

Black Butterfly

Many were the things Mama and I discussed
during that last lingering afternoon we shared:
light and frothy to dark and deadly serious;
soap bubbles to stones. Father Peter stopped by
to chat, to laugh and share, then to comfort and
sustain with prayer, scripture and the Eucharist.
In the Church it is called “the anointing of the sick”,
but I knew it for what it really was: Viaticum:
“preparation for the journey” – Last Rites.

I sat in silence in the warm sunlight as he listened
to Mama’s confession, wondering where she was
finding so many small failings and misdeeds to lay bare.
They fluttered like rose petals to the ground,
these minute sins of the innocent and trusting.
I still sat in silence as Father Peter murmured
the Vater Unser, Our Father, my lips moving soundlessly
to the ancient text, but with my heart restless and
resentful. When he brought out his ampule of holy oil,
I quietly got up and moved away to a far corner
of the garden ostensibly to give them some privacy.

I watched under hooded lids as he gently applied

the oil to Mama’s forehead, heart and hands, making
the sign of the cross as he passed over her, but my heart
flared in anger as he raised the Host to heaven, then
dared to lay it on her tongue. When he lifted the chalice
to her lips, I had to force myself to stand still, fists
clenched, lest I stride over to strike it out of his hands.
Blind rage, ferocious indignation and seething resentment
shot through me like summer lightning, sucking away
my sanity, choking me with bile and gall...

I HATED this God Who would rip my mother from me
by inches, and I hated His puppet minion who violated
her with every sacred movement, every holy word --!

When they began to pray, I lowered my head and bit my lips
to keep from crying out against the injustices of an
uncaring Deity Who would take the prayers of the hopeful
and naïve, then toss them like used lottery tickets into
the winds of the future. Finally the grueling ordeal came
to an end; Father Peter packed up his beads and rattles,
watching me with pained compassion. I turned away,
unwilling – or unable – to meet that understanding regard.
He hesitated a moment, some reconciling word on his lips, then
thought better of it. He raised his hand to me in blessing,
wavered, then sighing heavily turned away and stumped off.
In the heat of my anger I didn’t feel the small, chill breeze

that whispered through the garden stirring the dead leaves
on the path and ruffling Mama’s silvered hair...

It was only after he left that I made my way back to
Mama’s side. She lay in the gentle sunshine, eyes closed,
serene and already beautified. She opened those clear,
all-seeing eyes as I settled back down into the chair beside her.
“Kind, was ist los? You look liked you’ve bitten into a sour plum,”
she asked quickly, still a mother even in the waning hours of life.
I valiantly tried squashing down the molten magma of my
volcanic emotions and smiled at her, but the thin stretching
of my lips didn’t fool her; after all, she was Mama and had always
been able to see through me – much to my childhood consternation.
I gave up the futile effort and looked at her, sighing in frustration.
“Mama, does all this – (“mumbo jumbo” came into my brain, but I
didn’t say it aloud) –” I waved my hand vaguely “ – really comfort you?”
Her face transformed into a radiant smile that answered my
question far better than words. I took her frail hand into mine,
studying the translucent quality of her skin. I could almost see
her spirit shining through it, like a light glowing through a thin
paper shade...I sighed, feeling all the fire of my righteous wrath
drain away, leaving me empty and alone... “Mama,”
I asked hesitantly, not sure how to approach this ache
“--are you afraid to die...?”

The question fluttered in the air between us
like a black butterfly, quiet but demanding attention.
Mama seemed genuinely startled, then slowly shook her head,
her eyes never leaving my face. “Are you?” was her soft response.
I knew she wasn’t asking was I afraid of the act of dying;
her question was much deeper and more soul-searching.
Was I afraid of HER dying...?

I bowed my head, the tears my anger had only masked finally
welling. Mama let them drip onto her fingers, then slide
down to her fragile wrist. “Kind,” she whispered to me
“where there is love, there is Gott and there is no fear.
And you are never alone, for He is always with us.
Believe it, Dear Heart, and don’t be afraid because
you are so loved, even if you can’t as yet accept it.”
She studied me with the absolute certainty of one
who knows for sure, for whom there are no more
questions, no doubts, no more puzzles to be solved.
All of her butterflies had long ago turned to gold...

Looking into Mama’s eyes I wanted to trust, to accept,
even though the small, chill breeze kept lispig
accusations in my ear and blowing doubts
into my heart. I didn’t have her child-like faith; I
had in my adult cynicism “put away childish things. “

But for this one afternoon on the edge of forever
the black butterfly closed its wings
and was still...