

Butterflies

by **Christina M. Wells**

The small piece of paper had a name, address, and phone number written in a hand I didn't recognize. "Betty Friedan," it read. I wondered if Friedan had scrawled this in a meeting somewhere, maybe in the living room down the hall. "Betty Friedan sat on my divan," my grandmother, Juanita Dadisman Sandford, had said so many times. I could see her in the kitchen, gesturing with her arms as she mentioned *The Feminine Mystique's* author. But now my cousin was down the hall, packing up the dishes for the estate sale.

"Hey, we could call her," my wife Jen said, looking at the slip of paper. "Maybe she'd like to know."

"Unfortunately, I am pretty sure she is also dead."

"Yeah, she is," my aunt MK confirmed. She was going through a heap of my grandmother's letters, deciding what should be kept and what should be thrown out. I had two stacks of books in front of me. They were a small part of the piles we had surrounded ourselves with in my grandmother's lavender home office. My other aunt, Susan, had told me that I couldn't throw away a Baylor University flask because it was probably a collector's item. I looked at the books, the papers, and what was probably a dead feminist's handwriting. I looked at my grandmother's letters stacked before MK—definitely a dead feminist's handwriting. These materials had real meaning.

How would we figure out where to put all of this stuff? How could I even think of categorizing it?

The week before, Jen and I had listened to a five-year old nephew play the drums and had gone through the 3D *Flight of the Butterflies* exhibit at the science museum we toured with family in Greensboro. We watched the orange and black

monarchs as they seemed to come closer and closer, then fade into something more ethereal. It was surreal, watching transparent butterflies seem to come closer and closer, only to fly away and disappear.

Before we left Greensboro that weekend, my father called to tell me my ninety-year old grandmother had fallen and broken her hip. She was in such bad shape that no one expected her to survive.

She was my maternal grandmother, but my dad had been her colleague in the sociology department at the state university in my hometown—that was where he had first seen my mother. For years, my father and grandmother had had offices down the hall from one another. Sometimes when I was little, one had been in class, and the other had watched me, while my mother worked somewhere else. Everything was tied up together: work, family, work, people from work.

On the way home from Greensboro, Jen and I stopped at a bagel place and a winery in the Charlottesville area. We needed to be outside, to talk about what was going on with my grandmother's health. The winery was small and desolate, a little way off the main road. The woman overseeing the tastings seemed angry and raw, irritated at having to be at work on a sunny fall day. I didn't want to be near her, and we sat outside on a long wooden deck, lost in memories and concern for my grandmother. I looked at the small glass of wine in front of me, recalling how my grandparents had once sat with me in the bar at a Mexican restaurant in one of the cities where I'd gone to graduate school. My grandmother had picked up a bottle of beer and said, "I like this brand. It gives me the best buzz." She had always had a way of saying the unexpected, nothing like the grandma rhetoric of the south. Once she had said, "These Baptists give their kids such hang ups about sex. When people are Puritans, their kids can't be normal." Then there was the time when she said, "I'm so glad you're a lesbian! Now you don't have to deal with men's shit!" She had cried over my announcement as if experiencing real joy, like experiencing Christmas in July or an unexpected lottery win.

Our left-wing grandma was the most unusual babysitter in town. No one in the history of her Ouachita Hills neighborhood had ever had been so open-minded. Opposite my grandmother in every way, the judgmental old woman across the street always had to know the comings and goings of the neighborhood and believed anyone

passing time there had to conform to a rigid standard. She had looked at my cousin and me through binoculars once when we were little girls, and we had found a pair of binoculars and looked right back, unafraid of her judgments. We were our grandmother's granddaughters.

This was long ago and far away. People no longer talked about my grandmother's trek to a Joan Baez concert, or the time she took her little white daughters and some students to see Martin Luther King, Jr. speak or to a black church when he died. They no longer talked about how she wore purple everywhere for years, her style legendary among friends, students, and community members for this chosen uniform. No, in recent years the hushed talk about my grandmother had shifted to how she kept repeating herself, and how aggressive she'd been with the nurses' aides who took care of my grandfather or the repairmen who couldn't help her put the closet door back on its hinges.

"I don't get why people don't grasp how memory loss works," I said, watching the tree limbs blow above the deck at the winery. "Do you know what my dad said to me? He said, 'You know she called us six times in a row the other day!' And he was angry. So, I just said, 'You get she has dementia, right?'"

Somewhere during a long conversation about how people were handling my grandmother's decline and her loss of independence, Jen and I saw something flying toward us, lyrically in a rhythm all its own. It was a purple butterfly, the first I'd ever seen outside a butterfly habitat.

All my life I had associated butterflies with my grandparents. My grandfather had died several months prior, and I recalled one of my favorite images of him when he doused himself in aftershave to go to the St. Louis Butterfly Habitat. The butterflies landed all over him while we took pictures. Strangers stopped to see the man who was covered with striking butterflies. He was perfectly still so they would move towards him—and the aftershave didn't hurt the process, either.

He was calm when he died, and even though he was in his nineties, I really hadn't been expecting it. He had recovered from a stroke, had had serious intestinal problems, had had his gall bladder removed, and had sustained a major head injury in

his driveway. Still, he had lived. I saw him as a survivor. On one of his more recent birthdays, he had said, "Can you believe I'm this old? I don't think I'll make it to 100, though." His late life diet had included innumerable mini-frozen pizzas, lots of bread, and plenty of "breakfast for dinner." He lived on fat and carbs, and he was diabetic to boot. Yet he lived. He always lived.

And then an infection that wouldn't have touched a younger person killed him. He had been an English professor, like I am, and I stared into the living room at the eyeless Shakespeare bust that I was supposed to take with me, eventually. I had been scared of it as a child, for its stillness, and well, for the missing eyes. Now Grandpa was gone, and that was more frightening than anything.

Jen and I had spent the night with Grandma the night after his funeral, after a lunch where Grandma sat next to me with a glass of wine and a plate of food she could barely touch. "Many of these people have never seen me drink before. And you know what? I DON'T CARE." She couldn't consistently remember who all the children present were, but she remembered well enough that most of my grandfather's colleagues were Baptists, and that a lot of the neighbors claimed not to drink.

"You've probably never seen me drink before," she said to a woman sitting across from me.

"Juanita, I think you'd be surprised what I know about you."

This was moderately funny, until it wasn't. Later that night, Jen and I had to get my grandmother back to bed several times.

"Where's Herman?" she said to me that night and the next day. It was like the voice of a child waking into a nightmare.

At some point that week, when she was calmer, I tried to see how far back the forgetting went. "Grandma, do you remember staying up with me and ordering pizza, watching OJ go down the freeway in his Bronco?"

"No," she said. "Why would we have watched that? I guess the whole country did. The whole country probably did. Why?"

Another time we had asked her about working on the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women with Hillary Clinton, who had once given my grandmother a handwritten note, praising a speech she had given. "Yes, yes. And now she's running

for governor. They'll never let her win." We didn't have much chance to talk about Clinton's run for the presidency or how my grandmother drifted in and out of knowing what it was she was running for. What happened over and over again was that my grandmother would say, "You know I used to teach a course in Death and Dying? But now I know nothing about death and dying. Can you believe that?"

The week she died, I couldn't help thinking of how she had said that, said it again, and said it again, as if for new emphasis and clarification, and not only out of Alzheimer's. At some point she fell into a sleep that lasted for several days until she didn't wake up. At that time, Jen and I had already flown to Arkansas and people were beginning to talk about the funeral. I had called her and had someone put the phone to her head. Among many other things, I said, "Grandma, maybe dying is like being yourself, only with super powers."

She already had super powers, to me, as evidenced by every story I ever told about her. Years before she had had plans for what she wanted various people to do at her funeral. She wanted a cousin and I to read essays, things we had written when we were in high school. Mine was about a time she was futilely trying to clean her study, the lavender one. I think this was from the same era where she had a poster up that featured Golda Meir, with the caption, "But can she type?" This was the world she lived in, and I stayed within its orbit whenever possible. In her files, she found this little plastic bag of green and white buttons that said "ERA Today." She handed them to me and suggested I pass them around to friends.

This was either fifth grade or sixth, therefore the mid-eighties. I didn't know that the ERA hadn't passed—only that I already believed fervently in equality. It's not a hard sell on a playground filled with ten and eleven-year old girls, still sometimes hanging strong to monkey bars while boys taunt them and act a fool. Only one person gave me back a button, and that was because her mother told her the feminists had changed her hymnal at church. That didn't even make sense to me, and I don't remember what my grandmother said in response. I imagine that she sighed and rolled her eyes, if only because that was a typical Grandma response when people didn't get it.

That is still my favorite Grandma story, even better than the one where she allowed my cousin and I to camp out in a tent in her living room or the time she took us for ice cream in our pajamas. It doesn't even compare with her not being mad when we took more of her butterfly stickers than she had offered us, and we plastered them over several free surfaces.

At a theoretical funeral, I wouldn't have read the teen-age version of the story, but I would have written a grown up one, reflecting on the buttons, the ERA, the resurgence of the ERA, and what it was like to learn that Arkansas, where I was born, was one of the states that completely screwed that era's version of the ERA because of its nay vote. My grandmother had taught me that activism and progressive opinions matter. That is how I always remember her.

At the real funeral, I brought a book with me, one I thought my grandmother had given me. I had held it in my office in Virginia, and it had fallen open to a poem about death by Mary Oliver, one that my grandmother's friend and former student, the minister for the service, later told me she regularly uses at funerals. I had found it by accident in a book I hadn't yet read. And I would read that poem at the funeral instead of my own stories. It felt right, when I didn't.

There are many stories I don't remember because I wasn't there. My grandparents both protested the Vietnam War outside a ROTC building. My grandmother started a chapter of NOW and led interracial meetings designed to help bring peaceful integration to the town where I lived. A housekeeper once told her that she should beware the KKK. Later, much later, Grandma wrote a book on poverty with some students and served with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

But I remember from life, not from stories, that both my grandparents made an extra place at the table for a student, a friend, or a combination therein. I remember how many people they kept up with over the years. I remember my grandfather's walking tour of Scotland, and I remember my grandmother singing "Midnight Train to Georgia" and Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt, and Emmylou Harris's *Trio* album in the car, while I associated my grandfather, chair of English at a Baptist college, with Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler." I remember Bing Crosby at Christmas and my grandmother's glass manger scene in the front window.

I remember being the head monarch butterfly in a first-grade play. It was on a nature trail, and another girl gave me grief for wearing pants—jeans, no less, something my whole family thought was normal. I stand in the pictures, strapped into a large butterfly, turning around and around in back of a cocoon. Looking at the images, I know so much now that I didn't know then. For instance, I know that as I rotated as a butterfly, my grandmother was sitting in an outdoor amphitheater, unknowingly having her purse invaded by ants.

I remember countless family triumphs and tragedies. I also remember how it felt to know that my grandparents' house was a shell, and that none of us would ever be in it again. There was always a tree in the backyard, hanging over the house. It always seemed precarious, but it held tight to the ground, never particularly blowing in the wind, and never, never blowing the house down.

Jen and I bought a house some months after my grandmother's funeral, a kind of family home for the new generation. It's a very different design from the houses I knew in youth. Sometimes, though, I catch a butterfly hanging close to the ground, or I see something familiar from the past in a house that's still largely new to me. I even think of growing a butterfly habitat in the backyard, something to pull the butterflies to me. I wonder, variously, what it would take to bring a monarch to me, or a purple butterfly. Perhaps we don't know what we draw towards us, or what gets drawn to us by the inexplicable. I don't believe that because something is invisible that it isn't here.

Someone once took a picture of my grandmother, all in purple, front door wide open. She is glowing in the sunlight that's pouring in the front glass, and she looks radiant and otherworldly. She is smiling a large wide grin, sporting a white and green ERA Today button. She looks like something has beamed her in. Then again, she looks planted to the ground.



Juanita Dadisman Sandford



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