

Balloons, “Butterflies” and Sneakers

The story of *Butterflies are Free* revolves around a young man named Don Baker who was born blind and has been raised as a normal child in every respect. Completely adjusted to his handicap, he has recently established his independence and moved to Greenwich Village, away from his domineering yet well-intentioned mother. He meets Jill, the kooky girl next door and they start to have an affair. After their first sexual encounter, as they are basking in the afterglow, his mother unexpectedly arrives to pack him up and take him home. A comedic parent-child battle ensues filled with ribald zingers and witty one-liners. At the heartfelt conclusion, the mother finally accepts her son's hard-won independence. During the moment of acceptance, her eyes brimming with tears, Mrs. Baker turns to her son and says, “You know, Donnie . . . it's hard to adjust to . . . not being needed anymore. But I can do it now . . . and you get on with your own life.”

For me, this became my mother's signature line. The many times I saw the play, and even more times I watched the film, I always imagined she was saying this to me. She spoke this simple line with such emotional honesty, depth, devotion, and tender vulnerability, how could she not have been thinking about her own children? As I grew into my teens and early twenties, naturally we would argue about silly, adolescent issues where I had to be right. Like Don Baker in *Butterflies are Free* (a role I later played in community theater), I was desperately trying to establish myself as a separate entity from this gigantic force in my life known as my mother. Yet, whenever I would see this scene in *Butterflies*, it was as if she were right there saying, “There's another side to this story, Luke. There is someone who loves you so much it hurts, someone who would do anything for you, someone who would even give her life for you.” How often do parents feel this, and how rarely do children see it? The truth in her performance was holding a mirror up to nature, and it was one I didn't always want to see. To this day, all I have to do is think about that scene and I start to cry.

I saw the play many times on Broadway before I had this revelation about the final scene. At age ten or eleven, it's hardly the thing a child thinks about. When I got tired of sitting in the audience or simply wasn't in the mood to see the play again, I would hang out backstage. Mama had two funny little dressing rooms at the Booth Theatre. There was no large star dressing room, so she had one room for dressing and one for napping, with a fridge and a cot in it, which she used on matinee days. I became great friends with Mama's dresser, Alva Gandolfi, a softspoken, Italian woman who took me under her wing and treated me like the child she never had.

One night while I was backstage with Alva, Mama came offstage with tears in her eyes after playing her final scene. She was subdued and speaking quietly.

“Mama,” I said, “What's the matter?”

“My child has just told me he doesn't need me anymore,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Did you have a fight with Mark?”

“No darling,” she said. “In the play.”

This was the first time I understood what acting was. It was also the first time

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I sensed the depth of my mother's talent.

For years, Mama had a round table in the corner of her dressing room with a floor-length tablecloth. When celebrities would come backstage to pay their respects, she'd ask them to sign it. The tablecloths varied in color over the years, depending upon her decorating whims. Later, her dresser would embroider the names with black thread to preserve them. Whenever I would go into her dressing room, my favorite game was to see what names had been added. I would trace the letters with my fingers and imagine who these grand people were with such large, flowing signatures: Katherine Hepburn, Helen Hayes, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Julie Harris, Jessica Tandy, Paul Newman, Jason Robards, George C. Scott, and so many others. Even if I didn't recognize their names, I knew if they were good enough to sign the tablecloth, they were to be respected and honored.

When Mama was doing a play on Broadway, the house took on a different tone. Since she didn't get home until well past midnight, she would usually sleep late in the mornings while Nanny fixed our breakfast and got us ready for school. My father told us repeatedly to be very quiet as we went past their bedroom door. And if we had to enter the inner sanctum to get our lunch money off Daddy's dresser, we had to tiptoe. Secretly, I wanted a morning visit with Mama. I wouldn't intentionally try to wake my mother up, but sometimes if I coughed too loudly or jangled the change as I took it out of the silver cup where Daddy had placed it for us the night before, I would relish the times she would roll over, stretch a flannel arm from beneath the covers, and sit up, sleepily reaching for the waiting thermos of coffee and a sweet roll placed there by my father. There was always the lush smell of expensive perfume and, in the earlier years, the antiseptic odor of Max Factor stage makeup. If time permitted and I wasn't going to miss the school bus, I would be allowed to sit at the foot of the bed and hear a wonderful story about what had happened at the theater the night before or which celebrities had come backstage.

For my mother's entire life, this was the ritual. I'd sit at her feet while she was in bed holding court, propped up by dozens of pillows and always laden with True Blues and Sanka in the morning and Dewars or Nestea at night. In the evenings, when there wasn't the pressure of time, these often became deep, soulful conversations. To this day, the scent of Norrell perfume tinged with stale tobacco is one of the most comforting smells in the world to me.