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BUTTERFLY PSYCHIC

有請蝶仙*

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The first time I saw him I sensed there might be something wrong with him.

Like a kid playing, he had a sheet of drawing paper spread out before him, about the size of a newspaper. On the paper was a grid, with a word in each square. The man's right hand held a chopstick, from which an origami butterfly hung by a thread. He closed his eyes and started murmuring; then his right hand, suspended above the page, began trembling. I couldn't see the point.

He seemed to be a most peculiar old man. So many odd-balls and oddities in this metropolis!—that's what I thought that first time I saw him amusing himself with a paper butterfly in the third-floor hallway of our apartment.

The second time I saw him he was crouching in the same

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place doing the same thing. This time, I couldn't help wondering—what if he's "mental"?

I wanted to inquire about him with a neighbor, but now there wasn't any opportunity. Besides, the people in this apartment were all of a philosophical demeanor, not the sort to be lightly disturbed. I was new to the building, had already knocked on two strangers' doors. I'd nearly been mistaken for a thief and wasn't keen on asking further questions.

The third time I saw him, his manner was disturbing. I halted on the landing above when I realized he was *talking* to the paper butterfly suspended from his chopstick. "C'mon, c'mon papillon, c'mon, c'mon, come papillon, come."

The skin on my scalp went numb. I was stunned . . . but determined to see what was going on. When he looked up and gave me this toothy grin, though, he caught me unaware. My heart constricted, for at that moment if he went berserk I would be in serious trouble: he was blocking the way down, and I didn't know if anyone would come to my rescue if I called, and there was no way down from the roof, *and* by his foot was a staff!

His smile soon hardened. Had my expression baffled him as well? Or maybe this was a sign he was going to try something?

The moments slipped by without him making any move to rise. Instead he started waving the paper butterfly in his hand and working his mouth at me:

"Hail, O spirit of the papillon," he said in a thick accent.

"Huh? What?" I said.

He beckoned me over; I came down the stairs warily and stopped a few feet away. For the first time I got a close look at him: his eyes were clear, his clothes neat, his hair kempt . . . he

seemed perfectly normal. He had better be normal, I thought. And if he's abnormal, he'd better be "eccentric" and not "ballistic." As I was turning the possibilities around in my head, he smiled and said:

"You live here?"

"Yes, I'm on my way to work."

"Wait a bit and watch me summon the spirit of the papillon."

"What? Summon the spirit of the what?"

"Papillon."

I didn't get it and just stood there. There still seemed to be no good reason for the staff by his side, and when he reached and grasped it I thought, enough was enough! Without a second thought, I burned a trail past him, down the stairs and out the door.

The fourth time I again had the "high ground." I'd seen him but he'd not seen me. I crept back up to my fifth-floor flat, got out my wooden sword, and went back down to the landing above the third floor to spy on him.

The paper butterfly was quivering above the paper. It seemed to hover over one square, then flutter over to another square, and then on to a third square. Now I could make out some of the symbols in the squares: arrive, come, return, China, well, son, outside, not, 7, 2, 3, 8, 5, gold, safe, born, girl, etc.

I must have watched him for a couple of minutes, when he took a deep breath and opened his eyes, setting the paper butterfly down on one of the squares. He pressed the butterfly with his hand and pondered the word inside the square.

Finally, he noticed my presence. I held the sword in front of me, as a deterrence measure. A look of apprehension appearing on his face: I'd preempted him. Calm and collected, I asked:

“What are you doing?”

“You again! Young man, last time. . . .”

“Exactly *what* are you doing?”

“I already told you: summoning the spirit of the papillon. What was wrong with you last time?”

“It looks like a butterfly. What’s a papillon?”

“This is! Papillon means butterfly. You could say I’m summoning the spirit of the butterfly. You can ask it questions and it will answer unto you.”

“Why do you always have that staff with you? Were you going to hit me with it last time?”

“Hit you! What are you talking about? This is a cane . . . you know, for walking? Last time you were acting very strangely. When you took off like that . . . it was kind of scary.”

I sighed with relief. He almost certainly wasn’t a madman: everything he said made sense. But summoning spiritual butterflies in the hallway of an apartment building? I’d never heard of such a thing.

I knew about psychics summoning the spirit of the saucer.¹ But the spirit of the papillon, or the butterfly, or whatever it was? That just seemed weird. I’d best remain on guard around him, I thought. Taipei had lots of everything, including people out of touch with reality. And I should know: I used to be a reporter. One time, at Lungshan Temple in Wanhua, I struck up a conversation with a fellow sitting idly on a bench. He conversed with me most articulately for going on a quarter of an hour, until I realized he was one of those crazy people who “act out” only intermittently. He said that he’d left kith and kin and

¹The saucer or dish would have an arrow on it. You put it on a spirit board, spin it, and the arrow points to one of the symbols on the board.

come to Taipei, that someone at a rotating credit club had run off with all his money, that someone'd set him up, that at any moment he might get beaten up, that once he'd been a millionaire, until some crook had cheated him of his fortune through a gambling scheme . . . and at the end of this litany he broke into peals of piteous laughter. Only then did someone come over and inform me that the man was disturbed. I was annoyed for the rest of the day, for I had work to do: a piece entitled *Urban Interpersonal Relationships Today*. I'd chosen him for a random interview. One of the subheadings of the article was *Why the Rate of Mental Illness is Rising*.

Hmmm. Could this old fellow my neighbor also . . . without changing my posture, I thought of how best to phrase my queries:

"How can you be sure your butterfly has a spirit? And why don't you stay inside your own flat and . . . summon it?"

"Oh, everything's got a spirit. As for your second question, it only works outside. Butterflies fly, right?"

"You . . . invented it yourself?"

"I learned how to do it, from a paranormal."

A paranormal?! "What questions do you ask?"

"My family. My son. My daughter. Home . . . anything I want."

"You don't mean the dish spirit, do you? Dish as in butter dish?"

"It's the same idea, but the butterfly spirit is more efficacious."

"Efficacious? In what way?"

Without saying anything, he pointed to the word under the paper butterfly. I got a closer look and saw it was *hsiang*, "fragrant." I was about to ask its significance, but he beat me to

it, talking all in a rush:

“Hsiang is my wife’s name. She’s in Henan Province. You know what? I asked the butterfly spirit, ‘Is my wife still alive?’ I asked it six times, and believe it or not I got a good result every time: two times the answer was ‘Hsiang,’ one time it was ‘safe,’ another time ‘separated,’ and the other two times ‘forget.’ Don’t you see? The butterfly spirit means that I should forget her. The wife I have now, my present wife, I married in Taiwan: she’s mental. And my son and daughter have both flown the coop: I haven’t seen them in years. It hurts just thinking about it. My son is in the United States somewhere. He didn’t even come back when he got married. And my daughter married someone from Tainan, like a kite with a broken string. I asked the butterfly spirit: ‘What’s with my son?’ ‘Gone.’ You see? One word, ‘gone’: the butterfly spirit is never wrong. Do you want to try summoning it? I’ll teach you: it’s easy. Will you give it a try?”

I was still wary. He gave me a funny feeling. I politely refused and took my leave, placing the wooden sword by the door of the storage room in the basement as I left.

About a week later, when I went to Soochow University to give a talk, I noticed my neighbor at the gates. A student there told me he was on the faculty at Soochow. After we’d properly introduced ourselves, he asked me a question:

“It must be karma. You might know the psychic Hsia Li-mi? There was an article about her in *China Times Weekly*. I’ve been wanting to meet her.”

“I don’t know her personally, but I can ask around. You interested in that kind of thing?”

“Oh yes, in anything to do with the paranormal.”

A university professor interested in the paranormal? I remembered the way he looked summoning the butterfly spirit in

the hallway. So much strangeness in this society, I thought. After talking with him a while, I finally agreed to accompany him to see a supposedly very gifted psychic, the very one who had taught him how to summon the butterfly spirit.

The psychic had a big house with a big open yard. We sat the three of us under a tree "Hail, hailing" the "spirit of the papillon." A sheet of paper larger than an open newspaper was spread out on the ground. There were too many squares and symbols to count, and the psychic's paper butterfly was twice the size of the professor's, too.

The question the professor put to the spirit was: "How many people are still alive back home?"

Holding his breath in concentration, the psychic closed his eyes and summoned the spirit. The origami insect began to move, at first just fluttering along, then, gradually, pretty much turning in circles, until finally it honed in on a particular square and sailed towards it: the symbol in the square was a "7."

When I turned to look at the professor, I was surprised to see that his eyes were red, his expression stricken. The psychic didn't say a word. He just kept sitting there, gazing heavenward.

"Two more gone? Two more gone! Last time there were nine people left. What's happened?"

I knew what he meant without needing to ask. 'Waiting until the psychic had gathered up his things and gone inside, I asked the professor, "Do you *really* believe? Is this for real? How can you take it on faith like this?"

His eyes wide open, he did not speak. I continued to reason with him:

"Is it necessarily 'efficacious'? Why get so worked up over a '7'? You're *sure* this guy has paranormal abilities? Is he

charging you? Why not ask the butterfly spirit yourself?"

Still he did not speak. It was beyond me: here was a scholar, rich in years. He was more certainly more learned than me, but also more experienced. How could such a man be so credulous? Not even the butterfly spirit, it seemed, was as hard to fathom as this old professor's heart.

We took a taxi home together. The professor said nothing the entire way. When we arrived, he opened the main door and went in; and before I knew what was happening, he rushed downstairs to the storage room, picked something up and tore upstairs. I was startled when I got a glimpse of what he was carrying: my wooden sword!

After some moment, I rushed up to the third floor. I knocked on the door to the right: the person who opened the door wasn't the professor. I knocked on the door to the left: nobody answered.

I went up to my own flat and locked myself in. After I don't know how much time, I heard the sound of smacking coming from directly above my study. There also seemed to be someone singing up there. I got a baseball bat and walked up to the roof. The way of the world is inscrutable. An old professor sick in the head? And what was I doing here in the middle of the night? Was I sick, too?

As I'd guessed, it was the professor singing. None of the potted plants on the roof was intact; there was a pile of branches and leaves by his side. I couldn't catch the lyrics of the song he was singing in fits and starts, but several times I heard him say "Little Hsiang," or maybe "Hsiao-hsiang."

Leaning on a corner of the water cistern, I watched him without interrupting. In the faint lamplight, I could see he was crying. More than sixty years old, I guessed.

I had no way of knowing what he'd been through or what painful memories haunted him. I couldn't perceive the real causes of his bizarre behavior. Basically, the only thing I knew about him was his last name: Tang.

I wanted to know more. But the bat did not leave my hand: better safe than sorry.

Professor Tang wasn't much surprised by my appearance. I came right out and interrogated him.

"You are just too weird. *Why* are you carrying on like this? Are you homesick? Or do you miss your . . . your wife in Henan? I just can't get over it: you're a professor!"

He gripped the wooden sword and hung his head. After about five minutes he finally spoke.

"What did I bother raising those kids for? . . . my first wife's been better to me . . . we've been apart more than thirty years and she still remembers me. She wrote me a letter and said she's never remarried . . . and my son and daughter? Humph! I guess that's the way of the world and the human heart . . . hard! On the mainland, through all that bungling in the dark, my wife managed to survive. . . . When you reach a certain age you're not afraid of being laughed at, but you're afraid of me now, aren't you? You're always carrying a bat or something. . . . My wife—the one here in Taiwan, she's mad, it's such a pity, but that's just the way things go. . . . And so what if I am a professor? Oh humanity . . . her letter was sent from China through Hong Kong—the Communist Party—what a catastrophe! How could the Chinese people experience such upheaval? I don't get it, I really don't . . . and now there's only seven left; the papillon is never wrong. . . . You think it's strange? Well, the last time the spirit counted, there were nine people left; and then not long after, my wife wrote me a letter, also saying nine: it really

works, see? . . . and now there are seven: which two are gone? . . . You and I aren't family or old friends, but what does it matter if I talk about these things? . . . You think I'm crazy? The communists are the ones who are crazy. You know about the Cultural Revolution? That kind of carrying on, it's like a return to the primal chaos. Oh humanity! Humanity. . . . Have you read Pa Chin's "Memories of Hsiao Shan," about his wife? What I can't understand is that kind of lawless barbarity. . . . I'm strange?! You're the strange one! What do you know? . . . With Chinese people behaving like this, what can I do? Sure I believe in the paranormal . . . what else do I have?! With children like this, a wife like this, a family like this. . . . You young people don't know what it's like to be old and alone. Who am I supposed to confide in? When I try to get things off my chest, you think I'm disturbed . . . has working as a reporter made you paranoid? . . . She was denounced and humiliated because of me: how *could* they? Just because she'd married me, they dragged her out and denounced her, even though she hadn't seen me in decades. Are there such people? . . . The Chinese people! What went wrong? The ones that suffered were the common folks, she's proof of that. But all those years she's kept me in her heart: that shows humanity isn't lost, that humanity isn't something the communists can kill . . . badly humiliated . . . and do you know the writer Lao She? He jumped to his death; how could you expect him to live? No, it was better to die. . . . In a couple of days I'll go ask Master Chang: he knows the art of channeling . . . which two are gone?"

Now it was my turn to be silent. I had no idea what to say. I sat across from him for ages before extending my hand for my sword and getting up to go. He called out to me:

"Do you believe in the papillon? Do you want me to

learn?"

I looked back at him . . . and then something occurred to me.

"Hey, I know a medium. Professor Tang, I'll take you some time, ok? You just mentioned channeling, right? I can set something up for you: I've got this connection." Expressionless, he immediately started nodding and said: "OK."