

The Chrysalis

By

B.J. Anderson

I hate children. I hate their absolute honesty, their shameless horror at the sight of me. I hate it when they point and scream, "Mommy, look at him!" I hate their glistening eyes and perfect fingers, their flawless skin and angelic voices. I am even more appalled that my reaction to this wiggling ball of flesh I've found is the same reaction children have towards me. Horror, nausea, sick fascination. My God, I'm just like them--maybe worse--for I know better.

A waxy layer of curd-like vernix crusts her wrinkled flesh Lemon yellow patches mottle her white skin, and her eyes are like black pin pricks. She looks like a grub. I want to look away, but I can't. I should drown her. Throw her in a bag with a brick and toss her in the river like an unwanted cat. I would be doing her a favor. She will have nothing in life. She will be mocked, ridiculed, teased relentlessly. She will pray for death, maybe even take her life in the end. Wouldn't I be dead now had I the guts to end it?

She blinks those infinitesimal eyes and a smile curls her almost nonexistent lips. She is too young to be smiling. She will face so much misery in life, yet I can't throw her out like my father did me, like some bits of cold fries or a crumpled wad of toilet paper. I will keep her in my one-room, run-down shack with the boarded windows and ratty shag carpet. She won't have to go to school and she'd be some company, if I can bring myself to look at her.

"I want to go to school."

I lower my book to look at her. The shabby patchwork dress the neighbor bought her at a yard sale clashes with her now-gamboge splotches. Ridiculously long arms hang nearly to her calves and she's never grown more than three tufts of black hair on her wrinkled head. My God, they will be merciless if she goes to school. They will run away like lambs from wolves, screaming "freak!" or "monster!".

"No, Dana. You wouldn't like it."

Sharp elbows jut out as she places her stick-like fingers on her hips. "How do *you* know? Have *you* ever been to school?"

"Once. A long time ago. It was miserable." That, of course, is an understatement. The little bastards nearly stoned me to death before the teacher intervened. I do not want that for Dana. She deserves better, much better.

"Well, I'm going. Whether you like it or not."

I sigh in defeat. She will soon learn the cruelty of children.

I hunker in my hood, despite the 100-degree weather, as the yellow bus pulls up to the row of mailboxes. Hands on each of Dana's knobby shoulders, I look into her eyes and try to smile.

"If you have trouble, call me. I will come immediately. If they tease you, just call and I will pick you up. You will never have to go again."

"Silly Daddy, what are you worried about?"

She turns, walks to the bus. I spin on my heel so the children won't see me. No need to give them any more ammunition to tease her. We only go out at night, and the only people she's seen are the freaks, the ghouls, the horribly disfigured, and the occasional stoned teenager. Can she handle it? I hear snickers, one girl squeals, another outright screams. I would get her if my feet weren't rooted to the ground in fear. The door snaps closed and the bus drives away. She is gone. I am a coward.

I'm facing the woods where I found her; she was beneath a lichen-covered log with a bunch of grubs. People don't leave their babies under logs. What kind of monster did that to her? She is ugly, but she deserves better than that, much better.

I sit by the phone, the same place I've sat for the past seven hours, waiting for her call. I know she will--it's only a matter of time. I hope something terrible hasn't happened. She should have called hours ago. I glance at the keys hanging like grapes on the *Home Sweet Home* sign next to the door. I've only used them when the shadows of the moon can hide my hideousness. Should I take them, venture out in the day? I've avoided the sun so long; its rays are like flames licking my face. I shudder at the thought of flames, blazes, and infernos. I can't go out there. I'm a lily-livered chicken shit. I will just continue to wait. She will call.

Flip-flops clap up the wooden stairs and I know the shoes are sunny yellow. Just a shade lighter than Dana's spots. The aluminum screen door slams against the wall as she barges in with a smile as big as Texas. A new light is in her eyes, like some hunger has been satiated. I am shocked that it is not a frown and tears.

"Dad! You wouldn't believe my day!"

"Oh?" I furrow my brow and bend my head so she won't have to look at me. She has seen what normal people look like, and I am ashamed of my appearance.

"When I first got to school, the kids were really mean." Her voice quiets, but she loses none of the joy in her eyes. "They said I looked like a freaky bug."

"I told you you wouldn't like it."

"No, it got better." She pulls a rolled-up parchment secured with a red thread of yarn from the same hand-me-down, garage-sale backpack I used as a child.

"What's that?" I eye the thing with the wariness of an old spring bear.

"Mrs. Adams painted it for me."

"Mrs. who?"

"Mrs. Adams. My teacher." Dana unrolls the parchment, smoothing it with her stained palms. "She put her hands to her mouth when she saw me."

In horror, I think, casting down my eyes so they don't deceive me.

"She said I was the most beautiful person she'd ever seen, and she wanted to paint me."

She was just being nice "She painted you?" I am curious, wondering how this Mrs. Adams could paint a flattering picture of Dana. I use my good arm to hoist myself from the indent in my chair. The picture is in watercolor, soft and pure. It's Dana, but something else is there, something in Dana I've not noticed before. Yet, when I look at her after looking at the picture, I see it. Beauty. There is definitely beauty this Mrs. Adams has seen and painted, and it's not just an illusion she's made up to keep from hurting Dana's feelings. She's added nothing to Dana's features, nor has she taken anything away. I cannot take my eyes from it.

"What do you think?"

I inhale deeply and pull my eyes from the watercolor. "It's nice, Dana. Very nice."

The smile falls slightly from her lips. She eyes the painting, and then eyes me. Rolling it up, she stuffs it in her bag and marches back to her room. Had I known she was going to get sick, I would have thought of something better to say.

"You Dana's father?"

I pull my hood almost shut over my face, barely leaving room for my eyes and nose, so that I may look at Mrs. Adams without her having to look at me. Beneath the glow of the hospital's incandescent bulbs, a soft body gives way to a pudgy face framed by a halo of salt and pepper hair. Too much hot-pink lipstick clings to her coffee-stained teeth, but her smile is like the sun setting on the swamp. Her skin is not quite white, not quite brown, and sprinkled with velvety rumples. Her tent shirt needs ironing and her wrinkle-free slacks are wrinkled. She is beautiful.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

She holds out her freckled hand and I take it, shuddering at the melted purple flesh on my own I notice her looking at it, but it's not in horror, nausea, or sick fascination. It's something else, like excitement. She tears her eyes from the hand and studies my face, even though she can only see a little of it.

"How is she doing?"

"They don't understand what's happening to her." I struggle to keep my tone smooth, not cracking. "Her insides are changing. They strapped her to the bed to keep her from curling up in a ball. The doctor said he's never seen anyone like her before."

Mrs. Adams smiles "Neither had I. If you need anything, you call me." She scrawls her number on a crumpled receipt and thrusts it into my hands, closing my fist around it with her fingers. "And I would love to paint your portrait sometime. When you are comfortable with the idea."

I watch through the glass windows as she sits by Dana's side, petting her head and holding her hand. I turn away, shoving the receipt in the pocket of my jeans, not yet ready to see if Mrs. Adams can find beauty in me.

I took Dana home because the doctor's wanted to run a bunch of tests. They brought scientists in crisp white coats and wrapped her room in plastic covered with biohazard warnings. Strong hands pushed me away, saying she never was my daughter, and that I was wrong to not have reported her the minute I found her in those woods six years ago. In the night I took her, wrapped her sweat-drenched body in the hospital sheets and snuck out the fire escape when no one was watching. They all had

their backs turned, pouring over charts, x-rays, and laboratory results from all the blood they'd drawn. She deserved better than that, much better.

I couldn't go home because they would have found me, so I went to that place in the woods where I discovered Dana six years ago. I laid her on pine needle litter and she smiled, a thin slash across her mottled face.

"You going to leave that house, Daddy?" She was delirious. "You going to break out of that hood and come into the light of day?" When I didn't answer, she stood, clambered up a tree like a squirrel, and sat while I waited below. She shed the clothes and folded her body into itself, sealing herself into one giant blob, and I could no longer see my daughter. The turquoise shell encasing her hung from the branch she'd climbed to, like some giant caterpillar's cocoon. What Dana used to be was gone

Wispy fluttering wakes me from my bed of hospital sheets laid over pine boughs, and my eyes dart to Dana's tree. A splash of gamboge and black flashes in the first rays of the rising sun before escaping the canopy. The cocoon stands empty; Dana has left. I climb up the rough bark to the limb where she rested. I touch the empty, paper-thin chrysalis, its wispy parchment crumbling in my fingertips. I grin, so much that it stretches the scarred tissue around my mouth to the point of hurting. I find a well of tears springing up from my core as I look to the sky. I wish I could see how beautiful she must be.

"Where is she?" The doctor in the white coat slams me against the wall of my shack, rattling my teeth and producing an instant bump on my head where it hits the wall. He bares his teeth, his face in anger is as hideous as mine "Where did you hide her, you God-damned freak?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." My heart pounds. I do not care that they see my face, that they call me a freak. I am exhilarated and feel like I'm bursting. "Last time I saw her she was in that hospital bed with a bunch of needles and tubes stuck in her."

"We have video cameras. We know you took her!"

"You must have seen someone else. I'm not her father, remember? I don't care about her anymore." But that's not true. Of course I care about her. I will always care about her. My heart explodes and I am free.

Pushing me to the floor, they stomp out, like soldiers of a genetic army ready to poke and prod, search for the reasons and rhymes of life no matter the consequences. I smile as I watch them slamming the doors to their white minivans. Picking up the phone from its cradle I fish the crumpled fast food receipt from my pocket and dial the number scrawled on it.

"Mrs. Adams? This is Dana's dad. Yes, I am fine. Dana's fine too. No, she escaped the hospital. She's gone now; flew away. Yes, yes. All for the better. Why did I call? Well, I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I was wondering if we could meet somewhere."

I sit on a park bench, watching the monarch butterflies flitting around my head. Children play on the jungle gym like monkeys at the zoo. Some of them stare at me, their mouths open as their mothers shoo them along. I don't mind. One tiny girl with

rivers of golden hair smiles shyly and waves. I smile back. The sun shines on my nearly bald head, on the few tufts of hair that remain. I close my eyes, thinking of Dana. I hope wherever she is, she's as happy as I am. When I open my eyes, there is Mrs. Adams with her rumpled skin and her smile like the sun setting on the swamp. She's carrying an easel and a large sketch pad.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Finally," I say.