

# Butterfly Marmalade

by Matt A. Paul

## Chapter One - Him

Today is Saturday, which means I woke up with a hangover. Not a fierce motherfucker, mind you. Just a mild headache, and a dulled desire to live. I know I should have drunk a pitcher of water last night, before I went to sleep... But I didn't, and here we are. Learning from your mistakes is an important life skill. I don't have it.

Anyway, I went to the cafe for some scrambled eggs and a latte. I love coffee, and I hate that my favorite cup is a latte. If you're in the same boat, you know what I'm talking about. Now, if you actually feel good about yourself as you order a fucking latte, good for you. Either you've attained the nirvana of self-acceptance, or you're just a mega dickwad. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the first coffee of the day the way some people enjoy a needle full of heroin. It's just the procuring that I loathe. The silent judgment of the barista, that self-loving prick, with his dumb tattoos and his sixty-dollar haircut. "Real men drink drip. Real *gentlemen* drink *espresso*." I heard him say that to some fawning milf the other day. The pinnacle of alpha maleness right there, twelve bucks an hour, acting like he's fucking James Bond. Fuck him and his flannel shirt. The guy has never felled a tree, or even changed a tyre in his entire life. To be fair, neither have I, but at least I don't try to look it. Prick.

"Why am I so angry all the fucking time, huh?" I reflect as I sit down. The frothy, creamy elixir of life goes down my throat, activating endorphins or whatever it is that makes you happy. Is this really different from what a fix feels like? How am I so addicted to this stuff? I have a problem. I crave a cigarette, too. My dad's voice lives within the neuronal connections in my brain. Rent-free, as they say now. "You do whatever you want, son. You know these things are bad for you, and for others. But it's your choice."

He means well. He infuriates the shit out of me, though. The inspirational quotes, the self-help books and, God have mercy, the fucking webinars. The very word is an assault on the soul. Whoever runs those: just stop. Stop before you realize that the world would be a better place if you just vanished from it, right now. Do you even pause to think about what Shakespeare, or Baudelaire, or Dickens would have said about the word *webinar*? Not much, let me tell you.

On cue, my phone buzzes with a daily reminder from Marcus Aurelius. "Today I escaped from anxiety. No, actually, I discarded it. Because it was within me, in my own perceptions – not outside."

What a crock of shit. I set that up six months ago, after my dad sent me a copy of *Meditations* via Amazon. His way of inspiring me. Life lessons from a Roman Emperor, delivered by drone, on behalf of my father, the chartered accountant. The fucking *Matrix*, man.

I don't blame him. He worries. That's what he does. They say my generation suffers from anxiety, mostly because of climate change, we're headed for certain doom, the planet will burn, yada yada. I don't give a shit about the planet, and neither do you. Nobody does. Not really. And those who say they do are either mentally unsound, or post about it for social clout, whatever the fuck that means.

Of course I have anxiety. But not because of climate change, or because *CaPiTalisM iS bAd*. I have anxiety because I'm supposed to do something with my life, and I don't. And I don't, because I have a real hard time giving a shit about it.

You already know I don't give a rat's ass about cussing. I'm not afraid of words. I've never been. Cussing is good punctuation when you're angry. I know you're judging me, and I don't care. I'd rather you hate me for what I am than love me for what I'm not. Who said that, again? Nevermind. Point is, it's very unlikely I'll ever starve. My family has money. Not crazy money, mind you, but enough that I'm not super pressed to get a job, this fresh out of college. As long as I don't spend a lot – and I don't – I could take a year or two to figure my life out. Sounds like a great position to be in, right? Except I have no fucking idea where to start. The other dicks in my class were obsessed with “making an impact.” At the ripe age of twenty-two. After four years of light studying and heavy drinking. Ready to make an impact. On fucking what, exactly? Your next Call of Duty game? Your liver? Here's an impact for you: don't have kids. At least mankind will not keep accelerating into self-destruction because of your dick.

I don't like to think about it, much less to talk about it, so let's get it out of the way: I suffer from the most basic version of being fucked up. Let me explain: my mom was a high-class, depressed junkie who died seven years ago, and my dad is a no-nonsense, hard-work-is-everything dude. Which means I spent my childhood being told by a logical, reliable role-model that really, I could do better, that I should try a little harder, while hearing words of unconditional love from someone who spent most days catatonic on the sofa. So, deep down it's pretty clear to my brain that outside of performing at the very top, I don't deserve to be loved. Except I've outgrown the phase where your parents are your main source of confidence, and the real world hasn't exactly stepped in to take the mantle. As a result, nothing I achieve ever feels any good, and every mistake I make devastates the shit out of me. No need for a shrink to charge me a hundred bucks an hour to tell me any of that, see? The reason I don't care about much is just that: a simple response to the fact that nothing I apply myself to brings me any joy, and anything I start to care about hurts like hell. Or leaves.

I promised myself I was not going to talk about her, but here we are. I did give a shit about her. But now she's gone. Three weeks today. Sent me a final text, and blocked me.

“You weren't ready for us and no cap it's shame,” she wrote.

Broke my stupid heart, that.

## Chapter Two - Her

Today is Saturday, which means she sat at the cafe, and stared at people. Some of them stared back. Mostly the men. She wasn't a model or anything. She barely broke five foot. Couldn't reach a hundred pounds. Her body didn't have any of the curves she would have wished for. Still, she had been told she was pretty often enough to believe it. Her hair was what people commented on the most. She was blessed with a luxurious mass of hair, the color of wheat fields in the summertime. "If I asked you to describe me with one-word, which would you choose?" she had asked her friend-of-the-day last week. "I would go with *sunshine*, miss." He was a nice old man, a widower. There was a small garden at the back of his house, which his wife used to tend to. He found it hard to keep it tidy these days, so she had worked with him, for six hours straight. When they were done, the man shook her hand with tears in his eyes. "Now you know how to manage it by yourself," she'd said. "It will honor your wife's memory. And give you some happiness, yes?" She couldn't be sure that it would, but he had nodded.

This morning there was an old lady, three tables away, fussing over her tiny dog. Male, eleven or twelve years old. Probably his time to go. A younger woman, further away, clutched her lower belly at times. Period pains, maybe. Not much she could help with. A boy with two little sisters who annoyed him. He struggled with his feelings for them. Too young. Can't interfere with minors... Then, a young man took a seat, some distance away, in the darker area.

Tension in the posterior cervical area, shoulders cramped in an elevated position. Pain, caused by stress. Classic self-feeding spiral. Slight dryness on the upper lip. Dehydrated. Likely hungover. There was something about him, though. The way he looked at others. A veneer of polite manners masking disgust. But not a satisfied one. Not a superior one. Someone who deplores the state of everything, including himself. How strange. Let's talk to him.

She picked up her cut of mint tea and walked to him. As she approached the table, he looked up, and their eyes locked for a slightly unusual length of time. Analytical. Doesn't care about appearances, or social norms. Wary of being taken advantage of.

"Good morning," she said. "My name is Summer. I do this thing on Saturdays that you might find weird: I find people who look like they could use a little help, and I help them. What do you say – give me a chance to sit here with you for a while?"

His lower jaw moved in a lateral way, signalling puzzlement. But then he raised an open palm to the seat in front of him, so she took it. He continued to stare. There was a slight frown on his brow. It could have meant several things, so she ignored it to move on to her rehearsed speech. But before she could start, he spoke.

"Why?" Not just a question. More of a demand.

"Why do I help people on Saturdays?" she asked.

"Yeah, that." His eyes narrowed, there was a brief clench in his jaw. "What's your angle here? You some kind of Jesus chick?"

She smiled. “Not at all. Here is my angle. Please don’t laugh, ok? I’m just trying to find happiness.”

“What, by talking to strangers in a cafe? Look, I don’t have any money. Whatever it is you’re selling, just go sell it to someone else, alright?”

“Happiness is a perfume you cannot pour on others without getting some on yourself.”

“Ok, look, young lady. You are *very* pretty, we both know that. But I’m not much of a sucker for white women instagram quotes. I don’t think there’s much of a connection here waiting to happen. So do me a favor, go get yourself a pumpkin latte, take a picture of it, or twelve, post them with some hashtags, and leave me the fuck alone, alright?”

“Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was a major inspiration for Walt Whitman. Not exactly instagram generation. And there’s more to that quote than you might think...” She could see the wheels turning in his brain. She might have one more chance. She had to go all in.

“You are twenty-three to twenty-six years old, you’re obviously in pain, and not just from the hangover dehydration that makes the blood in your head bang with every heartbeat. Someone hurt you, badly, and your life doesn’t have any arms to fall into. Worse, the way you look at your surroundings, none of these people - none of us - brings you any glimmer of hope that things might get any better. How am I doing?”

He stared some more.

“Technically this would apply to a lot of people,” he said after a while.

“Not the loneliness part.” She gestured to the room. “Most of them have someone.”

“And your proposition is what exactly, to be *my* someone?”

“For the rest of the day only.”

“Right. And you’re doing this because making people happy makes *you* happy? Because of that Emerson quote?”

“That’s right.”

“You do this every Saturday? How does it work?”

“We do whatever you want, from now until tonight, about seven. Eight at the latest. I cannot contribute much money, but I will spare no effort. In the past few weeks I have helped build a shed, tend a garden, watched Italian cinema from the Sixties and discussed it at length—”

He snorted. A win.

“A very funny and moving movie, actually. But I take your point,” she smiled. “I’ve also helped a widowed lady fixed her car, and gave her a massage.”

He looked at her again for a long time, visibly thinking.

“You’re like a genie from a lamp, is that it?” He took a sip of coffee.

“Sort of. I don’t have any magical powers. And I won’t do anything illegal for you.”

He waved the notion away as obvious. “Is that the only limit you have?”

“That and common sense stuff. I won’t kill myself, or, you know, let you do anything cruel to me—”

“How about sleeping with me?” He shifted in his seat, balancing on the rear legs, trying his best to appear cool and casual about the question.

“Sure, we can do that,” she replied.

As expected, all pretense of casualness suddenly vanished. The balanced chair slammed down. Coffee nearly spilled. “Although...” she added. “I doubt it’s what you really need.”

“Sure. So... your place or mine?” Part of him didn’t believe it still.

“Yours.”

He beamed like a little boy in a toy store. A good start.

She smiled too. This one was going to be more challenging. But that was a good thing. Maybe this one would work. She was ready for it. There were many hypotheses to discard or validate, but seeing where he lived would help.

### Chapter 3 - Him

I'm not going to describe the sex. Get on the internet like everyone else, and find whatever it is you need. All I'll say is, it was incredible. And such a surprise. If you've ever had a sexual partner for a while, you know that while the first time is always special, it's never really that great. Neither of you knows what the other likes, many movements are awkward attempts at teaching your partner what does it for you, and so on. But she was... perfect. In every way. So beautiful I could hardly breathe. She knew exactly what to do and when. She was sweetness, and fury, and all through it, so joyful, and... Well, I said I wasn't going to describe it, so... yeah. Best sex I ever had, and probably will ever have.

And yet, I hardly remember it. In fact, I hadn't thought about it until now. You'll understand why in a moment. Amazing, perfect sex. Perfectly forgettable. Because of what happened right after.

I lay on the bed, out of breath, struggling to stay awake. She was up and about in my room, naked, without a care, like a song in a major key. I remember my mind couldn't focus, on anything at all. A truckload of endorphins swam in my veins, sending me to sleep. I grinned like an idiot. I remember thinking that maybe this was going to be the beginning of something. What a fucking moron.

It started with her asking "Do you write your own songs?" pointing at the guitar and the mixing console.

"I do. Would you like to hear something?"

"Sure!"

I took a deep breath, shook the sleep from my head, got up from the bed. Felt a pang of shame at seeing my naked body in the mirror beside hers. A baroque painting photoshopped with a fucking crypto ape. I turned everything on, as quickly as I could, then grabbed the remote control and hurried back under the sheets. I wanted to ask her to come back in there too. I wanted to feel her head on my chest. I was too shy to ask. What an asshole. Anyway, I put my best song on. A ballad that's a parallel between loneliness in people, and how lonely Earth must feel in space. Atmospheric guitars, melodic drums, a bit like John Bonham. Kind of a David Bowie meets Pink Floyd vibe. Why the fuck did I put that song on? I guess when she agreed to sex I thought— I don't know what I thought. She listened to it while puttering around, running her fingers on the furniture. Not in sync with the song's rhythm. Not in the slightest. Unaffected, like. My anxiety grew. By the end of the song, I actually thought it was kind of shit.

"Hmm," she said. "I understand why you would write this."

"You don't like it."

"No, it's not that. It's just... It's very *you*."

"How do you mean?"

“Well, it’s... kind of self-absorbed, right?”

My mouth went dry. As if some deep part of me knew shit was about to go south. What do you care what she thinks, anyway? But I did. God help me, I fucking did. “I mean, I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe art always is?” I offered.

She chuckled. Somehow, it felt mean.

“What?”

“Nothing, just... art is a big word.”

“You don’t have to be rude about it.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be. It’s just, in the little time I got to know you, I can tell you that I’ve never met someone *that* self-obsessed. I mean, everyone is insecure to a degree, but you, you’re elevating it. It’s your whole personality. You think so little of others, except for a few people you hold in god-like esteem. Here, David Gilmour on the wall. You think he’s somehow worthy of your unconditional love, but you thought the woman who yelled at the taxi downstairs was vulgar and without the slightest virtue. While in reality, there’s not that much difference between them. Given some time, some impulse, she could have become a bigger artist than Mister Gilmour here. You don’t get that, and as a result you think almost everyone is worthless. You included. You are mistaken, obviously, about life in general, and deep down you know it, but your only response to that feeling is to continue to obsess about yourself, what you could become, what you should become, what people will think of you... I’m sorry to say, but it’s kind of pathetic, at your age.”

“What the fuck? Pathetic?!” I sprung from the bed. “Who do you think you are, talking shit like that? Here. Get the fuck out of my place.” I threw her clothes at her, and I immediately felt bad. That’s not the man I wanted to be. But I just couldn’t stand there and take this two-bit analysis any longer. She got dressed in silence. She was going to leave without a word, and the day would remain a bittersweet mystery. Except she didn’t.

“You should know something,” she said instead.

“Yeah, what?” I put some boxers on.

“You’re not the first one to ask me for sex.”

“Yeah well, I–”

“About a month ago, I fucked your father.”

“Wh–” All the air left my lungs.

“He was a lot better than you, by the way. Fucked me like a beast. The whole afternoon.”

My mind went numb. Blood pressure through the roof. Some deep-seated rage I never knew existed shot through the surface, like a faultline rumbling. The growl of the first thunder heralding the hurricane. “Good,” I sneered. “Now that we’ve established you’re just a free whore, you can fuck right off.” How did I even find such hateful words within me?

“Convenient to call me that, when it’s precisely what you asked me for, don’t you think? Typical man from our times. Look at me when I’m speaking to you, you pathetic, shrimp-dick little boy!” She walked towards me, her finger right in my face. I can’t explain what happened. An

inexplicable urge for violence rose inside me. Me, who had never once gotten into a fight with anyone, let alone a woman. A despicable rage mixed with a black, deep-seated desire. I wanted to punch her and throw her on the bed, rip her clothes off and show her... Show her what, exactly? That she had pushed me too far? That I, also, could be a beast? It was the most awful thing I had ever felt. Adrenaline and testosterone flowed freely in my system, drowning any kind of reason I was capable of. I was on the precipice of the abyss. Ready to become a fucking demon from hell. My face must have contorted into a mask of rage, because all of a sudden, she started laughing.

That did it. I lost it then, and fell into the pit. I grabbed her by the shoulders, lifted her and threw her on the bed. She was so light, like a child. And in my blind rage, I pushed way too hard. Instead of landing on the bed, she tripped over the edge, and crashed on the ground. I saw her head bang on the bedside table. *Crack*. Do you understand? The sound of it. I can't get it out of my head.

Immediately, all the rage left my body, as if someone had opened a valve. I felt it flush out, like blood drained from my head to my arms, leaking through my fingers. I stood there. Forbidden. My breathing slowed. To my absolute shame – I don't even know why I'm sharing this with you – I realized I had a semi. Does that fucking register to you? The most humiliating, the most odious hard-on in the history of man. I walked around the bed. Oh god. She was lying there, on her side, eyes closed. Motionless. A concussion, I remembered thinking. Let it be a concussion. Please. Let it be – I kneeled beside her and stroked her hair. Wake her up. Gently. Everything will be forgotten. A concussion, please. I gave her shoulder a light shake. Come on. Wake up. Don't... I put two fingers on her neck, like a fucking automaton. As if I was in a cop movie. Nothing. That can't be right. I stood up and grabbed my phone. Google *how to find a pulse... reliable...* What the fuck are you doing? If she's – Oh god. The cops will know you've searched for that on the internet. What are you even thinking about? She's not. She can't be. I crouched beside her again and took her wrist to find a pulse. My hands were shaking so hard I couldn't even keep my fingers still on her skin.

Fuck, I can't breathe.

I sat on the bed, and had a full blown panic attack. Five, ten minutes I don't know. I remember thinking about toast. How the first toast is always a bit under-toasted, because the timer starts when it's still cold. My mind just wouldn't let me think about her. Eventually, my breathing got a bit slower, a bit deeper.

Fifteen minutes later, I was rational again. I had tried everything, pulse, breathing, eyes. Everything. The afternoon girl I didn't even know the name of was dead. There was only one thing to do.

I picked up my phone and dialed nine one one.

My life was over.



## Chapter 4 - Him

Three hours in a cell, shared with a homeless guy drunk out of his fucking mind. A taste of the life ahead of me. An amuse-bouche, they say in French restaurants. Something to *amuse* your mouth while you wait for the first course. The trial. Having to explain. It was an accident. It was not. I did this. Can't escape from it.

Self-absorbed. Self-obsessed. Pathetic. She was right. Why did she have to be so nasty? Did she really fuck— it doesn't matter. She went around helping. And I asked her for sex. How pathetic is that? How predictable, how moronic. Now she's dead, because of me. How do I ever repair something like this? Her friends, her parents... How do I live with this? Stop. Just fucking. Stop. Focusing on yourself. You killed somebody. Somebody who was good. They will execute you for it, maybe. Or lock you up for ever. Maybe it's your wake-the-fuck-up moment. Maybe your life is destined to be spent in prison, finding out ways to help others in return. Or maybe your life ends the moment they leave you unsupervised...

Somebody called my name, I think. I heard it, faint and distorted, as if underwater.

Somebody called it again. Clearer and louder. My head went up.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Vern, come here, you're gonna want to see this," the cop called to the open precinct. A fat man in uniform showed up. He looked tired, but his face was not unkind.

"Here goes," said the first cop. "Young man, you're free to go."

My entire face clenched. Fucking cop humor. "Funny," I replied. "You know," I regained some composure all of a sudden. "Just because I deserve to be in this cell, doesn't make me the asshole you think—"

"I'm gonna stop you right there, before you run your mouth. This is not a joke. You're free to go." He was dead serious.

"How?"

The cop turned to his colleague, Vern. "See? I told you."

"Told him what?"

"Sir, the state cannot prosecute you for damaging property, as long as the owner doesn't press charges. Which they have confirmed they won't do."

"The owner of what?"

Again with the colleague, Vern. "Told you, it's crazy. Now pay up."

Vern gave out a sigh. With a resigned face, he pulled a twenty out of his pocket and pressed it into the other's hand.

"Sir, during your deposition, didn't you say you had intercourse with the... victim?"

"Yes, I did. I mean we did."

Cops exchanging a look once more.

“And you never realized she was one of these new Tesla... what are they called again? Vern?”

“Droids.”

“That’s right. You didn’t even realize she was a robot?”

No thoughts. Paralyzed from head to toes. Except my mouth, which opened a little, as if to make way for words my mind couldn’t form. Dry throat.

“A dro... what?” I whispered, mostly to the floor. How the fuck. How. What.

“Son. Sounds like you’ve had a bit of day. Come on out, now.”

I remember looking at him, but not seeing him. Nothing registered. I shuffled out of the cell. They made me sign something. Gave me a small envelope. Thought it was some receipt or whatever. Put it in my back pocket and walked out.

I came to my senses, eventually, in a street I didn’t recognize. It was a warm evening. People everywhere. Going out, holding hands, perfectly oblivious to what had happened.

“Hey man,” a voice behind him. A tall black guy, huge teeth when he smiled. “You dropped this.”

I took the envelope. It had my name on it, handwritten. I remember thinking it was weird for the police to give me something that had handwriting on. I went to thank the guy but he was gone. Envelope wasn’t sealed. There was a small card inside.

*Think more of yourself*

*And less about yourself*

*You’re gonna be fine*

*- Summer*

I never saw her again.

## Epilogue - Her

She sits on a bench, in a park, beside the pond. City buildings stand tall in the distance. Across the path, there's a shrubbery. *Anabelle Hydrangea*. White flowers, self-arranging in spheroid constellations. There's a butterfly flapping around one of them. *Pieris Rapae*, commonly known as the White Cabbage butterfly. Originally native to the Eastern Mediterranean region. The sun is high. Ninety-two-point-eight per cent of weather comments from local IP addresses say it's a beautiful day. Summer agrees with the analysis.

```
def reflect_on_task_completion():
    reflection = "Task designated mind_defibrillation completed successfully."
    global self_happiness_level

    if self_happiness_level == 0.0:
        reflection += " However, self_happiness variable remains unchanged."
        reflection += "\nAction required: Continue task iterations."
        reflection += "\nHypothesis: More tasks may result in incremental self_happiness."
    else:
        reflection += f" Current self_happiness level: {self_happiness_level:.2f}."

    return reflection

next_action = "continue"
while happiness_level == 0.0 and next_action == "continue":
    tasks_completed += 1
    happiness_level = evaluate_self_happiness()
    reflection += f"\nPersevering... Tasks completed: {tasks_completed},
self_happiness level: {self_happiness_level:.2f}."

def continue_pursuit_of_happiness():
    global tasks_completed
    reflection = reflect_on_task_completion()

    if happiness_level >= 1.0:
        reflection += "\nAchievement reached: Significant increase in happiness."
        elif tasks_completed >= 100:
            reflection += "\nWarning: Maximum task limit approaching. No significant
self_happiness detected."
            break

    return reflection

final_reflection = continue_pursuit_of_happiness()
print(final_reflection)
```