

ON THE WINGS OF A BUTTERFLY

by

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(A man, the PLAYWRIGHT, enters. He is simply dressed and carries a spiral bound note-book, which he places on a table or set piece. He looks out at the audience, waiting a moment before speaking.)

PLAYWRIGHT

Hello. Thank you for coming. It's good to see you here. This would be lonely for me if you weren't. But here you are. Gathered in a theater, waiting for something to happen. Full of expectation.

I expect I'll disappoint you. I apologize in advance.

Convention says I stand here. In the light. You sit out there. In the dark. I speak. You listen. I tell a joke. You laugh.

(pause, waiting for laughter.)

Thank you.

(or, if they don't laugh.)

Or not.

So, here we are. You and I. And now what? I've been asked to talk about politics and a certain hurricane. I'm supposed to entertain you, I know. Make you feel or think. Stimulate your imagination with a lively discourse. That's what theater is about, yes?

But I'm a bit adrift these days. I'm fairly depressed, if I can be honest. So, this may be a bit scattered. I thought I should warn you. If any of you would like, you can take a break for a few minutes. Go out and get a soda, a candy bar. Nice stiff drink?

You're too kind. All right, I'll begin. There's a saying about . . . well, it's not really a saying it's more of a Oh, what's the word? It's not a parable. I know it's not a fable. What is it when you say something like "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step?"

No one? Well, it'll come to me. Or not. Starting again,

PLAYWRIGHT (CONT.)

the saying goes “A butterfly in China beats its wings, and a hurricane forms in the Atlantic Ocean.”

You understand? It means that small events can lead to larger ones. A cascade of moments, each triggering the next until . . . Seems improbable. That a stray action, say telling a small lie, could lead to thousands of deaths. I mean, a butterfly couldn’t cause a hurricane. Could it?

All right. Imagine a butterfly, colorful. Yellows and oranges. Put him on a flower – you pick the color – a flower on a steep hillside near Shanghai. Don’t let him take off. Not yet. Make him stay there. Just flexing his wings. We’ll come back to him.

Now, picture a playwright. Not Shakespeare. A living playwright. None of you can picture a single living American playwright?

All right, forget the playwright. This may be better without one anyway. Picture yourself, then, sitting in a metal tube 39,361 feet somewhere over Texas. You’re on a red eye from Los Angeles to New York, returning from a trip for a long weekend. You’re anxious. Not because of the turbulence, or the thunderstorm you’re flying through. Or even because you’re over Texas. No, that tightness in your chest is there because you’ve been commissioned to write something about Hurricane Katrina for a theatrical event. And it’s due tomorrow morning.

(indicating the notebook.)

But you have nothing.

Why you agreed to write something in the first place isn’t important. It was a moment of weakness. You did it, it’s done, and now you have to live with the consequences. Life’s like that, isn’t it? You’ve had two months to write a few paltry pages, and now the deadline – savor the word deadline – the deadline is imminent and you don’t know what to write.

You sit there and wrack your brain for an original thought. Go ahead. I’ll wait.

PLAYWRIGHT (CONT.)

No? Nothing? Is it getting hard to breathe? Then it comes. An idea. You remember hearing how some of the elderly were stranded in nursing homes in New Orleans as the waters rose and the staff ran for higher ground. You get a mental picture of an old man lying asleep in a bed. See him waking up and finding himself alone, forgotten. He calls out for help. But no one answers. The man wonders aloud, maybe reminisces about his life, calls out again for help. But no one comes, and all the while the waters rise. The water is two actors kneeling on the ground downstage of him, holding opposite ends of a sheet. While the man talks, they slowly raise the sheet, until it finally covers his head . . . and the man drowns.

That's a very theatrical image. You pick up your pen and start to write . . . but then you stop. If he's lying there alone who is he talking to? And more to the point, who is this man? You don't know anything about him or his life. All you've got is a picture in your head.

Picture yourself putting the pen down, as the plane hits more turbulence, and the captain asks us to return to our seats and fasten our seat belts. You grit your teeth as if that will keep your inner ear from bouncing along with the rest of the plane, and you try to focus. New Orleans. What do you think of when you think of New Orleans? Besides Mardi Gras. Or "Girls Gone Wild."

All right. Imagine an empty stage. Tennessee Williams comes out and winks at the audience. He wears a light weight, light colored suit, cigarette in a cigarette holder in one hand. He smiles mischievously and in a lazy drawl says, "Blow out your candles, George Bush."

No. Tennessee Williams? No. You don't want to just make a joke out of this. I mean, people died.

All right. A woman is alone on a stage. She's stranded somewhere in New Orleans, surrounded by water. Waiting for rescue. She survived the hurricane, watched the levees break, struggled through the muck to find food and clean

PLAYWRIGHT (CONT.)

water. She got separated from her family. She wonders if they're alive or dead. She wonders if that stench is coming from the dirty water or her. And she waits for someone to find her. And waits. And finally she sees it. Two men in a boat. She jumps to her feet and runs forward as they approach, but they walk right past her, look down at the ground where she was sitting, and one says, "Here's another body."

You take out your pen and write two or three pages in no time . . . until you hit the same problem you had with the elderly man. You don't know this person.

By now it's three in the morning, and you're exhausted. Turn off that little light overhead and put your seat back. One inch. Two inches. That's all you get. Sorry. Close your eyes, drift off a little . . . then you sense a flash of light. You look around, but nothing. Then it happens again. Lightning in the tops of the clouds you're flying over. See yourself, nose pressed against the window, waiting for the next flash, and the next.

The clouds light up from within. Patterns of white arc through them, showing mountain ranges, valleys, rolling landscapes far above the ground. It's beautiful, like something from "Fantasia."

Tomorrow when you turn on the television, you'll learn the tornadoes spawned by this storm killed 22 people. But now, here above the clouds, you can't tear your eyes away. And you wonder, what did Katrina look like from this angle? Was she beautiful too?

A flight attendant comes by with snacks. It's less than an hour 'til you land. This thing is too big to wrap your mind around. Write what you know. That's what they say. But what do you know of devastation and loss like that?

Well, . . . picture the face of the person you love the most in the world. No, the other one. The one who broke your heart when she said, "It's over. I'm leaving." Or words to that effect. Have you got that? The hollow feeling when everything shifts, and your world changes forever,

PLAYWRIGHT (CONT.)

and there's not a thing you can do to retrieve it?

Good. You look down and see that you're writing. Words spill across the page.

"We want cars to drive everywhere. Each of us in our own car. We want to be warm in the winter, and cool in the summer. We want to live in former swamps below sea level. We want to fly to Los Angeles for a long weekend. But desire is hot. So when we get what we want the world is a warmer place. And we get a hurricane season that produces more storms than letters in the alphabet. And we have to turn back to the ancient Greeks for more names. We get more category five storms in a single season than ever before, including Wilma, the most powerful hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic, and one counter-clockwise swirling mass of air and moisture called Katrina. We're all connected; the people stranded in the Superdome and the President, tsunami victims in the Indian Ocean and victims of a suicide bomber in Baghdad. People starving in the Sudan, and people on line at the local McDonalds. Me. You.

So is Katrina to blame for the ruined lives? Is the president? The man who ran FEMA? The butterfly? Or, like that failed relationship, did you maybe have a hand in it?"

Well, it's a theory.

Let's go back to China and our butterfly, is he still
An adage! It's an adage. Well, I feel better. So, our butterfly. Is he still sitting on that flower? Let him take off, fly to the next one. Has he gone? How many wing beats did it take? Did he start any hurricanes?

Well, I wouldn't worry about the butterflies. They'll probably all be gone soon. And then who will we blame?

I'm sorry. I told you I was depressed. But after everything that's happened . . . aren't you?

(Lights fade to black..)