



DONNA MARIE TODD

THE SINGER OF STORIES

This is an excerpt from my current book project, "Butterfly Girl." It speaks to my life long battle with self-esteem, which was battered by my mother's breast cancer diagnosis at age 40, the stress of working in the image driven world of professional entertainment and the ever-damaging media messages that a woman is never young enough or thin enough.

Butterfly Girl retreats and workshops are based on demystifying our poor self image, uncovering the messages we have been given that we weren't pretty enough or successful enough, and claiming our unique internal beauty as our true self-value. I tell this excerpt at the beginning of my Butterfly Girl programs.

BUTTERFLY GIRL

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www.donnamarietodd.com

For most of my life, I thought I was a caterpillar. Other girls were butterflies. Their long hair swirling around them each time they took flight on the playground or at a birthday party and later, at the high school proms I was never invited to. It took me a long time to appreciate the exoticness of my own wings. It took me most of my life to recognize that I am beautiful. I am a rare kind of butterfly. But I didn't know that then.

I can still see the row of newly shaved legs swathed in fishnet stockings in 6th grade. I can still feel the eyes that glanced over and smirked at my neatly folded ankle socks, scuffed orthotic shoes and legs still covered in brown fuzz. They floated and giggled, I wiped hot tears in the gym locker room and kept my place in the corner, crawling through school like the caterpillar I knew I was.

Our family didn't believe in birthday parties. Birthday parties were for butterflies whose mothers wore tight skirts and soft, shapely sweaters. My mother had lost her left breast before she was forty and her womb not long after so she never wore anything tight or short or soft. Birthday party invitations arrived only because my father was the handsome, popular young Methodist pastor who could preach better than a Pentecostal and out sing a boy's choir. I dreaded each and every party; shuddered when mother slipped their happy, balloon covered invitations from the envelopes and said "Won't this be fun!"

If you define fun as two hours of playing pin the tail on the donkey with a gaggle of girls who couldn't complete a sentence without giggling followed by cake with a Barbie doll on top and enough cherry Kool-Aid to fill a bathtub, it was fun. After all the Kool-Aid, I needed to pee. But before I could find the bathroom, we were all running around a circle of chairs like puppies chasing their tails. Now, I know they were looking down trying to find a chair. But then it seemed that they were staring at my thick wool skirt and fuzzy legs. After the games and cake, the birthday butterfly opened box after box of bright packages tied in colorful satin ribbons from twenty of her best friends as the others tossed their long curls around on their angora sweaters and stole

glances at my thick eyebrows and chopped pixie haircut. It was a good party when I didn't have an accident from all the Kool-Aid. But I was grateful for it. Glasses of cherry Kool-Aid gave me something to do while the others girls giggled about the newest Barbie outfit or a cute boy at school. Caterpillars are invisible when butterflies are talking.

I met Kim at a birthday party. She was a butterfly, too, but she was a brown one. Her shiny dark hair was always parted in the middle and neatly braided. Her mother let her shave her legs but she couldn't wear fishnets and she was there because her daddy was the fire chief and Mary's father desperately wanted to demonstrate why he had been elected chair of the local Democratic party by having a person of color at his daughter's birthday party. She was different from the others and we bonded over glasses of red Kool-Aid and chocolate cupcakes.

We began to walk home together after school and share our crush on Rodney Wright. We'd joke about how his name should be spelled Right because he always was. He had glossy black hair that curled around his ears, pillow-soft, ruby colored lips, and smooth creamy skin. His glassy dark eyes always seemed far away from the world of middle school with its burnt-out teachers and faded green walls. But it was Rodney's hand that shot up first, every time, when the teacher asked a hard question. And, he had the right answer, the first time and every time. Rodney Right.

After Kim and I got comfortable walking home together it was inevitable that we would end up visiting each other's homes. She asked me in first, or actually, her mother did. Mrs. Brown was a butterfly, but she was a very nice one. On the fall day she invited me in for cookies and apple cider she was planting mums in their yard. She was floating around in the front yard, like butterflies do, in a soft orange sweater and brown plaid pants. Her body was slim and strong and light brown, just like Kim's. When her tangerine tinged lips parted in a smile I had never seen teeth that perfect or white. She was quite beautiful.

Once inside their house I was greeted by Jack the boxer with a wet kiss I hadn't anticipated. The sloppy crime landed poor Jack in the backyard. He planted his wet nose against one of the lower panes of the glass door and made heart shaped slobbers on it while Mrs. Brown called my mother to ask if I could stay for a snack. Kim served up the cider and pulled big, brown molasses cookies out of a cookie jar with a half moon handle. As we savored the spicy cookies around the red Formica table I was surprised at how similar our kitchens were. I'd never been in a black person's home before. My father had admonished me the first day I'd spoken about Kim to refer to her as "black" not "colored." The civil rights movement and its fervent religious leadership had transformed the language of white pastors. Maybe it hadn't healed racism in the churches yet but at least now we used kinder words to describe one another.

Kim's dad arrived home shortly after we did. I could hear him talking on the radio, just like the police did, as the red Ford Victoria with the fire fighters' insignia on the door pulled up in the driveway. Chief Brown was an impressive man, with his fire engine red car and the uniform with its commendation bars and badge. He was a very big man, a good bit taller than my six foot Daddy. His hands were the size of a Christmas ham and his shirt could barely contain his powerful arms. Chief Brown's skin was the color of a Milky Way bar and his thin mustache arched elegantly above his full lips. He grabbed Kim on the way in the door, swung her up to his shoulder and kissed her on the cheek and then gracefully planted her back on her feet before reaching for his walkie-talkie to give orders to the dispatcher at the firehouse. His athletic grace and personal power took my breath away.

The whole friendship with Kim was very new and wonderful for me. The two of us planned her birthday party with her mom after school and for the first time in my life I had a friend who actually wanted me at her birthday party.

It was early summer and I had outgrown everything from the year before so Mom took me shopping to buy something new to wear and it was even an outfit I liked! I used a month's worth of my allowance to buy Kim a present. I knew she wanted a diary and the five and dime had a pink one with a princess on it that was just perfect. Kim liked pink. Carefully, I wrapped it in layer after layer of pastel tissue paper, and pulled out the edges just so. I cut a soft yellow tea rose from our garden and tied it onto the present with a soft satin ribbon. Its heady scent filled the car like an expensive perfume on the drive over and for once in my life, I felt like a

butterfly. I had a new outfit that I really liked! It was my best friend's birthday and I'd helped plan the party and I'd bought her just what she really wanted, a pink princess diary!

Balloons of every color were tied to the white fence when I arrived at Kim's house, just like we had planned that day in her kitchen. But when Mrs. Brown opened the door my heart stopped. There was Kim, in the middle of the room, showing off a pink princess diary, just like the one in my hand. I couldn't believe my eyes. Her slim brown arms didn't grab me for a hug like they did the day we planned the party, she didn't even know I was there. I quickly stuffed my newly formed, wet wings back into my thick caterpillar body and wished I could be anywhere but there. I wished I could be anyone but a fuzzy caterpillar at a butterfly party.

Which I guess explains why in my world as a grown-up I find myself giving the parties I always wanted to go to! And I know, now, that I am a butterfly. I am just a very rare, exotic one that only appears when it's safe.

BUTTERFLY GIRL Retreats & Workshops

These retreats and workshops are designed exclusively for women. They are an investment in self-identity and self-empowerment. I believe that each of us is a uniquely beautiful individual with God-given gifts and qualities. The workshop and retreat process lets each participant become aware of messaging that is damaging to their personal joy and replace those messages with their truth.

Expect laughter and tears, rage and joy to coexist as we explore how life has damaged us and willingly support one another as we claim our unique beauty and God's vision for our lives.

Let's talk about your upcoming event! 828.407-6023

Donna Marie

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