, I got a new 2017 Honda Civic – I said it was for the great gas mileage and the sleek look, but it was really, truly because the Honda reminded me of her. I've always kept her clipped angel sentiment on the driver-side fold-down mirror: 'Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly'. I hope my Mamaw can fly 90 mph sometimes.

Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Darkness shrouded our lives, kind of, in that last year – I say 'kind of' because my middle sister and I didn't see her in hospice much. My mother wanted us to remember her as she was, for who she was, for everything I've described. The couple of experiences I had with that somberly-laid building with the cheerful garden included a bow she got me with a turtle charm

fastened securely on it (in the 5th grade I loved both bows and turtles, wearing one of the former clipped to my right-side hair every day and having upwards of eighty representations of the latter taking up space in my bedroom). She was so proud of that bow. I loved that bow, too, but I never could bring myself to wear it – it was just too much. The other experience was second-hand, as my mother laid out the details of her final descent to those golden gates of heaven in ways my eleven-year-old self could understand. And that was all He wrote.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

After her death, symbols of my grandmother emerged everywhere: ‘yellow pixie dust’ took the form of way too much food, later every Thursday food, and yellow ribbons wrapped around the trees in my neighbors’ front yards. She was a yellow butterfly – to this day, every time my mother or my middle sister or I see a yellow butterfly, we think of her. We used to send pictures of the butterfly, but it’s been 8 years and we keep our sadness to ourselves now. As time went on, butterflies started to take on a new meaning, the meaning of everything my late Mamaw represented to me: love. And God.

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Butterflies started to populate my life, the way I thought, and the way I understood the world around me. I see them everywhere, at all times, in everything I do. I see her. I see butterflies now as a symbol of losing something and coming back invariably stronger; as an image of

respect for those we've lost and miss; as a depiction of endless care, of always finding a way to endure and conquer, as being vulnerable, and as understanding. As being a solid entity for those in need. As being a reverent figure for those in search. As being generous and virtuous and cheerful and uncompromising in the ways we feel, the ways we treat others, and the way we treat ourselves. As being wholly good.

In a lot of ways, love is Mamaw Butterfly.

These days my grief and anger has transformed into something new and different: hope. Now I understand that with faith, she is not truly gone, but in continuous presence around me. She is a part of my foundation, a shield and a weight, and, most importantly, a lesson. She has left this earth, but she hasn't left me.

"What's that, child? Oh, the passage. That's what love is – remember that when I'm gone."

As I continue to grow older, to understand and experience more and more things, both good and bad, I keep her lessons with me always. She has endless life through my memories. Through my middle sister's memories. Through my mother's memories.

And I hope to carry with me, for the rest of my life, this love.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

I pledge to find it, to carry it, to share it. On the wings of a yellow butterfly.