

Getting There

by Jen Knox

Tonya relaxed in a chair, stared at the fading orange and black tattoo on her ankle. It was poorly done with too-thick lines, and people often thought it was a bee, not a butterfly. She had made this appointment to get it touched up, but the tattoo artist said he could only do so much. He warned her that he couldn't reasonably thin out the lines.

"That's fine," she said. "So long as you can make it look like a butterfly."

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The sheets felt softer last night when Mia bunched them between her fingers and kicked at them with bare feet. Now, they felt almost like paper. The man next to her was unshaven, thirty pounds overweight, and she appreciated him. He was real. He was snoring. She kissed his forehead for the first and last time.

Once dressed, she didn't look back—this was a habit she'd perfected. She slid on her wrinkled blue dress, grabbed her sandals in one hand, bag in the other, and walked barefoot down the drive to the silver Jetta. She drummed her fingers on the wheel to the quick, soft words of Regina Spektor.

When the peppy man at the rental agency popped her trunk, she felt remorse. The man talked for the duration of the ten minute drive to her house. Mia hadn't been paying attention to him until, toward the end of the drive, he asked her to coffee. She knew she shouldn't, but she accepted on the contingency that coffee become a martini and the martini be accompanied by sushi. He accepted. He might be a little too clean cut, what with his gelled spikes and well-pressed clothes, but he was what he was. She decided to give it a shot. She told him to drop her off a few houses short of home.

Mia knocked twice before retrieving the key from beneath the mat and unlocking the door to find her mother passed out on the floor with the vacuum on and next to her head. At least she had tried

to clean up. Mia considered leaving the thing on and just going up to her room, but she thought again and flipped the switch.

“Ma!” she yelled, shaking her mother a little harder than felt appropriate. She helped Tonya up and into her chair. “I think it's time for rehab again.”

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Tonya had moved around non-stop, had been close to everything she'd ever wanted to be, but had never actually been. She had been almost tall enough to model when she was a teenager, almost pretty enough to do print ads. She had been a decent writer, but not good enough to get in the college literary journal. She still had the rejection letter: “Your submission showed promise. If you are not a senior, please try again next year.” She kept all of her close calls as reminders. When she finally found something she was good at, sales, she began raking in the kudos. And sales in small retail shops led to high commissions, which led to higher end stores and higher commissions. She really found her niche selling cars, which led to selling luxury cars to extremely well-off men and women. One of these men would ask for her hand in marriage after three dates.

This man, the husband-to-be, would never be. In fact, he would vanish two months before the wedding upon hearing that baby Mia was the reason Tonya's hips and stomach were expanding—a thing he had welcomed before knowing the reason. Tonya had the name picked out long before she knew what it meant. She'd read later, when Mia first ran away from home at fifteen, that the name meant bitter.

“I'm not bitter, just restless,” Mia had promised.

“You're the only one that stays,” Tonya had slurred, or thought, the night before she crashed Mia's car. “She's the only one that stays,” she repeated, or thought again, when she woke up the next night, head bleeding against the steering wheel of her daughter's car. It was the second car she'd crashed, the first being her own. And though this incident would not be what would sober Tonya up, some small thing would shift in her thought pattern that day. As she

sat there, waiting for something to happen and someone to help, she reminded herself that Mia also means my.

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Mia ate her sushi with sloppy grace. She was all confidence as she dropped yet another California roll on her silky white shirt. "So much for wearing white," she said and shrugged.

Vince was far less chatty across the table than he had been driving her home. He had told her how beautiful she looked four times already, but it was all he could think to say again. Mia laughed generously when he did, and asked him about school. Vince was a student, but he didn't yet know what to major in. He asked her in turn.

"I'm a prostitute," she said, matter-of-factly. "I'd like to stop, but it just happened. I was basically a slut in high school, and I had the entrepreneurial spirit, so I decided to parlay my hobby into a career.

Vince dropped a piece of salmon, just missing his pants. He watched her face for a sign that she was joking. Mia was stone-faced.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just bored by guys that are too nice, too perfect. I don't think this is going to work."

"You think I'm too perfect?" Vince asked. There was something loosened in his voice.

"You look it," she said.

"I just know how to press a polo shirt. Dad was in the military—we had to look clean or he'd kick our asses."

Mia noticed that Vince's eyes were like brown suede, and she decided to order another drink.

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"My daughter is bitter. She is the child—the one that'll make it," Tonya said to a room filled with haggard-looking people who, like herself, were detoxing. "I want my daughter to make it to Mexico. I want to buy her a car that will take her there."

"You make no sense," a young woman said. The woman's nails were painted black, and she'd said this not so much to Tonya but toward the floor. Tonya continued to speak, a little louder than

before she was interrupted. She looked down at her ankle as she spoke.

The monarchs that inspired the tattoo had arrived thirty years before, on her fourteenth birthday. Tonya's mother had insisted on going to the outlet mall at 7AM, to beat the weekend rush and buy Tonya a birthday dress. They were half-way there when bundles of the small butterflies began plunging into and swooping around the windshield of their mud-laced Volvo. Tonya thought they were tiny leaves at first, but her mother told her to look closer and when she did, she saw wings. She wanted to roll down the windows and let them fly in.

"It's the migration," her mother explained. "Most of those little butterflies won't make it to Mexico from here, but they'll stop and have babies in the Midwest. Those babies might make it, and if they don't, their babies will."

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Tonya would slip up and begin drinking again, she knew. Any day now, she would break and take a drink. But, because she knew this, she savored every moment of every day. It was on the day that her daughter called to announce her engagement to a handsome young man named Vince that Tonya made an appointment to see a tattoo artist.

Life was so incredibly hard, but there were those short times when it wasn't and everything seemed okay. Tonya thought about her mother as a thin needle pulled her blood to the surface and cleaned up the lines old wings. She thought about how the butterflies came that day. How, that day, her mother had bought something called ice cream of the future, and how the small beads had melted slowly on their tongues.

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On the day of her wedding, Mia was all satin and creams. Tonya told the monarch story as she pinned a stray curl in place and admired her daughter's image in the mirror. The girl was smooth, perfectly young lines and curves. She had chosen to not hire a photographer because, she'd explained, she didn't want to look

anywhere but forward. As they sat there in the thickness of anticipation, Mia asked her mother why she had the tattoo redone.

The monarchs that migrate to Mexico and California in the autumn every year live for only a month. They lay eggs on the way toward their warm destination. The babies hatch and begin the same route, as though they have been born knowing the story that came before them and knowing that they were born to do nothing if not carry on.

