

BUTTERFLY BLOOD

a play in two acts

by

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CHARACTERS

SUN-HI	Eighteen, adopted from Korea as an infant. Fidgets. Long hair hangs loose, and she plays with it as she talks.
ANGELA	Fifty, white Australian. Sun-Hi's adoptive mother. Precise in her movements. Neatly dressed, but not elegant.
HARRY	Early fifties, white Australian. Sun-Hi's adoptive father. Stocky and a little gruff. Wears casual pants and open-necked golf shirts.
ALISTAIR	Sun-Hi's adoptive brother. Corporate businessman, problem-solver. Very protective of Sun-Hi.
HO-SOOK	Sun-Hi's biological mother. Petite and elegant, she carries herself tightly-wound and walks with small steps.
DAE-JUNG	Ho-Sook's husband. Works in a stressful environment. Very affectionate, though prone to outbursts of rage.

SETTING

Open in a government office in Seoul, Korea. Other settings include a hotel room, Alistair's office in Sydney, and Ho-Sook's home.

TIME

The present.

ACT I

SCENE ONE

(SUN-HI and ANGELA sit side-by-side in two plastic bucket chairs. Their shoulders are touching, but both of them have their hands in their laps. Next to SUN-HI is a small table with a large flower arrangement. The spotlight alternates as SUN-HI and her mother speak to the audience. In the background, traditional Korean music is playing.)

SUN-HI

On my sixth birthday, my brother switched the candles on my cake.

SUN-HI

(Closing her eyes.)

Made a wish, blew them out. They lit back up.

ANGELA

(Pressing her fingers together in her lap.)

She caught pneumonia at two-and-a-half. So tiny there in the bed at the hospital, tubes and wires.

SUN-HI

Tiny sparks to fire, again and again and again, vanilla icing melting as the bright yellow candles burned. They burned and I blew, with every breath the same bright wish.

ANGELA

Every breath a chore, snuffling and wheezing, vitals check twice an hour, temperature that wouldn't stay down. But she didn't cry. Not once. Not really.

SUN-HI

My big brother Alistair, did it to make me cry.

SUN-HI

(Laughing softly.)

Thought he'd drive me mad with greed, because I couldn't cut the cake until the room was dark.

ANGELA

(Wrapping her arms around herself.)

Always was a quiet baby. Right from the start.

SUN-HI

As dumb then as he is now. I never wanted it to end.

ANGELA

From our start, anyway.

SUN-HI

After dinner, middle of winter, same as always, everyone was there: my parents, Gran, Uncle Rory and Aunt Elise, my cousin Jan. Forks in hand, mouths watering, waiting for the cake.

ANGELA

Seemed even more silent in hospital, with all that noise. The beeps and the rings and the steady pulse of her heart, breathing made possible with asthma puffers on the hour.

SUN-HI

Five of those candles sputtered and spat after three quick puffs of air. But one held on, over and over.

ANGELA

The worst was over in three days, though the doctors held her in the ward a little longer.

SUN-HI

Banana cake with coconut and walnuts, smothered in smooth, white, sugary icing. Still my favourite. But I could have kept that wish revolving in my head like the moon, waxing and waning with the alternating light and flickering shadows. Stuck in a loop, watching, wanting what I couldn't have, wondering if anyone could read my mind.

ANGELA

Antibiotics twice a day for a month, syrupy liquid that stuck to everything, hands and clothes and the roof of her mouth. Washed it down each time with a glass of milk.

SUN-HI

Snap! The lights in the living room were on, and everyone was laughing, and my dad tugged off that last remaining candle, and stubbed it out like a cheap cigarette, doused it with water so it couldn't come back. I watched him lay it on the tablecloth beside his paper plate.

ANGELA

(Looking more and more nervous.)

Couldn't keep much down. Ice blocks and bananas, toast and rice. I don't think I heard her laugh for weeks.

SUN-HI

Everyone was laughing.

ANGELA

She never was that sick before, or since. She slept in our bed for a month, and woke up at the slightest noise. Hospital must have frightened her as much as it terrified me. Nightmares.

SUN-HI

Mum said it was my birthday, didn't need to help clean up. But I knew what I needed. Before she could shoo me outside to play with Alistair, I hid it away. The dead yellow stalk was still damp when I tucked it into the pocket of my jeans. It was a nub, like a chewed-up pencil, dribbled down with melted wax, and smudged with soot.

ANGELA

Looked up at me one day, a few weeks into the medicine, and just said, "Don't worry, Mummy, all better now."

SUN-HI

Slept with it under my mattress for a month.

ANGELA

(Digs a mirror out from her handbag and tugs at her fringe, frowning.)

I hadn't thought about that in a long while.

SUN-HI

I'd forgotten all about that until this morning.

OFFICIAL

(O.S.)

File number L-48210. We are ready for you now.

(Startled, SUN-HI and Angela jump apart and turn their heads to look at one another.)

SCENE TWO

(Alistair sits at an office desk covered in papers and an open laptop. He is dressed in a suit, with his mobile phone in his ear.)

ALISTAIR

What do you mean, a two person limit at the office?

(He taps his ear.)

ALISTAIR

(Taps his earpiece.)

Didn't catch that, Dad. Say again?

ALISTAIR

(Listens for a few seconds.)

No, no, I'll ring you. Get a better line.

(He hangs up and redials.)

ALISTAIR

So, what's this business about having to leave them at the office? I thought the invitation said 'family welcome.' Why didn't you wait downstairs?

(He looks frustrated. Getting up, he starts to pace, listening carefully to the person on the line. He comes to rest with his hands on the back of a tall leather swivel chair.)

ALISTAIR

Do you think she'll be there? The woman, I mean.

(Alistair winces, raising his hands.)

ALISTAIR

Don't shout—I know who she is.

(Alistair sits heavily in his chair, shaking his head. He takes a deep breath.)

ALISTAIR

Of course, you're right. Useless to get trapped in that discussion loop again.

(Beat.)

ALISTAIR

All that way to sit in the hotel. Must be driving you mad.

(He reads his e-mail, distracted.)

ALISTAIR

Yeah, I'm sure.

(Pause.)

ALISTAIR

So my travel agent worked out? No problems with the visa?

ALISTAIR

(Nods.)

Hmm. But you got all the papers sorted out—including the extra passport photos for the file?

(ALISTAIR gathers the papers on this desk and tucks them into a folder as he talks.)

ALISTAIR

Look, I'm short on time here. My flight leaves at three—I'm heading out to the airport straight after lunch with the boss. If there's news before then, ring me. Otherwise it'll have to wait until I'm home tonight.

(As he stands to leave, ALISTAIR pauses with his hands on the desk.)

ALISTAIR

But how'd they look, Dad? Mum and Sun-Hi, I mean—you think they're going to be okay?

SCENE THREE

(SUN-HI and ANGELA sit in the waiting room. They stare at each other as the announcement repeats, then face front again as though they could ignore it.)

OFFICIAL

(O.S.)

File number L-48210. We are ready for you now.

SUN-HI

Twelve birthdays since. Never wished it again. Didn't happen the first time.

ANGELA

(Picking at the hem of her dress.)

I should have worn that other dress. This one's too loud, too showy.

SUN-HI

That was the year for trying, though. Didn't matter how many times we talked about it. All the way down the South Coast over the school holidays, me with all those impossible questions. Who was she? Where was she from? And the why. Always the -

ANGELA

She'll think I'm trying to hard.

(Touches the pearls at her throat.)

ANGELA

And what was I thinking with these? There's still time, there's still time to -

SUN-HI

- why, though the answers came tumbling out of my parents' mouths, they'd been practicing -

ANGELA

(Sags into her chair and pushes her feet against the floor.)

- change. Change her mind. After all these years, maybe there's still time to -

SUN-HI

- practicing for all those years, before I came along. Before I had the words. Six. Six is when it started. Day before my birthday, project at school. Everyone else filled in their forest, green and red and purple family

trees. I drew two, side by side. Got the colours of an oil slick out for the first one, a rainbow connection with Mum and Dad and Alistair, Nana and Gran and Aunty Lou. The other tree, ghost-gray, just a trunk and skeleton branches. Leafless. Lifeless.

(ANGELA clenches her hands in her lap and sighs heavily. SUN-HI tucks one foot underneath her and starts to rock gently in her chair.)

ANGELA

No. Waiting time's long past due.

(ANGELA smoothes her dress and leans down to pick up her handbag.)

SUN-HI

I've changed my mind. Nothing in there I don't already know.

(ANGELA shakes herself and stands up. She touches her daughter on the shoulder.)

SUN-HI

Got it all on paper now, beginning to new beginning, end to end.

(She hunches further down into her seat.)

I haven't even talked to her. Didn't even ring when I had the chance, when she was sitting right here in the office, wondering whether I'd call.

ANGELA

Everything's different than it was last year, sweetheart. You're different.

(She pulls her reluctant daughter to her feet and steadies SUN-HI with a firm hand on the elbow.)

SUN-HI

Think she hates me?

ANGELA

You're ready.

(As SUN-HI takes a step forward, Angela hangs back a moment. Her

smile wavers, but she stands
firm.)

We're ready.

OFFICIAL

(O.S.)

This way, please. Your mother is in the first room to the
left. Go straight in.

SCENE FOUR

(A conference room with a large rectangular table and four chairs. The back wall is a bookcase with crammed with legal volumes. A closed door stage right and the outline of a large window stage left. There is a jug of water on the table and a bowl of fruit. HO-SOOK, dressed in a light-blue twinset and matching heels and handbag, stands with her back against the bookcase. She grips a small photo with both hands.)

HO-SOOK

(Practices aloud, slowly. Her accent is almost imperceptible, but she is hesitant.)

I am fine thank you, how are you? Did you travel well? Was there much traffic on the street this morning? Is your hotel suitable to your needs? Were you able to locate the offices with clear understanding of directions?

(HO-SOOK walks over to the table. Still holding the photo with one hand, she puts her handbag down on one of the chairs and pours herself a glass of water. As she sips it, she spills a little on her skirt. The photo falls from her hand to the floor.)

HO-SOOK

Babo! Stupid woman!

(HO-SOOK pulls a handkerchief from her sleeve and leans to inspect the water spill on her clothes. As she daubs at the damp spot with one hand, she crouches down to retrieve the photograph. While her head is out of sight behind the table, the door opens. ANGELA comes in first, with SUN-HI dragging behind.)

SUN-HI

I told you, no one here. He said the second door on the -

(HO-SOOK stands up so quickly that she knocks a chair over. She does not have the picture, as it is still on the ground. ANGELA freezes at the sudden noise. SUN-HI nudges ANGELA out of the way and HO-

SOOK and SUN-HI stand across the room from one another.)

SUN-HI

Oh.

(HO-SOOK retrieves the chair without taking her eyes off SUN-HI. SUN-HI starts to smile, then looks back to ANGELA for support. ANGELA squeezes her daughter's hand, steps over the threshold, pulls the door shut behind her and walks to HO-SOOK with an outstretched hand.)

ANGELA

(Deliberately, as though inviting a stranger into her home.)

Mrs. Kim? Thank you so much for coming. I'm Angela Wilson. Sun-Hi's...

(Trailing off, her voice catches.)

Angela.

(HO-SOOK frowns, ignoring ANGELA'S offered hand. She gives a short, stiff half-bow with her head and walks a wide arc around ANGELA to stand in front of SUN-HI. She stands at arm's length, appraising the young woman from head to toe. SUN-HI stands like a statue, then looks beyond to ANGELA. ANGELA returns to her daughter's side and tries to pick up the conversation.)

ANGELA

(Uses gestures to convey her meaning.)

The consulate said they'd provide an interpreter here, but there is no one. I thought perhaps you might bring someone—a friend? A relative?

(HO-SOOK doesn't react to Angela's question. SUN-HI shrugs at ANGELA.)

SUN-HI

This isn't working, Mum. Maybe it's not even her.

(SUN-HI glances backwards at the door. ANGELA reflexively tucks a stray hair out of her daughter's face and forces a smile.)

ANGELA

It'll be fine. I'll just duck back to reception and find someone to help us with the language barrier. Less than five minutes. Promise.

(ANGELA nods at HO-SOOK, pats SUN-HI's arm and disappears out the door. HO-SOOK hasn't moved. SUN-HI takes a step backward, looking around the room.)

SUN-HI

(Apologetically)

She'll get lost down the corridor. I should go find someone to tell us what's going on, find -

HO-SOOK

(Loudly, making SUN-HI start.)

No need for that. No need for any of that.

SUN-HI

You speak English? But I thought, when my mum talked to you, you didn't -

(HO-SOOK interrupts her with a dismissive wave. Her voice gets harsher.)

HO-SOOK

No reason for her to be here. Only two people in the room this matters to is you and me.

(SUN-HI stares. HO-SOOK turns sharply and settles into a chair.)

HO-SOOK

Sit.

SUN-HI

(Not moving, she puts one hand on her hip.)

No. I don't even know you!

HO-SOOK

(Presses her fingers to her forehead, her elbows on the table. Her voice is much quieter.)

You see me, bringing someone else?

SUN-HI

I shouldn't have come.

(SUN-HI looks at the door again, trying to decide whether to stay. HO-SOOK stares at the table, pressing her palms against the wood. She looks up as if to speak, then down again without a word.)

SUN-HI

(Talking to herself.)

Alistair said it'd be the biggest mistake of my life, said everything would come undone. Once in forever, should've listened to him. Should've have stayed home.

HO-SOOK

(Icily.)

It is disrespectful, to bring someone from outside into our situation. No reason to involve those it does not concern, calling in people to stare and wonder. Why would you do this?

(At the mention of the word 'outside,' SUN-HI clenches her fists and tightens her jaw.)

HO-SOOK

No one taught you better?

(SUN-HI pivots on her heel and reaches for the door. As she pulls, ANGELA returns with a broad smile. She doesn't register SUN-HI's distress, but walks straight to the table and speaks directly to HO-SOOK.)

ANGELA

All under control, see? Receptionist said there'll be someone with us soon.

(HO-SOOK doesn't look up. ANGELA taps her watch, miming her message with a grin and wide eyes.)

SUN-HI

She understands you, Mum. She understands you just fine.

(SUN-HI walks out, shuffling her feet. She glances back at the table; HO-SOOK is still looking down. ANGELA starts towards SUN-HI, but the young woman waves her off.)

SUN-HI

Need a minute. I'll wait downstairs. Can you sign us out at the front desk when you come down?

(ANGELA nods and watches her daughter gently close the door. She turns on the other woman, and slams her palm against the table.)

ANGELA

What did you do?

(Beat.)

ANGELA

What have you done to my daughter?

(HO-SOOK looks up, shaking her head. She crumples the handkerchief where it lay on the table, mopping up the spilled water.)

HO-SOOK

(Tiredly.)

Mine, first. First breath, first smile. Wide open eyes from the moment she was born. Always curious, always awake.

ANGELA

No problem with your English now, is there? So the language game got me out of the room?

HO-SOOK

This is no game. I wanted only to -

(ANGELA reaches across the table to touch HO-SOOK on the arm. The other woman recoils, cradling her elbows tightly to her chest. ANGELA scrapes a chair and sits heavily, still leaning over.)

ANGELA

Do you realise the damage?

(Raising her voice.)

ANGELA

She's been planning, waiting years for this moment.

(HO-SOOK covers her mouth with both hands, then lets them slide down into her lap.)

HO-SOOK

I only meant to talk to her. Alone. Without - without interruption.

ANGELA

She's gone now.

HO-SOOK

Gone, yes. Again.

ANGELA

(Furiously.)

You left her first.

(HO-SOOK sucks in her breath and starts to stand up.
ANGELA softens her tone.)

ANGELA

I only meant -

HO-SOOK

(As though in a dream, sadly.)

I understand the words that come. After, we try to excuse, talk ourselves out of our words. We give them breath, we make them alive with our thoughts and our feelings. Only ghosts in the air, perhaps. But our words without thinking are what we mean.

(The two woman stand up. HO-SOOK turns to look out the window, arms crossed. ANGELA takes a step toward her, then retreats and puts one hand on the doorknob.)

ANGELA

The other-God, the other, I could forgive, I could find ways to understand, such a gift, such a gift to me and my family, our daughter. The first time you left her, no choice, the only choice, I could understand that. My heart broke for you, every single day, all these years. I wanted to find a way to thank you, to show you that we'd done the best we could, so that you could see what a beautiful young woman she turned out to be. Our daughter. But this? We've come all this way, and this?

HO-SOOK

There was no room. Here or there, now or then. I had nothing to give, you had all that time.

(HO-SOOK allows her arms to drop to her sides.)

I only wanted a small space, to find myself in her face, without the reflection of you in every way she moved.

ANGELA

(Cocking her head.)

Not that different, then, you and I. I've been living with your shadow since she was ten months old.

(HO-SOOK turns from the window, the hint of relief on her face.)

HO-SOOK

Even if the sky falls on you, there is a hole you can escape from.

ANGELA

What's that?

HO-SOOK

Is there a way—to begin again, perhaps? With the girl?

ANGELA

(Retreating to her defensive posture.)

This was your second chance. This bright morning, in your city, in your world.

(ANGELA opens the door to step through. HO-SOOK rushes to the door.)

HO-SOOK

Another minute, to find a way to -

ANGELA

A mother gives her child what she needs. And Sun-Hi needs me now.

(ANGELA leaves. HO-SOOK stumbles to the table, where she reaches to the floor, retrieves the photo and clutches it to her chest.)

