Sheila Delany/A HORDE OF BUTTERFLIES

A Telephone Call

Peter closes his wife's door so that he can call Caroline, a student assistant in the laboratory where he works. His wife is sitting at her tiny desk in their bedroom, writing a letter, he supposes. The telephone is down the hall, and though his wife knows who he is calling, and he knows she does, Peter does not want her to hear anything. Catherine is fragile enough already, unpredictable. Her present calm puzzles him, but makes it easier after all. There is no answer, and after replacing the receiver he walks back down the hall to re-open the bedroom door.

"No answer. She's probably making it with some young stud."

"Does it bother you?" Cool, almost clinically offhand.

"I suppose so."

Zombies

Catherine sleeps late, usually: she had been up at two and six to feed the baby. It is draining away her lifeblood, she thinks at these hours, even though she is not nursing. In the mornings she is dimly conscious of the dumbwaiter creaking up from the basement, of Peter's rising and quiet dressing, his solitary breakfast toward the front of the apartment, his leaving for work. Then Ginette comes in with her own key and takes care of the baby and takes her out and it is quiet again in the apartment.

Ginette is cheerful and pretty, nothing takes her by surprise. Catherine is glad they hired someone older, who knows what to do. The way Ginette pronounces her name — Meesis Cahlvair — makes something glamourous out of the plain businesslike name. Sometimes before going home Ginette will leave a pot of rice on the stove for their dinner, rice cooked with a hambone in the Haitian way, or chicken in a spicy red sauce. Ginette is about the color of a walnut shell. She wears her hair in a chignon and will not speak to Ken, the Jamaican janitor, because he is black and flirtatious. She wheels the pram by him without a word.

In the apartment Ginette talks profusely, or hums or sings to the baby. Catherine likes to have her tell about Haiti. Ginette will not describe a voodoo, though she said they occur even here in New York, at a certain club not many blocks uptown. She tells of zombies, people who have been drugged by a village medicine man. The drug, or poison, produces a death-like coma for several days. After the victim is buried as dead, the medicine man digs him or her up, only now the victim, brain-damaged, remembers nothing and can do nothing but obey orders. The zombie is secretly taken to another region and sold as a docile servant. They are much in demand. Ginette has a friend who knows several medicine men, the friend has learned some of their lore and wants to attend medical school in Paris.

A Nightmare

Sleep; she fears it. Her dreams are crowded, tempestuous. From some of them she wakens at the verge of tears, clutching the quilt, pulse pounding in the throat. She approaches sleep nervously, as if entering a courtroom, or a foreign country. In one of the dreams that she does remember she is smearing the walls with excrement, peacefully defiling the walls with her own excrement. From this dream she awakens as from a nightmare, sobbing.

Job in the Whirlwind

Peter will do anything his wife asks, if only she will ask. He has told her this often. Though Catherine is an intelligent woman — no doubt about that, a zoologist, for heaven's sake — there is a sullenness to her now that almost borders on stupidity. She is being stupid about Caroline, who is only a student lab assistant and certainly no threat. Peter has offered to stop seeing the girl the minute Catherine asks. He knows it isn't the best time; hell, it isn't for him either. But Catherine does not ask. It is as if she were conducting an experiment to see who cracks first. Immured in her long hair, her knitting, her letters home, she observes and waits. She takes everything too hard. Occasionally Peter wonders what it would be like to be married to somebody simple and vulnerable. It will be good

for Catherine to start work again. Her old laboratory job is filled, but others will open up soon.

Shattering the sullen, watchful calm there have been one or two episodes. During these moments of shrieking fury Peter barely recognizes his wife. He feels like Job in the whirlwind, uncomprehending, awed. Peter considers himself a simple person, basically: simple and therefore predictable. He sees simplicity as his central virtue. If forced to choose he will choose Catherine, naturally. If not forced to choose he will let things alone, to run their natural course. Peter does not borrow trouble. Sufficient to the day.

Death-Train

Catherine can hardly bear to look at it, what she's done to it. What she's done. "It" is "her". With a name, Laurel: Peter's name for the baby after two weeks without a name. The baby is tainted, touched as if by a demon's wing, ever so lightly but it is enough. If the baby survives it will be a big-headed creature in an institution whom they will visit weekly, then monthly, then forget about if they are lucky. But Catherine knows she will not forget, never. It—she, Laurel—will be her despair always.

It means, simply, that Catherine was not fit. Again. Judged and found wanting. They ought to have known not to force barred gates: five years barren, two miscarriages, and now. This body that should protect, this body a death-train. Defiled with infant corpses in the millions, carrying children to their graves as surely as Jews to Dachau. Can you do nothing right, then, neither take life nor give it? Chopped hair and sliced wrist, years before Peter. Peter knows about it, you can't very well hide scars. Another time he does not know: with pills, between miscarriages. Death is her trade, death her profession. She knows about life except to produce it. "If you ever should kill yourself," Catherine reflects, "they can make your epitaph 'At last she did something right.' "

La Loi

"You should come out dancing with me and my boyfriend."

"But Peter doesn't dance."

"So you come without Mr. Cahlvair. Plenty of men will be

happy to dance with you, believe me. I am older than you. I am a grandmother and I go every week. You don't need to go with a man, you find one."

Ginette tells about her marriage, now ended, to a man who made her miserable with other women. Once she had followed her husband to a Cuban restaurant where he met another woman for dinner. She waited outside until the meal was served, then stormed in and overturned the table on the two of them. "Sometimes," she says, "I get like that. I feel to have *la loi.* You know" It is what happens to you at a voodoo, she explains, to have *la loi.*

A Horde of Butterflies

Catherine spends a good deal of time in the bedroom since the baby has been born. She reads or knits, she rests, she feeds the baby when Ginette has gone home. Sometimes she pushes up the window and sits on the broad sill to catch the autumn sun. With her long light hair and the whole apartment behind her, she is like a figurehead except that she is terrified every moment of falling and more terrified of allowing herself to fall. She keeps one foot on the floor inside, never letting her outer leg dangle or even project beyond the sill. It would be so simple to lean forward into that irresistible pull. Peter discourages her habit of sunbathing in the window. He tells her to use the roof, but the roof is hot and tar-papery, and visible from other buildings.

Once down the canyon of the street a butterfly came slowly past the window: a monarch, orange and black. Catherine was surprised to see it so high. Leaning out, she noticed other spots in the air up and down the street, even higher than her window. All afternoon the monarchs fluttered by, going south to a wintering place. Their formation was composed mainly of empty space, like an atom. What is the word, Catherine wondered: a flock of butterflies? Surely not a herd, but possibly a horde? One day she must ask.

Graffiti

Returning from a weekend at her mother's with the baby, Catherine finds clean sheets on the bed.

"Were you here with her?"

"Don't ask questions if you don't want to know the answers, Catherine."

Catherine screams and screams. Who are they to force her to think of them? With the reddest lipstick she owns she scrawls graffiti on all the bedroom walls: "Catherine's place" "Go somewhere else" "Do not use this room!" She scribbles warnings and threats, some of them in block letters, others in script, a tornado, a defacing whirlwind. It will always be her room, but she will make it too ugly for anyone else. "Let's see how sensitive your assistant is," she shouts.

Poor Peter. He spends hours afterward scouring the walls. He feeds the baby and cooks something for Catherine who lies, purged and convalescent, weeping in the bedroom. He won't go out to buy anything, afraid to leave her alone. Or is it alone with the baby? Peter is frightened for her, and frightened of her. That is why he suggests a clinic uptown: to help her deal with her anger, he says: to help her forgive.

But it was so strange, for Catherine had felt all the while a calm at the center like a smooth small white stone. It was this hard blank at the center that let her act, even forced her to act, with completest certainty, just as if she were performing another household chore: claiming her room. A necessary task. A considered judgement.

She agrees, anyhow, to apply to the clinic. She telephones and gives her address to receive the application form. She is shamefully, shamelessly grateful for Peter's love.

Sick Animals

Catherine sees her life as a constant state of emergency. Sometimes the emergency is paralysis. Curiously, it is then that people seem to like her best or dislike her least: she is very quiet then, she sits reticent and vulnerable within the veil of her long light hair doing crochet or knitting a blanket for the baby. Peter says she is easier to get along with at these times, not so prickly or hysterical as at other times. She tends, he says, to overreact.

Even so, she notices people turn away from her in pity — or is it disgust? The reaction of the healthy organism is to shun the sick one. Or to kill it, eat it, drive it to death. Even the amiable dolphin cannibalizes the wounded of its kind.

Hope for the Best

Peter has taken books out, but Catherine will not look at them although none of the books has pictures. She could not bear to look at pictures. Ironic, Peter reflects, that two scientists should have a damaged infant. From the library books Peter has learned that some ancient cultures exposed such children on a cliff to die. He has learned that there is a high survival rate if the child is kept at home, and that many of them become sweet-tempered, loving adults. There is an institute in Philadelphia that has a program. Possibly the baby will die, prone to infection, but on the other hand, new discoveries are made everyday. It's important to hope for the best.

Peter remembers when, before going to sleep, Catherine would describe how the baby felt, moving within: an interior tickling, a dragging movement across the inner surface, a rib gently pressed from the other side. There would be the sudden odd twitch that even Peter could observe. Paradoxical, he thought, the passivity after birth: from the previous activity you'd think it almost capable of walking away from the delivery table. They'd known nearly at once, of course, and Dr. Bertrand has been wonderful, still is. Doctor Bertrand agrees it is important to hope for the best.

Yellow Ducks

Although she has not seen such a blanket before, Catherine knows exactly what it should look like. It is composed of knitted squares sewn together. Each square consists of four squares inside one another. She could have crocheted each four-color square from the center out but instead she is knitting each one from the top down, counting stitches. The outermost square is dark green, for the life around them. Ash to ashes, dust to dust. Then there is a purple square, a beige one, and finally, the smallest and only complete one, yellow. Peter is the purple, beige for herself, and then the baby. Yellow is for babies, baby ducks and chicks especially. Or children in yellow raincoats. Catherine had thought the blanket would be gay and circuslike, a striped tent, but now as she knits she sees it is garish and dull at once, an eyesore, offensive.

A Wristwatch

Ginette rocks the pram and chants a two-note lullaby: "*Do, do, l'enfant dort, l'enfant dormira bientot, do, do...*" The baby falls asleep quickly in the fresh air, but Ginette keeps up the song, softly. A good baby, but thin like her mother, nervous. And ugly, Lord! But a baby can't help how it's born, you have to love them however they look. Besides, children change, maybe they get better-looking later. Louis was always handsome right from the start, thank God, and already he's made her a grandmother, that boy, a grandmother at thirty-nine!

Ginette's boyfriend is a policeman and her son is addicted to heroin. The son is being cured at a center downtown. The boyfriend is nice, a white man; he spends money but not like the Haitian men when they have it. There they know how to live, money or no money. One of her boyfriends in Haiti, a government minister, gave Ginette a little yellow convertible that she would drive up the mountain roads to the big hotels. She's known a few generous men in her life, thank God.

Louis is late for his lunch-money. He doesn't like the food at the center, and for good behavior they let him eat lunch out. Even with a watch he's late. Ginette found the watch in a bottom drawer with the laundered shirts, obviously an old one of Mr. Calvert's that he had no one to give it away to when he got his new fancy one. He should have given it to her in the first place. Some people you have to help them to be generous. It's good for them. God will give them credit.

Walking Wounded

The second time Peter brought the girl to her bedroom Catherine knew there was nothing left to say about it. She drew the wedding ring from her finger, laid it on the sill and opened the big window.

The window, as wide as her arm-span, is their bedroom window and it overlooks the city. She flings the tiny golden ring out of the wide window, not caring even to trace its trajectory. She is still not free, but she feels that she will be free one day, that she is preparing herself to be free.

Peter goes out into the oily, lamplit street ten floors below to

search in gutters and basement stairwells. He recovers the ring and fetches it back upstairs, but Catherine will not put it on again, never. Sadly Peter puts the ring away; Catherine does not ask where.

Peter wants the three of them to be a community of love, but now he sees it is impossible. He grieves the loss of his dream. Caroline wants decisive action, something definite. She calls Peter pusillanimous, they quarrel and he walks away from her in the laboratory where she had sought him out.

Catherine continues to do the usual things. She shops, takes the baby to the doctor, changes her when Ginette is not there, talks on the telephone to friends whom she cannot bear to tell what is happening with Peter. She is lost doing these things, she does them by rote, walking wounded.

Protection

The blanket is already larger than it needs to be to cover the baby's bed or pram, but Catherine continues to produce the little multicolored squares. She is eager to complete the blanket because when the blanket is done she is going to wrap herself in it. She will hold the baby in her arms and brush its head lightly with her lips, feeling the fine hair against her lips, as fine as the hairs on her own wrist. She will hold the baby in her arms, covering the two of them in colorful squares of wool. She will cover her own head with the blanket like a woman from a foreign country, Mexico or India. She is going to raise up the window, seat herself on the broad sill, all wrapped as she is in the knitted blanket. She will clasp the baby close as she has longed to do for days and weeks, protecting it forever. And she will lean forward, regretfully, into the yellow sunshine.

Witness

It is a graceful old building, the cornerstone engraved "1911". There is a narrow entrance court, and wrought-iron bars over the heavy glass doors. An ancient dumbwaiter in each apartment creaks up from the basement first thing in the morning to receive yesterday's garbage. Also in the basement are the washing machines and dryers in their stolid white rows.

The basement labyrinth is ruled by Ken, resident caretaker. Ken is rotund and friendly, with a soft Jamaican accent. He

rolls his eyes and hints things about Ginette. "You don't know that girl," he advises. Catherine continues to fold laundry, noncommittal. Ken withdraws to another part of the basement to repair the pipes and wires.

A slight buzzing catches Catherine's attention. There, in a web spun across the corner of a basement window, a large fly vibrates noisily. Already the spider approaches. It is on the fly's back, passionately injecting poison just behind the fly's head. The spider is somewhat smaller than the fly, a round mottled pebble. The spider applies its underside obscenely to the fly's back, jabs until a drop of sticky substance comes from its underbelly. From this matter bonds are quickly spun. Two or three rapid workmanlike twists and the fly is enveloped, wings bound to body, ready to haul. The spider pulls its encased prey up to a spot just beneath the ceiling near a heavy, brown-painted pipe. There it settles in, cradling the fly's head in position with several of its striped, attenuated legs. The fly's body throbs as it is rhythmically pumped out. After a minute more there is no movement: the spider rests.

Catherine waits to see whether the spider will resume its ministrations. For the time being it does not, so she gathers up her folded sheets, as full of this new knowledge as any witness to a most complete murder.

Distance

The blanket is done, there is no point making it bigger. From within the apartment, from just inside the window, the sidewalk ten floors below is not visible. Standing by the window, Catherine can see the black street, the other pavement, the building made of beige stone that forms the opposite wall of this chasm. In order to see directly below she would have to learn far out, she would have to be about to fall.

The idea of impact frightens her less than the idea of falling for a long, sickening moment. One could lose one's mind during free fall. Perhaps she ought to drug herself first. She must hold the baby ever so tightly to protect it.

To clear things up, finally, to be unencumbered, all of them. To be effaced on the pavement, rubbed out like the chalk-writing that children do on sidewalks, yellow chalk of hopscotch squares or slogans about who likes who. Rubbed out

on purpose, by foot, a pale yellow smudge on the pavement.

Ceremoniously Catherine drapes the knitted blanket over her head and shoulders, gathering it to her breast.

Taking Risks

Children wade through layers of brown leaves along the walk, kicking them up like water and falling, diving, into leaf-piles. On a park bench facing the river sit a man and a girl, near but not next to one another. It is where they often meet, so that he thinks of her whenever he walks through the park alone or with his wife. The gritty texture of the concrete bench-supports with tiny pebbles ingrained in it, the soft, near-splintery feel of the wood beneath his hand will always, he fervently believes, remind him of their sparse conversations, of the difficulty of risk. Both the man and the girl are dark, ruddy, clean-featured; there is a slight facial resemblance though they are not related. The girl wears a wrinkled trenchcoat; the man, in corduroys and tweed jacket, smokes a pipe. Behind them the late afternoon traffic rushes up and down Riverside Drive.

"What do you want from me?" Her voice is soft, tentative.

"Caroline, I wish I knew."

"All my relationships are difficult now," the girl sighs.