

# The Man who was followed by butterflies

*by* Alison Earls

Lo's place was by the water with his fishing line. He would listen to the clatter and talk from the boats but he was peaceful.

It was there that the butterflies had first found him.

When he was a boy, he had played on the bank — dashing from shadow to shadow; examining the tufts of grass and leaves, the puddles and the rocks and dirt that presented new treasures every day. And one afternoon, he was joined by a butterfly. It flickered across his eyelashes with a brazenness that left Lo sitting in a patch of mud — one that he had been carefully avoiding. And as the dampness had seeped up and Lo had blinked away the butterfly abrasion from his lashes, the white wings — tinged with a pale shade of mint — had made their second assault. Lo had waved his hand to keep the insect from his face and after a while — and much brushing and puffing from Lo — the butterfly seemed to learn that it was required to keep a certain distance from the eyes, the nose, the mouth. But still it would hover near him. Dabbing at his shoulders sometimes. Crossing his concentrated gaze when he was not ready to lose focus.

Each day on the bank it would be there, flapping near him. And soon another joined it. And then another. And another. Until there were a dozen or more butterflies circling Lo like an elegant tornado. They would flutter and dance — skittering away and then back again, resting on rocks or branches that Lo ventured near, but never tickling his eyelashes or flicking at his face. Not anymore. They hovered and darted but, after a while, they seemed to be always around him. Lapping at him like the mellow waves that stroked the muddy bank.

By the time that Lo was ten years old, his travelling cloud had taken to venturing with him away from the water. They were with

him as he walked to school, working in the afternoons, on errands for his family. The only time they were separated from their host was when Lo's mother closed the door and windows every evening and would not let them in.

“Lo, you bring those things inside and I will ... I will...”

She never said what she would do, but Lo knew it was not good, and — for once — he was grateful for his mother's strictness and her determination.

Before he had finished school to work every day with his father, Lo had asked his teacher about butterflies and how long each one would live. She had looked inside the big book that had all the answers and she had told Lo that a week was longer than the whole life of one butterfly. So then Lo knew that the first butterfly he had met by the water was long gone. And so were hundreds of others. But still they had kept coming. Sometimes there were seven, sometimes ten — never more than twelve, but the space around Lo had become a home for butterflies and he knew that it was to be so, whether he wanted it or not.

Children had laughed and called him silly names. His father could grow exasperated with their constant presence and would send Lo out to work away from the shop, by himself near the packing boxes or in a spot beside the fence.

But when Lo met Tula, she had said, “How beautiful to see the world through a veil of butterflies” and on their wedding day, if he had thought to count he would have found a dozen extra in the haze allowing Tula, for that day, to join him in the cloud.

For the first years of their marriage, he had not gone to the waterside but once or twice each year. He was too busy with his work and with the house and then with the children. But later, when his eldest boy had shown an interest in helping him at work, Lo had been able to take some hours on the bank where he had grown and find his solitude again. And he found himself sitting by the water, wondering how such time had passed that had allowed him to become a man, a husband and a father. And he took some time to

look at the butterflies and wonder for a moment why they had chosen him.

And so, as the days went on, he spent more time on the bank. Not examining the puddles and stones any longer but sometimes looking out at the bobbing boats and seeing the markets thriving and bustling before him. He would let his eyes rest on the water and feel the colours and shapes move in front of him, and although they were busy and moving and ever-changing, Lo found a kind of peace behind his gaze. The sounds of the city, the clamour of the people soothed him as he sat in his quiet space on the bank and looked through the flutter of his chaperones.

When his sons began to coax him to leave the work to them for a whole day or two, he took a fishing pole down to his spot and let it dangle in the water. Sometimes he would glance down to see the fish examining his lure, nibbling cautiously. And sometimes he even had to pull the greedy curious ones ashore so he could ease the hook from their cheeks and set them back into the water.

But when his Tula became sick and tried not to show it, he stayed near her. Not by the water.

And when she lay on her bed and asked him to go against his dying mother's wishes and let the butterflies into the house, he did. And for one dreamlike moment, they left him to farewell Tula with a veil of perfect white.

And so Lo went back to the water. Because now that was the only place for him to be.

And he took comfort in the shouts from the boats, from the buyers and the sellers. He let the hum of the land and the sea settle him and let the colours dance before him as if to say that the world would continue spinning even though it seemed that Lo's world has come to a sudden halt. The butterflies floated on the wafting breezes. The water lapped gently at his feet. And Lo knew that he would breathe for a little longer. Look for a little longer at this place. And he would wait with the water and the fishes and the world and find some comforts around him until it was his time.

And so days drifted by and Lo's sons became men and his daughters, women. Soon they were husbands and wives, and before he could blink, they were fathers and mothers. And still Lo found his place by the water and let the fish dance around his line as he listened to the familiar sounds of his city all around. He was content in his house with his baby, Mae, and her growing family and his life had a kind of constancy that made the sadnesses easier to bear.

But one day, that seemed so much like all the others, Mae spoke to Lo and told him that they were leaving. She and her husband and their three children would soon fly across the world. To a new life. As her words found places in Lo's head, he felt his own life fall. He felt something inside him sink deeper than the soles of his feet until he was so empty he might crack and crumble. But Mae explained that Lo was to fly with them. He would go with his littlest one and her littlest ones to a far off place and see their lives grow into the earth and sky that he had never seen. And so he was not empty. But he was not full either.

Lo went once more to the water to listen to the sounds that would become his memories. He did not fish. He did not sit. He looked one more time. He smelled and listened just once more. And then he left.

And through the long dark of the flight and the longer dark of the strange new land, Lo waited. He knew he would not find a new life for himself — he was too old. But he waited to find something that would bring him a little light.

Mae and her family worked. They went to school, they went to offices, they went to shops and businesses. They worked hard so that their new life could grow. And Lo watched and saw them find places that they might one day be a part of. And he was proud. But he was still waiting.

And after a while he stopped waiting for the light and began to wait for an end to the darkness.

Mae talked to her father. She tried to find people to be his friends. She tried to find places that he could be a part of. But Lo was still in the dark and sometimes it was black and sometimes it was grey, but it was always dark. He longed for his Tula, for his house, for his

riverbank, knowing now that all were just pictures in his mind. And sometimes they too would fade into the dark.

One day — a hot day such as Lo had never felt, Mae led her father to a new place where he could wait. She had to buy some food and Lo's legs were too old now to walk all the streets and shopfronts and walk home as well. But he would not let his baby carry all the food alone so he would go with her and wait and bring her to her home safely again. This hot day, when Mae disappeared into the tangle of busy people striding and bouncing through the streets, he found himself on the edge of a kind of garden. There was a place to sit — a wooden bench, but Lo's legs still had something in them and they drew him through a gateway and along a tidy path. He wasn't fast and the path was long and winding but his legs brought him on until he saw a sight that twinkled in the distance. A twist of light called to him and he walked towards it until it became flashes through the trees. And when Lo made his way past the leafy branches, there it was. A river. He smelt it to see if it was his old friend, but it wasn't. It was another river. He listened and there were only rustling trees beside him — no clanks and calls, none of the sounds from his old riverbank. But light sparkled on the surface and the sunlight was the sunlight he had known.

Lo blinked. He blinked and breathed and his breath was the first one he had taken in this new place. The first once that slid deep down inside him and cooled the darkness that had lingered for so long.

And then he blinked again. But this time it was not at the light dancing on the water. Something had brushed at his eyes. Something had flicked at his lashes and fluttered across his face.

Lo breathed out a long quiet breath. A breath that had been waiting for who knows how long.

And when Mae found her father, he was standing by a river.

And when she took him home, he was followed by a butterfly.

