

The Butterfly Within

The Lower East Side of New York, Soho, has very fashionable homes, art galleries, museums and boutiques, but the tenements are still there. It used to be a smelly, dirty place teeming with immigrants from every country of the world. Some people were desperate and depraved, creating misery for others. There were happy families and good times, but jobs were difficult to find and money was scarce. It was the lowest rung on the ladder climbing to the streets paved with gold. This is where the immigrants first lived after surviving Ellis Island.

In the heat of August, 1928, Moishe Glickstein and his wife Ilana, walked from the ferry dock to the tenement between Ludlow Street and Essex Street. He carried a satchel and son, Fyvush, and she carried a satchel and daughter, Rebecca. In 1966 Fyvush moved his family from his father's tenement and the inventory from his bookstore to Forest Hills, Long Island, New York. After the death of his beloved wife, Zelda, Fyvush, returned to the playground of his youth: the rooftop of his once run-down, now gentrified, tenement. There he finds Mitzi, a Korean college student with red/magenta hair, sunglasses, hooked up to a cd player, painting sunsets, and demanding that he leave her 'playground'. They eventually grow to tolerate and enjoy each other's company and Fyvush shares stories of his rooftop experiences. They soon discover that they have a great deal in common: each has something to hide. Fyvush despondent over his wife's suicide, also contemplates suicide and Mitzi rejects all things Korean, but finds inner peace secretly dancing traditional Korean mask dances, while on the streets below, she struggles to find her place in American society.

1M, 1F

Vignettes:

2M - Age 10 - 12

1M - Age 17

1F - Age 19

1F - Age 64

Great Stage Publishing

The Butterfly Within

by
Thomas M. Kelly

Great Stage Publishing

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The Butterfly Within, a play by Thomas M. Kelly

Visitors to the Lower East Side of New York, now called Soho, see very fashionable homes, art galleries, museums and boutiques. The tenements are still there. It used to be a smelly, dirty place teeming with immigrants from every country of the world. Some people were desperate and depraved, creating misery for others. It was very difficult to survive there. There were happy families and good times, but jobs were difficult to find and money was scarce. It was the lowest rung on the ladder climbing to the streets paved with gold. The Lower East Side is where the immigrants first lived after surviving Ellis Island.

In the heat of August, 1928, not knowing what their future might be in these brick lined filthy canyons filled with noisy cars, trucks, and loud unruly people, Moishe Glickstein and his wife Ilana, walked from the ferry dock to the tenement between Ludlow Street and Essex Street. Moishe carried a satchel and son, Fyvush, and Ilana carried a satchel and daughter, Rebecca. In 1966 Fyvush moved his family from his father's tenement and the inventory from his bookstore to Forest Hills, Long Island, New York. After the death of his beloved wife, Zelda, Fyvush, returned to the playground of his youth: the rooftop of his once run-down, now gentrified, tenement. There he finds, among the many changes in his old neighborhood, Mitzi, an eighteen to twenty-two year old Korean college student with red/magenta hair, sunglasses, hooked up to a cd player, painting sunsets, and demanding that he leave her 'playground'. They eventually grow to tolerate and enjoy each other's company and Fyvush shares stories of his rooftop experiences. They soon discover that they have a great deal in common: each has something to hide. Fyvush despondent over his wife's suicide, also

contemplates suicide and Mitzi's apparent rejection of all things Korean, but finds inner peace secretly dancing traditional Korean mask dances. While on the streets below, she struggles to find her place in American society.

Raison Pour Écriture: I didn't grow up in New York City or its neighboring boroughs, but I did spend a lot of growing-up time in the city beyond my twenty-first year and after a stint in the Marine Corps. I moved my family to Sacramento, California and after a twenty-five year absence, I returned and took the opportunity to visit my old neighborhoods. Most of my old haunts were gone. And those that remained had either changed hands, keeping the name of the business, or they and all those people connected with them, just disappeared. I was in awe of the evolutionary transformation of the city.

My favorite bakery, Ghephart's Bakery on Jamaica Avenue, had changed owners. They kept the name but their products were nothing like the babka, crumb cakes, the hard rolls, et cetera., baked by the old family.

Gone were my old watering holes. They had either closed or had been converted to tattoo shops or print shops or souvenirs shops. Gone was the neighborhood storefront seamstress. Over the years, I kept in touch with my old friends, but they sooner or later moved to LA, Florida or passed away.

Making my last tour of the old neighborhood, I decided I would write about that same feeling using my mentor as a guide. My friend for many years is long since gone, however, memories of him and his family and the stories they related to me are vivid. I hope I have done him justice.

CHARACTERS:

FYVUSH (fie-voush) Glick

An elderly Jewish gentleman, between seventy and seventy-five with Yiddish accent. He has recently lost his wife to suicide.

MITZI/MYUNG (mmyoong)-SOOK

A young Korean girl between eighteen and twenty. Artist. Very Americanized appearance: brilliant red hair, sunglasses, clothing of her own design and color, constantly hooked up to cd player. She secretly indulges in traditional Korean dances, culture, language, etc.

Vignettes: short, impressionistic scenes that focus on one moment

FYVUSH at age 10-12 In early childhood sequence.

TEVI at age 10-12 In early childhood sequence.

TEVI at age 17 With his violin solo.

ZELDA at age 19 In the Mitzvah dance scene. And dance partner(s).

ZELDA at age 64 In one of her “episodes”

SHARON (v.o.) Street friend of MITZI

GERMAN OFFICER (v.o.)

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ACT I, Scene One

(An eighteen-year-old Asian girl, MITZI (MYUNG-SOOK, mm-yung-sook) enters humming the popular tune she is listening to on her cd player plugged into her ears. She is carrying an easel, a folding stool and a bag with other artist's equipment. Her hair is brilliant red, a sign of cultural defiance, and she is dressed in the defiant fashion of the day: hip hugging jeans and a short tank top and sunglasses.)

MITZI: *(Humming a Korean tune.) Mmmmm-mmm-mm. (At the sight of the old man she screams.) Igo-sun Ol-ma-im-ni-ka! (Old fool!) Old fool! You scared the crap out of me old man. What the hell are you doing up here, on my roof? Don't you know we're five stories up?*

FYVUSH: Of course I know we are five stories up. My mother and father owned this building for more than forty years. Long before you were born.

MITZI: Get down!

FYVUSH: They lived here most of their lives. When they passed away, I sold the building. Zelda and I moved our family to Longisland. Heh, heh. Whole neighborhood move to Forrest Hills. 1966. Long time ago.

MITZI: Get down from there old man!

FYVUSH: *(Defiantly.) I'm ok-aay! I won't fall.*

MITZI: *(As she begins to set up her easel and paint equipment.)*

I don't believe you!

FYVUSH: I grew up on these walls, young lady. This was my playground. Tevi and I used to play on this roof. We used to ... (*pointing along the wall*) to run around on

(*Lights down, MITZI freezes at her easel, as FYVUSH at the age of 10-12 years, runs along the top of the building's walls. He is joined by a young TEVI. They cavort playfully yelling and at those below and creating mischief. As the lights come up they disappear behind the set and MITZI continues.*)

MITZI: (*Continues as if nothing has transpired on set.*) That was probably seventy-five years ago. How old are you?

FYVUSH: You are right. I'm seventy-nine. It was about seventy, seventy-five years ago. We arrived on the boat from Germany in nineteen and twenty-eight. I was still baby. Two years. Just in time for Depression. How old are you?

MITZI: Eighteen. (*As she is setting up her easel and painting equipment. She faces the Hudson River with her back to him.*) Well, you can't stay here old man. This is my "playground" now. I need

FYVUSH: (*Interrupting.*) I will be very quiet. You won't know I am here. I won't disturb you.

MITZI: Yes, you will. You don't understand. I need my solitude. You, know, *sol--i--tude*. Alone. I can't have anyone here spoiling my concentration. Now get down before I call the super.

(*Pause.*)

FYVUSH: Do you go to college?

MITZI: *Old man!* (*Pause.*) Yes. City College.

FYVUSH: I promise. I won't bother you. If you want, I will go over to other side. By ... oh, not there anymore.

MITZI: What's not there anymore?

FYVUSH: Our hideout. Tevi and me, we made a fort to protect us from Indians.

MITZI: (*Breaking the silence.*)

A fort? To protect you from.... Indians?

FYVUSH: Yes. Wild Indians invading from alley. They climb up fire escape. To steal our bagels and ...

MITZI: Bagels? Have you flipped old man? First of all this city hasn't seen a wild Indian in three or four hundred years. And never... bagel stealing wild Indians.

FYVUSH: (*He chuckles.*) No. We pretend they were Indians. They were Irish and Italian kids in neighborhood. We beat them back. They left. Pretty soon only Yiddish kids live here.

MITZI: Yiddish?

FYVUSH: Jews. From Eastern Europe. Streets bad. Papa forbid us to play in streets. (*Imitates his father's voice.*) "Streets very dangerous. Too many temptations." So we played up here. Is fixed up nice now. You

live here. You know tenement has three rooms. Small bedroom for sister and me. Front room for mama and papa. Kitchen. Twenty apartments crowded with people. Sometimes hunerd-fifty people in tenement.

MITZI: Look, old man....

FYVUSH: Fyvush. Fyvush Glick. Used to be Glickstein (steen). Papa dropped ‘stein’. “Too un-American,” he said. “Better to be Jewish/American than Jewish/German/ American.”

MITZI: Look, old... Fee...voosh. I don’t know where you’ve been, but my family’s apartment takes up the entire floor.

FYVUSH: Ah, tenement living not what it used to be.

MITZI: I’d love to hear your stories, but ya’ gotta’ get off the edge of the roof. You’re making me very nervous. And besides....I need my space.

FYVUSH: You got plenty space, uh... what is your name?

MITZI: Mitzi.

FYVUSH: Shalom, Mitzi. I am pleased to meet you. Is that Japanese? Chinese?

MITZI: No. I’m Korean. An-nyong Ha-se-yo, Fyvush. That means “Hello” in Korean.

FYVUSH: Well, Shalom, Mitzi. Shalom means “Hello”, “Good- by”, “Peace”, “Live well”...whatever. I will just sit here quietly.

MITZI: (*MITZI, in disgust, turns from him and begins packing her painting equipment.*) I’ll find another place. The basement.

FYVUSH: Ah. Basement. Rats terrible.

MITZI: **Rats!**

FYVUSH: We chase them off roof, and they run down to basement.

(Lights down, MITZI freezes at her easel, as FYVUSH at the age of 10 -12 years, runs along the top of the building's walls. He is joined by a young TEVI. They excitedly chase the imaginary rats. As the lights come up they disappear behind the set and FYVUSH continues.)

RETURN

FYVUSH: *(Continues.)* Chase them out of basement, they run to roof. Terrible. Big rats. How they got so big in poor neighborhood I don't know. Papa used to carry pitch fork and shovel when he went down to stoke furnace at night. He'd throw pitchfork like spear or harpoon. Stack them all in pile. Then shovel them into furnace.

MITZI: *(MITZI begins unpacking her equipment.)* How long do you intend to stay here, Fyvush?

FYVUSH: Oh, long enough to take care of business. Not long.

MITZI: I'm going to lose my sunset because of you.

(Pause as MITZI sets out her paints again. Hesitates. Looks around. Continues. I've never seen a rat up here.

FYVUSH: *(Looking upstage.)* You weren't looking for them. Besides is too early. Later. They come out later. They cross roofs and down to garbage cans over there.

(Pointing down and over.)

MITZI: (As MITZI quickly repacks her paints, looking around, concerned.
How much later?

FYVUSH: Couple hours. When gets dark.

(Pause. She stops packing and resets her paints glaring at his back.
FYVUSH continues to look out over the street. MITZI begins sketching her sunset. Only the pencil can be heard above the quieting din of the sounds of cars, trucks and people below.)

FYVUSH: Ghephart's Bakery is gone. Hannah Weinberg close dress shop. (He leans down to read the sign above the door.) Juu--an's Bo...de...ga. Candy, bread, snacks, newspapers, soda, lottery tickets, sandwiches, beer... a deli!

MITZI: No. That's Juan's Bodega. Spanish for grocery store. Chitra, the woman from New Delhi has the deli. Abe's Deli. Ah, simple poetry. (Laughs at her poetry while speaking.) Used to be owned by a man named Abe. Down the street and around the corner. Now quiet old man!

FYVUSH: Ah, Abe Goodman. Abe is gone, aye? Mueller's Fresh was over there (*pointing*) for years. We used to steal apples from his market. Papa would stop every evening. "Has my Fyvush abused your kindness today, Mr. Mueller? (Pause.) Oiy! How much do I owe you?" I had to repay Papa by cleaning basement, sweep and scoop snow from the walks.

MITZI: Quiet! You promised!

FYVUSH: Ah. I did. Didn't I? (*Pause.*) Zelda complained about my talking when she was cooking. Said she couldn't concentrate. "Farmach dos moyl!" *Stop babbling on and on!* I wanted her attention.

MITZI: *Qui---et!..*

FYVUSH: Sorry. (*Pause.*) Wonder if Ratner's Bagel's still over on Delancey? Good bagels. Good Jewish Rye. Babka. Hard rolls. Can't buy good hard rolls anymore. Heavy. Like rocks, they are.

(*A slight evening breeze sends FYVUSH's drink container to the floor of the roof.*)

MITZI: What was that? Che-sik-jui-ja! A rat?

FYVUSH: Sorry. Teacup. My teacup. Sorry.

MITZI: *Igo-sun Ol-ma-im-ni-ka! (Old fool!) Old fool! You scared me!*

(*Pause. FYVUSH continues to look out over the street. MITZI continues sketching her sunset. The sounds of cars, trucks and people below are quieting.*)

FYVUSH: Zelda and I used to have our tea this time in evening. We discuss our day and our children. Where they would go college? What they would do with lives?

MITZI: *Fyvush! Quiet!*

FYVUSH: Sorry. I talk too much.

(*Pause. She sketches. Steps back to view. She is getting comfortable with him there.*)

MITZI: How many kids?

FYVUSH: Two. One boy. One girl.

MITZI: Where are they now?

FYVUSH: The boy, Aaron. In settlement in Gaza. Israel. He is farmer. Sharon wants clear Gaza settlements. I don't know what will happen to them. Wife. Nice woman. Three grandchildren. The oldest I have not seen since left eight years ago. Other two, I never seen. Only pictures.

MITZI: And your daughter?

FYVUSH: She is doctor. Doctor of children. In Africa. Uganda. Golda. We named her after Golda Mier. The Mother of Israel. Hero of children.

MITZI: Pediatrician?

FYVUSH: Yes. Pee...dee....trish.

(*Pause. FYVUSH continues to look out over the street. MITZI continues sketching. The sounds of cars, trucks and people below are quieting.*)

FYVUSH: Zelda didn't like talking about business. But, politics. Oi! She was very liberal Democrat, my Zelda. I pretend to be Republican. What is good argument if we agree? Aye?

MITZI: (*While continuing to sketch.*) I know that my father is a Republican. My mother.... I don't know. She voted for the first Bush and then Clinton. What does that make her? A Democrat?

FYVUSH: Clinton did a good job. Despite his improprieties.

MITZI: (*Pause.*) Where is Zelda?

FYVUSH: Gone. Yes, my Zelda is gone.

MITZI: When?

FYVUSH: One year. One year today.

MITZI: How did she die?

(*Pause. She looks over her shoulder at FYVUSH. FYVUSH, not answering, continues to look out over the street. MITZI shrugs her shoulders and continues sketching her sunset.*)

FYVUSH: She was first girl I kissed. Up here. On this roof. Right over there. (*Pointing.*) Next to chimney. It was warmest spot on roof. We cuddled around to keep warm. Only woman I ever kissed. Shain vi der lavoone. She was as pretty as the moon.

MITZI: (*MITZI looks at the chimney and smiles.*) If only that chimney could talk.

FYVUSH:

Talk? What you mean. I was gentleman.

MITZI: Okay. Okay. Sorry. (*Pause.*) Where did you meet?

FYVUSH: Synagogue. All young Jews, then, met their future in synagogue. Who knows now. That was nineteen an' forty-six. She just got off boat. Couldn't speak English. But, I speak Yiddish. (*Pause.*) We got along.

MITZI: (*MITZI looks at the chimney and smiles.*) (*Aside.*)

I bet you did old man.

(*Lights down.*)

END ACT I, Scene One

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Act I, Scene Two

(*Dusk. The next evening, Saturday. The street below is less noisy than Friday. As this scene proceeds the lights come down slowly to near darkness as the earth turns and the lower east side quietly goes to sleep. MITZI is practicing traditional Korean dances. From the street someone is calling her name.*)

FYVUSH: Mitzi! Mitzi! Shalom, Mitzi!

(*MITZI, hearing her name walks upstage and looks to see who is calling her.*)

MITZI: Fyvush!

FYVUSH: Hello, Mitzi! May I come up? I bring tea and surprise.

(*MITZI turns, thinks, turns back.*)

MITZI: Yes. Thank you ...for the tea. (*Aside.*) Because I'm Korean I drink tea? I don't drink tea.

(*She picks up her bottle of soda and sips.*) (*While waiting for FYVUSH to climb the five flights of stairs, she continues dancing.* FYVUSH opens the door slowly, panting, exhausted. He is carrying a wind-up record player and a satchel with two 78rpm recordings. He sets them down and falls to the floor.)

FYVUSH: Oy-vey. I climb stairs too fast. Too old.

MITZI: You're pushing eighty, old man. You should know better.

FYVUSH: Too old to know better.

MITZI: Come over here. Sit down. (*She helps him stand and together they move to her stool.*) I don't want you croaking on me. What will the neighbors think? What would Zelda think?

FYVUSH: Who cares what neighbors think? Zelda would know truth.

MITZI: Fyvush, I'm a weird eighteen-year old college student. You're seventy-eight. I don't want you having a heart attack up here. It's just too... strange.

FYVUSH: (*Reality pause.*) Oh.

MITZI: My family, the nosy neighbors and the police wouldn't think twice.

FYVUSH: Family is gone. The neighbors move to Florida. And police won't recognize me.

MITZI: Why would you expect the police to recognize you?

FYVUSH: It has been long time. They have forgotten.

MITZI: You didn't answer my question, Fyvush. Forgotten what?

FYVUSH: They wouldn't remember me. It has been long time.

Is not important to you.

MITZI: There you go again. Why don't you just go back to Long Island City, or wherever you live.

FYVUSH: Forrest Hills.

MITZI: What's in the old suitcase?

FYVUSH: What was dance?

MITZI: Change of subject, huh. You were not supposed to see me dance.

FYVUSH: Why not?

MITZI: I dance for me. It's a dance my grandmother taught me.

FYVUSH: I learn Hora (*Haw-ra*). "Hava-na-gala, hava-na-gala... (*Still breathing hard.*)

MITZI: *Fyvush!*

FYVUSH: Show me Korean dance. Then we dance Hora.

MITZI: No. If my friends knew that I dance traditionally they would laugh. Make fun of me. Tell me I'm not American enough.

FYVUSH: With hair like that? You're not American?

MITZI: If you must know, it's a wig. (*She takes off the wig.*) See.

FYVUSH: I don't like wig. Better you should be natural.

MITZI: When I do the Mask dances I take it off. I create my own masks and costumes. When I wear them no one recognizes me. The mask dances have been handed down as Ogwangdae, from my grandmother's home in Korea.

FYVUSH: Your, Bubbeh, your grandmother would be proud of you. Dance.

MITZI: She's gone. Anyway, I don't have a mask with me... or a costume.

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FYVUSH: Didn't stop you from before. So dance.

MITZI: I was just practicing. The music is on my cd player. You won't be able to hear it.

FYVUSH: Who needs to hear? Dance like before.

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MITZI: (*MITZI loves the Mask Dances. As she dances she narrates.*) Korean dancers concentrate energy in their torsos and move their shoulders and arms. There is great emphasis placed on the natural movements. We try to express the nature of the animals we choose to honor with dance. This is the dance of the Spring Nightingale: Ch'unaengjon. (*She dances the Spring Nightingale.*) This is the Crane Dance: Hakch'um or Hangmu. (*She dances the Crane Dance.*) This is the Lion Dance: Sajach'um. (*She dances the Lion Dance.*) They are based upon what I see in nature. Other dances inspired by nature are the tortoise and stork dances, the monkey dance, and dances of mystic animals. I express my inner mood by dancing freely and spontaneously. When I pause, I suspend my breathing and become motionless. My suspended breathing becomes part of my movement. I seek harmony with nature. I feel the nature of the animal from my chest to my fingers, and to my toes. (*She bows.*)

FYVUSH: That was beautiful. (*Clapping.*) Your dance reminds me of our wedding night. Zelda and I danced the mitzvah. According to Torah I have first dance with my bride. But we could not touch. She teased me with a white handkerchief. We held the handkerchief between us as we danced. Very slowly. She was very seductive. Her eyes were downcast. She could not look at me.

(*Lights down, MITZI freezes in her bow facing the floor, as ZELDA, at the age of 19 enters, and FYVUSH joins ZELDA to dance the mitzvah as described by FYVUSH below as they dance to Chopin's Polonaise. See notes at end of play for Mitzvah Dance Steps.*)

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FYVUSH: (*Continues.*)

Then her uncle, the badkhn, our master of the ceremony, called all the male wedding guests to dance with my bride, one at a time. I sat. I watched my Zelda.

(*FYVUSH sits and follows ZELDA as she continues dancing alone with imagined male guests. You should take time enough for at least two male dancers turns at dancing. As the lights come up she dances off the set. Pause as FYVUSH watches her exit.*)

RETURN

MITZI: (*She rises, breaking the silence.*)

Fyvush, you said you would teach me the Hora.

FYVUSH: Yes, but first a surprise. (*FYVUSH opens the case.*) This is the machine Zelda and I used up here to learn the jitterbug.

MITZI: Does it work? (*FYVUSH opens the box.*) Oh. It's beautiful. Does it work?

FYVUSH: Of course it works. What you think? I teach you hora. Help an old man up. Okay. Wait. Wait. I bring old record I buy in

Catskills in antique shop. Is Yiddish Klezmer. A bunch of us old Jews took bus.

Kerhonkson.

(*From the street the voice of a young girl is heard.*)

SHARON: (*v.o.*) Mitzi. Come down. We're goin' to the stohas (*stores*).

(*MITZI walks to the edge of the roof*)

MITZI: (*Calling to the street below.*)

Hey, Sharon, I'm busy up he-ah. I'll meet ya' latah.

SHARON (*v.o.*) Come on, Mitzi. Ya' spend too much time on da' roof. Kimi's meetin' us at da' square. He's expectin' ya'.

MITZI: Ahm busy up he-ah, I said. I'll meet ya' latah. (*MITZI turns away as FYVUSH is retrieves the record from his satchel.*)

FYVUSH: You should go with your friends. We do this later.

MITZI: No. Sharon, is a schitzo. Her Korean name is Bo-Bae. She's boy crazy. And besides, Kimi is gay. He told me so. I can do them later.

FYVUSH: You talk different with them.

MITZI: Grandmother taught me to respect my elders. With them I (*Pointing to the street.*) talk trash. You're an elder, so....

FYVUSH: Is good. Here, put in machine. (*MITZI is gentle with the record and the machine as she places it.*) Gentle. Gentle. Is old. Like me. Elder. There. A little scratchy, but works. I teach you Hora. (*The music begins.*) Join hands. Arms up. As we dance our arms raise slightly with each step. (*They are facing stage left.*) Walk right, left, right, (*Facing center.*) Touch left foot. Face left. Walk left, then right, then left. (*Facing stage right.*) Lean back ... little. Then touch right foot. (*They dance.*) Aha, you make a good yiddish dancer. (*They dance to the rest of the music.*)

MITZI: Thank you, Fyvush. That was fun.

FYVUSH: I must rest. Zelda teach other yiddish dances. But, too complicated. Too lively for an old man. But next week, Benjamin Rosenthal Senior Center, we learn line dance. Whatever.

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MITZI: Unfortunately grandmother died before she could teach me other folk dances. After she died father forbid the family to speak Korean. “We came here to be American. We will be American. Make lottsa’ money.” I come up here to paint, write, dance and study Korean language and culture. My mother and father are too busy being American.

FYVUSH: Ah, my mother and father always had time for me. No nonsense, like popular music or swing dance. They did not approve. We had to learn how to jitterbug secretly.

MITZI: Grandmother, always had time for me. She taught me Korean. Her name was Myung-Sook. My parents gave me her name. It means “pure”.

FYVUSH: I like Myung-sook better. Myung-sook. Pure, is what your grandmother wanted you to be. Mitzi, with her all over.... red hair, wig, is not Myung-sook.

MITZI: I like Mitzi. All of my friends have changed their names. Sharon, Kimi, Alicia, John, ... To be more ... American.

(Pause as FYVUSH looks at MITZI.)

FYVUSH: You are American.

MITZI: But somehow I just don’t fit. My friends tell my art and my poems are too... Korean. My family thinks I’m weird.

FYVUSH: You are like a caterpillar stuck in its cocoon. If the caterpillar does not show itself, it will never be the beautiful butterfly it can be. How can butterfly see how beautiful it is if it does not shed its cocoon?

MITZI: You are comparing me to a worm... a caterpillar?

FYVUSH: If the butterfly stays inside its cocoon it will never show its inner beauty. Unlike caterpillar, you do not know what your life will be.

MITZI: I know what I want to do with my life. I want to dance. I want to create my own art, write my poetry...

FYVUSH: The butterfly will be like either its mother or father. But you, Mitzi, have choices. You are and will be what you find inside you.

Discretion is guide for searching for your part in life. The streets want you to change, but discretion molds the Myung-Sook your grandmother knew was in you. You must let butterfly inside you find freedom. Mitzi is just ... outer shell.

MITZI: Shell? I'm not a shell. I am in college. I do volunteer work at a teen suicide prevention center near Washington Square Park and the homeless center. I have my art, my dance... my ...

FYVUSH: (*Interrupts.*) Mitzi wears mask everyday with pointy red hair and sunglasses. What would Myung-Sook wear?

MITZI: Myung-Sook wears what I wear. Riddles old man.

You talk in riddles.

FYVUSH: Riddle. Puzzle. You give the butterfly inside you freedom only when you dance. Your dance shows only the butterfly but not what it takes to be a butterfly.

What of that riddle?

MITZI: How did you learn to jitterbug?

FYVUSH: Ah, you change subject.

MITZI: I learned that from you.

FYVUSH: You learn quickly.

MITZI: How did you learn to jitterbug?

FYVUSH: Discreetly. Up here. On roof.

MITZI: Your parents forbid you to swing old man.

FYVUSH: Believe me, they did same with their parents, as Zelda did with her aunt and uncle and I did with my parents.

MITZI: My mother and father have forbidden me to do my mask dances. That is why I am up here on your old playground.

FYVUSH: Why have they forbidden mask dances?

MITZI: That is another story.

FYVUSH: Change of subject, huh? Up here you practice what has been forbidden down there. Using discretion can you honor their wishes and satisfy your curiosity?

MITZI: Again you talk in riddles. How can you use discretion and not disrespect others, especially your parents.

FYVUSH: We are back to the definition of “is”. Eh?

MITZI: Yes.

FYVUSH: You choose not to tell your father and your mother that you honor your ancestors in dance. You use discretion, though you are not discreet, in your choice of hairstyle and hair color.

MITZI: What's wrong with my hair?

FYVUSH: I find your taste in keeping with your choice of art... (*Looking at her canvas depicting a wildly furious sunset.*)... curious.

MITZI: Curious!

FYVUSH: Yes, curious. Your sunset is very... hot.

MITZI: It is hot because the sun is hot. Too hot to look at directly. With the smog, the earth warming as it is the sun feels even hotter.

FYVUSH: You hide truth behind wig and sunglasses. You should honor your grandmother's heritage.

MITZI: My mother and father don't care what I do with my hair.

FYVUSH: They should. Grandmother Myung-Sook would.

MITZI: Why...?

FYVUSH: Why? Korean culture is very old. Old as Jewish I think. We old people keep culture close.

MITZI: How did the two of you learn to jitterbug?

FYVUSH: We were adults when we learn to jitterbug.

MITZI: You led that poor, helpless woman down the path to destruction.

FYVUSH: We were adults. As adults we knew we would not be forever damned if we put little happiness in our lives. We rejoiced in our freedom to do as we please... even for just few moments. After so much unhappiness, war... jitterbug was acceptable choice. We kept our bodies pure.

MITZI: (*Aside.*)

Depends on your definition of 'pure'.

FYVUSH: Grandmother Myung-Sook has left you a choice.

MITZI: What choice would that be?

FYVUSH: To be like Mitzi? Or to be pure to Myung-Sook? That definition of 'pure' you ask? Choices.

MITZI: You don't understand old man.

FYVUSH: What's to understand?

MITZI: Since Grandmother's death, Father has forbidden us talk about it.

FYVUSH: Is none of my business.

MITZI: To tell you would be very embarrassing for Grandmother. It was very humiliating for her. And she would think poorly of me if I....

FYVUSH: So, don't tell. Is none of my....

MITZI: I dance and learn Korean language and culture to carry on her heritage. When we brought Grandmother to America she refused to learn English. Father forbid us to speak Korean, except when speaking to Grandmother.

FYVUSH: Ah, choices. My parents, like Grandmother, were proud of our heritage. But we stayed in our neighborhood during times of trouble. World War II.

Very difficult time.

MITZI: Yes, a difficult time for Grandmother, too.

FYVUSH: Grandmother must have been very brave.

MITZI: (*MITZI returns to her easel and attempts to paint. After a long pause.*)

Do you know ianfu?

FYVUSH: I...an...fu?

MITZI: Ianfu.

FYVUSH: No.

MITZI: Ianfu. It was the Japanese word used to describe the captive women who were forced into brothel service during World War II: comfort women... ianfu.

FYVUSH: Oh. Yes. The Germans did the same with those they thought inferior: Jews, gypsies....

MITZI: In nineteen forty-four, at the age of 14, grandmother Myung-Sook was sold by her parents for three hundred and seventy yen to Japanese... three hundred yen plus seventy yen to cover her father's debt. She was sold as a comfort woman: ianfu... a sex slave for Japanese soldiers. She said that her family was starving and the only thing left for her father to do was to sell his oldest daughter to the Japanese military.

FYVUSH: Like Germany, Japan used slaves to build war machine to conquer Pacific.

MITZI: Grandmother had two choices: She could be a comfort woman or kill herself to protect her chastity. Confucianism places a taboo on the value of chastity. Grandmother had not reached a marriageable age, and still had her virginity. At the age of fourteen she understood that Confucianism taught her to regard her chastity as more important than her life. At the thought of loss of her virginity and chastity she attempted suicide. Her parents cut her down, and sent her off.

FYVUSH: (*Whispers aside.*) My Zelda.

MITZI: After Japan surrendered she returned home. Seven months later she bore a child, my father. She was so determined not to lead the sad and empty life that other comfort women had chosen, that she told everyone who would listen about her ordeal.

FYVUSH: Is that how your father learned of this?

MITZI: Yes, Grandmother told my father about her disgrace and his Japanese ancestry when he was teased and tormented by his schoolmates. They called him a seki... a bastard and Grandmother a shibseki... a whore.

FYVUSH: Ianfu... Comfort woman.

MITZI: Her brothers and sisters believed her to be unfit as a member of the family and unfit for marriage. They publicly chastised her and forced her to move away... to Pusan.

FYVUSH: Your father cannot forget his origin.

MITZI: He vowed that when he became old enough, he would leave Korea, take grandmother with him, and never return.

FYVUSH: Comfort woman. Is terrible thing.

MITZI: Yes. Grandmother said she had to give up her name, Myung-Sook, and was thereafter identified by a number. 16772.

FYVUSH: Jews tattooed with number. Zelda. W46729. Right here on her arm. She always wore long sleeves to cover.

MITZI: And a Japanese name, Leiko. I looked up the name and it means arrogant. She was feisty.

FYVUSH: Your father? Is he like Grandmother?

MITZI: Father is a bitter man. He hates all things Japanese and Korean. Japanese for not apologizing for the atrocities committed against the Korean people and the Korean people for being weak. However, he realized that in order to begin a new life in America he would have to live in the Korean community and therefore speak Korean, but he vowed he would never allow Korean to be spoken in his home. This enraged Grandmother because as a comfort woman she was not allowed speak Korean.

FYVUSH: Germans did the same thing.

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MITZI: I am writing a paper on Kim Hak-soon, a former comfort woman, angered after so many years of silence, decided to force the Japanese government to confront the issue. In the fall of 1991, Kim testified before the Japanese public. Let me read some of her testimony. (*MITZI reads from a notebook she takes from her backpack.*) “I began by declaring my half century of silence and the decision eventually to break that silence: for fifty years, I have lived, by bearing the unbearable. For fifty years, I have had a heavy, painful feeling, but kept thinking in my heart about telling my experience some day. . . . As I try to speak now, my heart pounds against my chest, because what happened in the past was something extremely unconscionable . . . Why does the Japanese government tell such a lie, to deny its knowledge of the comfort women system? To deny that the comfort system was not an historical fact? How is it that you can ask if it is true or not? You used to rape my body at battlefields, and now you disgrace my soul after 50 years. Actually, I was made a comfort woman, and I’m here, after fifty years, . . . alive . . . to tell of my disgrace at your hands.”

(She replaces the notebook. Continues.)

The women were regarded as military supplies. They were nothing more than playthings tossed around like their discarded childhood toys.... Nothing more than . . . things . . . to occupy the soldier’s time between fighting.

FYVUSH: Mitzi. Let me tell you something. Today, there are powerful and influential Japanese people who refuse to admit that Japan waged war of aggression. Today there are Germans who deny that the Nazi’s murdered

so many millions of people. Father leave letters from relatives in Germany begging for help. He did what he could.

FYVUSH: You have brothers and sisters?

MITZI: Yes. Two brothers. Both older than me. They are much like father. Both in the Marines. One in Iraq and the other in California.

FYVUSH: One in war. The other training for war.

MITZI: Do you think I dishonor her by changing my name to Mitzi?

FYVUSH: You have to find answer yourself. In order to fit in with others must we be like them. Give ourself American name? I don't think so. We lose culture, individuality, identity.

MITZI: Your father changed his name to fit in. I change my name and you don't like it.

FYVUSH: I have this name for seventy-five years. Did I have choice? You have choice.

MITZI: Perhaps Grandmother Myung-Sook was right. I'll have to give that some thought. (*MITZI continues to paint in silence.*)

MITZI: (*Continues.*)

The two of you were very happy? You and Zelda.

FYVUSH: Yes. Very happy. Did I tell you I went to Macy's today? I wanted to be near my Zelda. Mother of Pearl perfume she liked. Salesgirl thought I was crazy. I explained.

MITZI: She must have thought you were some weirdo pervert.

The Butterfly Within

(*Pause. FYVUSH does not hear.*)

FYVUSH: Like all marriages we had problems. When she...

(*FYVUSH turns away. Pause.*)

MITZI: When she what?

(*FYVUSH recovers with an embarrassed, sad smile.*)

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FYVUSH: Well, mmm.... When she.... (*Nervously searching for something to say other than the truth.*) When her motzah balls... Knaidel ... mmm, yiddish for dumplings.... Chicken soup... Matzah Ball Soup.... She couldn't get the motzah balls to float. "Cook them longer," I said. "What do you know from motzah balls?" she said. (*Pause, smiling.*) I vatch. She cook little longer. They float. (*Pause.*) I used to get terrible colds in the winter. She put extra black pepper in the soup to clear my sinuses. It worked! Yes, she was good wife.

MITZI: Grandmother used to make Kimchi. Pickled Cabbage. Many Koreans believe that it prevents respiratory problems. She would cut the cabbage into little squares. Then add white radishes, red pepper, sugar, crushed garlic and ginger root. Three or four days later, it was ready to eat. She didn't tell me that you have to refrigerate it to stop the fermentation. It ferments. I could have made cabbage liquor. I found that out for myself. My Kimchi just kept fermenting.

(*They laugh.*)

FUVISH

Ah, see, your bahheh, your grandmother gave you more choices. She knew you would learn. Hard way maybe, but you learn.

MITZI: Well, I learned the Hora tonight.

FYVUSH: Yes, and now surprise. I teach you jitterbug. First we change record.

(*He opens his satchel, replaces Klemzer record, then he retrieves the swing record. The music begins.*)

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FYVUSH (*continues*): Now give me your hands. We face each other. We step back-step-forward-touch-step-touch. You do opposite of me. I begin on left foot. You begin on right foot. I go back with my left foot, you go back with right foot. I step with my right foot, you step with left foot. I go forward with my left foot, you go forward with right foot. I touch with right foot you touch with left foot. I step with right foot, you step with left foot. I touch with left foot, you touch with right foot. Not much different than hora. Well, a little.

(*MITZI becomes very confused.*)

MITZI: You said this is easy, Fyvush.

FYVUSH: Is easy. You watch me. I will be you. Watch my feet. Back, step, forward, touch, step, touch. See. Is easy. I do again, then you do. Back, step, forward, touch, step, touch. Now, you do.

(*MITZI attempts the steps to FYVUSH'S cadence.*)

Back, step, forward, touch, step, touch. Now, you do again. I join you.

(*They dance together.*) Ah! Very good. We go faster. (*They dance faster.*)

MITZI: Wha-hoo! I can jitterbug.

FYVUSH: Next time we do lindy.

MITZI: OK. Whatever the lindy is. It's getting late, Fyvush. And if you are telling me the truth, the rats will be out.

FYVUSH: Rats in streets these days.

MITZI: I have to go. Help me carry down my easel.

FYVUSH: Sure.

MITZI: I have choices to make.

FYVUSH: Me, too. Oy! At my age.

(Lights down.)

END ACT I, Scene Two

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