

Sample of A Butterfly for Zhuangzi

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The cabin lights dimmed. Air rushed over the lowered flaps. Thisbe looked out the airplane's window at Shanghai's glittering lights. She'd never been overseas before. It would be nice to look around the city, but they'd keep her at the clinic until she recovered from the surgery enough to fly home. Thisbe looked at her watch and tried to estimate the time back home. It was probably too late to call Andy. He had put up such a fuss when he'd learned his mother would be gone for a week.

The plane banked and centered between the parallel lines of blinking lights that marked the runway. Thisbe felt a bump when the landing gear locked in place. Moments later the wheels touched the ground with a jolt. The pilot throttled the engines to maximum reverse thrust, slowing the plane and pressing Thisbe against her seat belt. The pilot let up and taxied to the gate.

Thisbe collected her belongings and joined the people exiting the plane. The ramp smelled of kerosene and exhaust. Once inside the terminal she scanned the crowd of unfamiliar faces and felt panic grow in her chest. What was she doing here? Should she turn around and take the plane back home? It was too late for that. She'd chosen her course, once she'd signed the contract with Maya Escorts. The dark-haired people surrounding her spoke in odd, alien lisping tones. She spotted a thin longhaired woman holding a sign that said "Miss Thisbe Anderson." Though clean and not faded, the woman's clothing seemed somehow stale and lifeless, like dead flowers or the old blouses Thisbe had found in the bottom of her mother's drawers. Thisbe waved and made her way to her escort.

"Miss Anderson, I am Miss Wang, and this is Mr. Yu." The woman pointed to a short man with crooked teeth and a bad haircut. "How was your flight?"

"It's Anderson, with a T. The flight was good. I've never flown business class before."

"Do you have any other bags?" Miss Wang pointed to the wheeled sixty-nine credit green suitcase Thisbe pulled by its extended handle.

Thisbe shook her head. Miss Wang spoke to Mr. Yu in Chinese.

"*Hao.*" Yu scooped up Thisbe's bag.

"The car is this way," Miss Wang said. "If you would please follow me."

Following Miss Wang proved exasperating. She moved through the crowd as if dodging bodies were an Olympic sport she'd trained for since childhood. Every time Thisbe stopped to let someone pass, Miss Wang got farther ahead. Then Thisbe would look back at Yu, who nodded and gave an embarrassed smile.

Miss Wang bypassed the immigration line and approached a bored man in a green uniform outlined with red piping. Thisbe withdrew her brand-new passport from her handbag, but the official waved her through without giving it a glance. The same happened at customs. Thisbe and her party strode past the other passengers loading their bags onto conveyors that fed the X-ray machines' cavernous mouths.

Outside, the night air was hot and humid. Miss Wang led Thisbe to a beat-up station wagon. It took several tries to start the engine. Yu shifted into gear and maneuvered into traffic. His constant starts and stops made Thisbe ill. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the cool window.

After an hour-long drive they arrived. Yu punched numbers into the panel to open the iron gate. After her long flight, all Thisbe wanted was to shower and go to bed. She got her wish. Miss Wang led her up the steps of the ivy-covered brick building. They took a rickety elevator to the third floor and walked down a tiled hallway to Thisbe's room. Yu placed her suitcase inside, and he and Miss Wang left.

There was a picture on the wall of an ancient Chinese man with a long beard, who wore a cloth cap that looked like a pair of underpants. A colorful butterfly perched on the man's shoulder. Thisbe looked out the door. The nurse sitting at the end of the hall nodded and smiled. A sign over the bathroom tap said not to drink the water. Fortunately a thermos of boiled water sat on the nightstand. Thisbe poured a cup and drank. She showered, crawled between the sheets, and fell instantly to sleep.

Thisbe woke before sunrise, walked to the window, and stared at the moon. Millions of plastic sheets on its surface portrayed a cigarette logo, visible from the earth. Twenty years ago politicians had called the tobacco company's offer to fund space research "an exciting partnership between government and industry." Thisbe wondered what they'd call it now that the tobacco company has withdrawn its funding. Her stomach growled. No one was in the hall except for a nurse with her head down on her desk. Thisbe retrieved the Robe of Purity from her bag and returned to bed to read in order to take her mind off the hunger pangs. Eventually traffic sounds came from outside, as the city roused from sleep and the sky lightened, Thisbe heard voices in the hall. A half hour later a nurse entered.

"Please change." She handed Thisbe a hospital gown.

Still later a Chinese doctor in a white lab coat carried a clipboard into the room. A nurse in a white uniform trailed behind.

"Good morning, Miss ..." The doctor examined his clipboard. "Anderton. I'm Dr. Lee. Would you sit up, please?" Dr. Lee produced a penlight. "Follow my finger with your eyes. Good."

During the exam Thisbe wondered if she should admit lying about her high school drug use on the questionnaire. "What's that picture about?" She pointed to the wall.

"Oh," the doctor said. "It's an old Chinese story. Once the sage Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he wasn't sure if he was a man who'd dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. Fitting, don't you think?" The doctor scribbled his final notes and left.

The nurse returned moments later with a wheelchair. She patted it to indicate Thisbe should sit and then wheeled Thisbe to a room with an MRI machine that resembled a giant sugar cube with a hole bored through the center. Thisbe understood that she should lie on the table. When she did, a technician placed earphones over her head and adjusted the control so the table slid inside. The opening was not much larger than Thisbe's waist. The close fit made Thisbe's skin clammy. The muscles between her shoulder blades twisted. She thought of getting trapped inside during an earthquake and wanted to claw at the walls.

"Watch the screen, please," a voice said from the earphones.

A small flat-panel display in front of her eyes turned solid blue. The solid color changed into patterns. Thisbe heard clicking while this happened. The patterns became pictures of food, animals, and people. The images paused. Thisbe wanted to scratch her knee but feared that moving would spoil the tests. A low tone alternated between her left and right ears, rising in pitch until Thisbe could no longer hear it. Her lower back began to ache. Thisbe squirmed to ease the pain.

A plastic tube extended toward her face.

“Please put the tube in your mouth.”

Thisbe followed the instructions. A few drops of sugar water squirted into her mouth. Bitter, salty, and sour tastes followed. She smelled ammonia.

“You’re done.”

The electric motor hummed and withdrew the patient couch from the machine. Once Thisbe’s head cleared the opening, she sat up and rubbed her lower back. The next patient - a Black woman with a round, glowing face - waited in a wheelchair by the door.

Thisbe had had enough for the morning and looked forward to breakfast and a rest. Her stomach growled once more. Instead of returning Thisbe to her suite, the nurse rolled her to a room where a barber draped a nylon smock over her shoulders. The man walked away and returned with a buzzing set of electric clippers. Thisbe jerked away. It was all happening too fast. The barber steadied her head and mowed furrows in Thisbe’s brown hair. Within a minute it lay in a pile on the floor. The barber lathered her head and shaved it smooth with a straight razor.

The nurse wheeled Thisbe into another room where a man wrapped her arm with an elastic band and injected something into her vein. When he removed the band, warmth spread through Thisbe’s limbs, relaxing her muscles and easing her anxiety. She hardly worried when the man injected Novocain into her head and screwed four posts into her skull.

Soon Thisbe felt like she was flying - flying when they took her for another brain scan, flying when they stuck an IV into her vein. Thisbe flew to the operating room and seemed to hover over the table when the doctors attached her head to a metal frame. A high-pitched whining drill bored holes in her skull. Under bright lights, doctors with magnifying glasses on their spectacles inserted wires into her brain and asked what she saw, heard, and felt. Finally the anesthesiologist injected something into Thisbe’s IV, and she slept.

Thisbe woke in a room full of electronic equipment. Ghostly blue traces on monitors displayed her heart and respiration rates. She sat up carefully avoiding dislodging the tubes and wires attached to her body. Her head throbbed. Her tongue was swollen with the drugs’ bitter aftertaste. She longed for a gallon of water to wash away her grogginess. Thisbe ran a tentative finger over her bandaged head and stopped at the socket behind her ear. Emboldened, she pressed gently until the pain forced her to stop. She pressed the call button. A nurse arrived a few minutes later.

“Could I have some water?” Thisbe croaked.

The nurse returned with a small cup, which Thisbe downed. After making her track a penlight, the nurse abandoned her to her aches and exhaustion. Thisbe slept. Periodically the nurse woke her for the same follow-the-light test.

The next morning they moved her to a room without wires and machines. A woman rolled a cart into the room and set a breakfast tray on the nightstand.

“Good morning,” Thisbe said.

The woman nodded with a bashful grin and rolled her cart to the next room. Thisbe picked at the runny, lukewarm eggs, toast, and fruit cocktail and washed them down with tea. The doctors didn’t allow Thisbe to read or watch TV. Instead she watched dust motes float in the light spilling from the window as the sun swept from dawn to dusk. Traffic sounds and the hospital’s rhythms distracted her from boredom, aches, and exhaustion.

On the second day after surgery, a nurse removed Thisbe’s bandages. Thisbe stared at the mirror and touched the holes where the screws had been removed from her skull. Two days later Dr. Lee returned, accompanied by a technician rolling a cart of electronics.

“Time to see if everything works.” Dr. Lee plugged a cable into the socket behind Thisbe’s ear. “Just lie back and relax.”

The technician powered the cart. Cooling fans hummed white noise. The machinery emitted a series of beeps. The technician turned dials and typed on the keyboard. Suddenly a field of blue with a magenta corner appeared before Thisbe. The picture remained when she closed her eyes.

“What do you see?” Dr. Lee asked.

Thisbe described the scene. Speaking Chinese, the technician made adjustments until Thisbe saw solid blue. They worked through a series of colors and stopped at a test pattern. The technician sharpened the focus so Thisbe could read the letters. Once they sorted out the visuals, they adjusted sound, smell, taste, and touch-virtual senses that felt eerie to Thisbe. She felt like she was there and not there at the same time.

“All right, Miss Anderton,” Dr. Lee said. “Are you ready for the full effect?”

Thisbe nodded. She felt a sudden dislocation, as if her consciousness swirled down a drain. Thisbe found herself in a white room, empty except for a young Asian woman in a blue skirt, white gloves, and white blouse sitting on a wooden stool. Thisbe moved closer. Her footsteps sounded on the hardwood floor. She scratched her knee, but the itch remained.

“I’m Keiko, your Fujitsu FJ9321 cranial implant’s autonomous agent.” The woman bowed. “My files tell me your name is Miss Thisbe Anderson. Would you prefer to be called Thisbe or Miss Anderson?”

“It’s Anderton, with a T, but please call me Thisbe.”

“Very well, Thisbe. As your implant’s agent, my job is to perform routine calibrations, run background diagnostics, and alert you should your implant need maintenance. Have you had any problems with your implant?”

“Well, my knee itches.”

Keiko paused as if looking inside herself. “Currently wire AC92’s voltage is reading out of tolerance.” She paused again. “No, it’s dropped back into acceptable range. Erratic readings are common immediately after surgery. Your itch should clear up once your brain adapts to the implant. I’ll output a diagnostic report. Do you have any other questions?”

“I’m a little overwhelmed,” Thisbe said.

“That’s understandable. If you have questions or concerns about your implant, please bring them to my attention. I’ll return you now to your organic reality.”

Thisbe felt the spinning sensation. She opened her eyes and found herself back in the hospital room.