

The Butterfly

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The place that I grew up was on the edge of a small town, not quite in the town, not quite outside. People argued about where the town border was, but I know it meandered somewhere around the edge of our property. Our house was old and well lived in. Dad said it fit like an old shoe. Our garden was large and oddly shaped, and basically a wild meadow. The grass was kept long, and all sorts of wild flowers grew throughout. In summer it was lush and wondrous, and I loved to play in it and wade through it, hunting frogs and chasing butterflies. My mother would have preferred that my father paid more attention to tending the garden, but, well he had other things to do. He did manage to sow some vegetables each year, much to my annoyance, as I was forced to swallow much more than any child's fair share of them.

At ten I was growing up and, though still a bit green, I didn't believe I was born under the cabbage patch anymore. As far as I could see, all that was in our cabbage patch was caterpillars. I'd take them in my hand and watch them crawl up along my finger, wondering at how they managed all those legs, and how they didn't fall off even though I'd stick my hand way up above my head and wave them about. I liked to do cool experiments like that. There was just me and my younger, annoying sister, and I spent as much time away from her as I could. All she did was get me in trouble. I just had to look at her and she'd wail, and Mum would swat me for teasing Ro-Ro. Ro-Ro, that's what they called her, short for Roisin, and usually sung as in Row Row Row Your Boat. Man how I hated that song!

We didn't have much but we had enough. At least that's what Mum always said, and I suppose she was right. There was enough to eat, and I got cool presents. But was there ever enough sweets and ice-cream and cake? Not for me there wasn't. I was sitting at the table one summer morning, in a world of my own, oblivious for the most part of the people around me. I was playing a game in my head, where I was the hero rescuing a village, fighting natives, swimming rivers. The story was growing as I munched on my cornflakes, slopping some milk down my chin as I chewed. I was staring towards my sister, but I wasn't seeing her. In our family we often spent breakfast wrapped up in ourselves, a bit like those caterpillars when they turned into

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pupae. We had learned about that in school. I liked staying wrapped up in my own world and didn't ever want to have to emerge.

Ro-Ro took a break from looking at the back of the Cornflakes box to notice that I seemed to be staring at her. This appeared to hurt her so deeply she had to let out an almighty wail that shook me out of the best part of my story, where I was knife to knife with the leader of the jungle natives. Dad, who was reading the newspaper and sipping coffee reached over and swatted my head. It wasn't hard, but it hurt. It hurt most because I hadn't done anything to deserve it. He hadn't even looked up from his paper. He'd simply removed his hand from the mug and in a lightning quick motion flicked it at my head. I was stung! Biting back the tears I sneaked a peak at my mother who was at the toaster making toast for everyone, her back to the table, and then I stuck out my tongue at the brat across from me. She sniffed and looked like she was about to launch another high-decibel protest when my mother plonked a plate of toast in front of her and broke the spell. The allure of the toast took her mind off of me for the moment.

While I was back in the real world I noticed that my mother and father had said very little this morning, to each other or us. This wasn't all that unusual in recent memory, but still I sensed that something wasn't quite right, I just wasn't very sure what it was. I didn't think I'd done anything worthy of real scrutiny or ire lately. At least nothing I thought they could catch me at. A plate of toast almost soared across the table to crash through the end of my Dad's paper, narrowly avoiding spilling into his lap. He glanced up over his paper and swore quietly as he stared at my mother. Uh Oh! Somebody's in trouble here, I was thinking as I looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what was going on. "What the hell's the problem, Margaret?" my Dad asked in that voice he used when he was angry, low and hard. "What would be the problem?" she answered sharply, "when you won't tend your own garden. With you flitting around from flower to flower and the whole world knowing it."

Somehow the garden always came into it. I know it wasn't perfect, like the Murphy's down the road, but it was beautiful and alive to me. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way, even if I couldn't play football in it, because you couldn't find a football in it. What was it that flitting from flower to flower was called, I wondered to myself,

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tuning out the ongoing argument. Pollination, that was it! Well, what could be wrong with pollination? That's what made the garden grow, wasn't it? I'm all for pollination in our garden. I love watching the butterflies and bees zipping in and out, landing here and there. Sometimes I just watch, and sometimes I get my net and run about catching them. I always let them go again, if I catch them. When I was younger I used to put the bees in a jar, and poke holes in the lid. I'd watch them for a while, and then I'd go off and play, and when I came back the bees would be dead. But I was older now, and wiser. I didn't want to hurt them anymore.

I had a book upstairs that showed all the different types of insects, bees, wasps and butterflies. I loved to pore over that book on a summer's evening, identifying all the ones that I could find in our garden. I loved the Red Admiral for its military bearing, identifying with it, soldier to soldier. Then there were the soldier bees, I identified with them too. There were those of us who were born to fight so that others could have. That was me, saving the world, one daydream at a time! Mrs. Finnerty in school called me a dreamer. Said I was always off in a world of my own. Little did she know, I'd learned that skill at home. My parents would get onto me about focusing more and achieving more for a while, but before long we were all back to our usual habits.

"Johnny, eat your toast!" my mother's raised voice brought me out of my daydream and I noticed the buttered toast before me. It smelled delicious and I grabbed up a slice and stuffed most of it into my mouth before biting a huge piece off. "Ewww, gross!" Ro-Ro squealed from across the table. If my legs had been long enough I would have kicked her. I had to satisfy myself with imagining kicking her, the satisfying thunk and stunned reaction. "I'm not going to stand for it any more Fergus", my mother was saying now. "I'm not going to be made a fool of anymore, do you understand me?" My father had put down the paper now. He chewed his toast slowly and looked across at my mother. I'm not quite sure what was in that look, it confused me because I hadn't really seen it before. "I don't know what you mean, Margaret. I don't know who's been filling your head with nonsense, but nonsense is what it is", he said in his quiet voice, the one he used when he was talking to me or Ro-Ro.

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Things got really quiet at the table. Well, no-one was talking, but Ro-Ro had started humming. She had a habit of humming to herself, and sometimes it drove me absolutely mad. Some evenings at dinner Mum would shout at her to stop humming, and she'd startle and look up and say in her hurt voice, "But I wasn't humming". Silly girl didn't even know she was doing it half the time. I didn't much mind her humming at the moment. It was better than the silence anyway. On another morning I'd take pleasure in getting her into trouble, seeing as she was always doing that to me. I quickly munched my toast and had a notion to get away from the table as soon as I could. I'd go out into the garden and have a look for frogs in the bottom corner. That's where they usually hid in the long shaded grass. Maybe I'd capture one and sneak it up to my room and keep it as a pet. I'd tried this before and been caught, but this time I could come up with a better hiding place, I was sure.

My Dad had said something I hadn't heard and my mother just stopped still for a moment, as if she'd been struck. She'd been in the middle of buttering her toast, and she just sat there with her mouth gaping, knife in one hand, butter in the other. In the next she was in motion, her hand coming up quickly and before I knew what had happened, I saw the butter fly.