



BUTTERFLIES

By Susanne Gervay



Chapter 1

“Jessie, don’t you just think Mr Roberts is the *best* English teacher?”

“If you say so, Katherine. It’s so hot I really don’t care.” She slings her school bag over her shoulder. “This bag is heavy. I’ve got that much homework to do tonight.”

“We all have. Can you stop complaining?”

“I’m not, but it’s stinking weather and I do have a lot of homework.”

“Are you going to the Horror Festival, Jessie? The original *Dracula* is showing this Saturday.”

“I saw *Frankenstein* last week. Pretty good for an old movie. I’ll go and see it, if I finish my *Romeo and Juliet* homework. I hate Mr Roberts. He sets that much work.”

“I like the way he reads *Romeo and Juliet*. ‘But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!’”

“Well I don’t.” Jessie smiles suspiciously at Katherine. “Is it Mr Roberts or *Romeo and Juliet* you’re so interested in?”

“That’s not worth an answer, Jessie.”

The usual group of senior boys waits at the bus stop. They’ve got their shirts half unbuttoned and their ties undone. It’s been a hot Sydney February. Two weeks of heat wave conditions and the temperature is still 40 degrees. Sweat drips off Marc’s forehead as he clowns around, pulling out William’s shirt, kicking a few bags, telling disgusting jokes.

Jessie likes Greg, the tall, skinny, red haired one standing next to Marc. Katherine elbows her. “It’s him.”

“Shush.” Jessie gives her that ‘don’t dare say anything’ stare.

“Girls. Girls coming.” Marc calls out. “What do you call ten girls standing ear to ear?” There are snickers. “A wind tunnel.”

“You’re the wind tunnel, if you ask me,” someone calls out, but it doesn’t stop Marc.

The heat, the end of the school day, his mates laughing, egg Marc on.

Katherine trips over Jessie's bag as she drops it. "Sorry."

Marc mocks. "Can't keep on your feet." He stares at her. "God, it's Dracula," he laughs. "You'll have to hide yourself in a paper bag if you want to get love at first bite." Marc smiles at his cleverness. Some of his mates laugh.

Katherine looks up at him, her face flushed. Jessie grabs her arm. "Why don't you shut up, you idiot," she yells at Marc. "Who'd even bite you? Not Dracula, that's for sure. He wouldn't want blood poisoning." There's sniggering.

Jessie whispers, "Don't worry about him, Katherine." As the bus pulls in, she says aloud. "Marc's a pain in the neck."

Everyone laughs.

Contemptuously, Jessie taunts him. "Why don't you get a life, Marc?"

"Sure thing, as if you'd know what a life is." Marc reddens as he runs his hand through his hair.

"It's all right," Katherine lies. "I don't care." The hot air makes the eucalypts crinkle and crack in the summer heat. She glances at the trees through the bus windows. *I've got to pretend, pretend, pretend.* Suddenly, she looks away from the cracking leaves

with their broken skin.. *Why did he say that? Think that? What have I done to you, Marc? I was happy today.* She watches his two metre frame slouch into a sticky bus seat, sweating humidity and male scent. *I'm not going to cry. I won't give you the satisfaction.* "Yeah, why don't you get a life."

Marc looks at Katherine quickly, pulls off his tie, then turns to discuss Rugby results with his mates.

Jessie sits next to Katherine in a back seat. "Don't worry about him, Katherine." Jessie points to her neck. "Anyway, look." She touches a small scar just above her collar bone. "I've got this."

Katherine stares at the small scar with its fine line. She rubs sweat from her eyes and turns away. "It's so humid, Jessie. They say there'll be storms tonight. Can you study in this heat?"

"I've got to study." Jessie reverts to complaining about school subjects, teachers and examinations. Katherine half listens as she watches the boys occasionally punch each other, occasionally look around at the girls, leering and joking. She stares at their thick black shoes scuffed with kicking and tripping each other, then she kicks the seat in front of her.

The bus stops. Katherine steps out onto the sizzling bitumen footpath, deformed into potholes and striations. She waves to her friends then runs from the bus towards home, sweat dripping down her shirt into the small of her back.

She unlocks the front door. On the kitchen bench are her breakfast plates left with the remnants of toast and jam. Black ants are crawling between the strawberry jam and melted butter. *Suppose I'd better clean it up before Mum gets back.* She throws her bag into her room, hitting piles of books and CD's she's left scattered on the floor. Then she goes back to the kitchen.

The sink. *Cold water first. Cold, then hot.* The words are habitual, repetitive, persistent. The cold is a relief. Slowly, carefully, she turns on the hot water, letting it flow gradually into the cold until the sink is full. Suds slosh as she rubs and swishes plates and knives and spoons into a bubblebath of reflections. *Hide in a paper bag. Hide. Hide.* She stops, rubbing her sudsy hand along the right side of her face, down her neck, her arms, feeling the ripples of taut skin. She's heard the story so many times that she isn't sure if it's her memory or theirs.

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Katherine is nearly three. Chubby and brown eyed.. There are photographs of her then. She's pretty. Mum is so young. Katherine's playing with her big sister Rachel on the front lawn of the units. The oleander trees are pink. She loves the pink flowers but they're dangerous. People get allergies from those trees, blow up with rashes and welts.

Right next to the oleanders, there is a red brick pit.

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Shuddering, Katherine shakes her head. She dries the plates stacking them inside the cupboard. She goes to her bedroom, shoves clothes and mess to one side, then puts on her CD. Hard rock blasts through her room and between her books. Hard rock blasts into the house, blasting so that no one can hear her crying, softly at first, then louder. Louder.

"Turn down that noise," Mum shouts as she drops shopping onto the table.

"Katherine, it is too noisy. Put the music lower."

Her sister, Rachel, carrying more bags, follows their mother into the house. "That's a horrible sound."

Turning down the volume Katherine calls out. "It isn't horrible. You're so boring, Rachel."

"Boring! What's wrong with you, Katherine? You're in a rotten mood."

Katherine's long hair hangs over her face so they can't see she's been crying.

"Nothing's wrong, except you. You live in the Stone Age. Haven't you heard of good music?"

Rachel rolls her eyes. "Yeah ... right. Whatever I listen to, at least it isn't hard rock. That's really the end."

"End? As if you'd know."

"Will you two stop fighting and help me get the dinner ready?" They don't stop and they don't help until their mother drops the box of groceries onto the bench. "That is it. These marshmallows are going to hit you girls in a minute." They ignore her until ... plop. Marshmallows soar into the air. One just misses Katherine. Two hit Rachel on her head. They stop fighting. Their mother is laughing. "Bene, bene. You look like fish with their mouths open." Her slight Italian accent makes the words sound like laughter. "Do not worry, you can still eat the marshmallows, they are not damaged. Now, come and help or no food. Look what I bought for you two. Your favourite - mangoes, very sweet."

Katherine is quiet as she unpacks the groceries while her mother and Rachel gossip and prepare dinner.

"I'm starving," Rachel announces as she brings the pasta to the table. "Come on everyone. Dinner's ready."

"Yes, it is." Their mother smiles as she digs the serving spoons into the salad. "Old Mr Jones does love his salad with especially the baby tomatoes. You know he has a

very strong grip. At his lunch, he held onto his fork stabbing the tomatoes. One landed on his cushion and when he lay back. Squash.” She’s laughing now. “Tomato sauce.”

"Mum, you're mad." Rachel bites into a tomato.

"That is what they say at work too." She stops laughing. "I like looking after the people in that community house. I wish for a permanent job there." She fiddles with her coffee cup.

“Who else would do that job? Who’d want to work in that crazy place?”

“It is not crazy, Katherine. I do not like you saying that. The people there need help and I need the work.”

“Those people want to be there, want to be helpless, sick.” Katherine pushes away her dinner. “Not like me.”

“They are not sick. You know that. They need a little help for a while.” Her mother puts down her coffee cup. “Are you all right?”

“Mum, she’s just having one of her scenes. Why don’t you grow up Katherine. You’re ruining dinner.”

“Well, I’m so sorry.”

“Stop it, Katherine.” Her mother looks at her daughter. “Is everything all right? Was it school? Did something happen?”

“No.”

Her mother waits. Stares at her. Puts her hand on Katherine’s arm.

Don’t touch me. I don’t want to be touched. But she doesn’t pull her arm away.

Rachel stops eating and stares too. Katherine looks away from them, confronting the kangaroo paw with its furry pods. *What are you pointing at you stupid plant?*

There’s nothing to point at. Can’t I be in a bad mood if I feel like it? Stop staring

Mum. Stop it Rachel. You’re staring a hole into me. Are you all going to just watch me? Are you afraid that if you stop looking at me, someone’ll take me? You’re wrong.

Wrong. No one wants me. No one will ever want me. That’s what he said. In front of everyone. I’ve got to hide. Do you want to hear that? She stares back at them. *All*

right then, I’ll tell you. A plain brown paper bag, that people stuff their leftovers in, then put in a garbage bin, That’s what I am. She holds her stomach as if she’s going

to be sick. Then shakes her head. *No. No, I can’t tell.* “There’s a fair bit of pressure from school work. It’s getting to me, that’s all.”

“You are better off than the people in the community house.”

I don't need a lecture, Mum. I can't make it, if you lecture me. Not today. Please, Mum. Katherine gets up.

"Katherine. You do know you are lucky?"

Lucky, lucky me. Katherine shrugs. "Yes." *I want to go now. Let me go.* Katherine stands looking down at her mother.

"Katherine, you have choices. Many of the people in the community house have not such choices yet."

You try, don't you Mum? "You're right. Mum." *I don't want to argue today. It's hot and it's too hard. I hear what you're saying, but I just want to look normal, like everyone else, that's all.* "I've got to study."

"You've always got an excuse for not washing up," Rachel complains.

"Your sister has to study if she wants to make the university."

Rachel rolls her eyes.

"It is only until the end of next year." Their mother wipes down the table.

Katherine disappears into her room. *Studying. I hate it. What's the point of reading and re-reading the same notes. Memorising things I already know. There're so many other things to learn in this world. I don't understand why ...* Scribbling on a note pad, she gets her pen to work. She flips open her Maths textbook. *Why? Scribbly little numbers. I want to scratch you out.* Dark blue lines cross and recross the note pad until Katherine's fingers hurt and the paper is torn with holes and pen marks. *Okay, okay. Calm down. Katherine, think. Think. I'm going to be a doctor. Focus. A doctor. That's the reason. Then all this'll make sense. I just need to breathe deeply, control myself. I know, I'll put on some music.* She shifts through her CD's leaving the hard rock aside. She finds the shiny silver disc. Carefully she blows fine dust from the disc, then inserts it into the CD player. The deliberateness of her movements, the concentration on the physical act, is calming. Waiting for the music, she crouches on the floor next to the player with her head bent over her knees. The melody sifts through the room as she slowly traces the lines of her body with the palms of her hands.

Last month, just before school started, Katherine went with her sister to see the red brick pit. They'd been there twice before. Once with their mother a long time ago and once on Rachel's sixteenth birthday. It had been hard. They cried standing over the red bricks, grieving as if it had been a grave.

Katherine and Rachel talked about going back to see the pit again a lot of times, but there were always excuses. Study, friends, the hospital. This time it was different. No excuses. Katherine was starting Senior School, Rachel starting work as a dental

nurse and their mother employed in the community house. Their lives were beginning to make sense.

“We have to go and see it now, don’t we? Just you and I?” Katherine asked.

“Yes.”

Katherine stood in her black laced shoes on the brick edge of the pit. A rusty metal grate was welded onto the top now, but they could still peer down into it through the bars. Leaning over the pit together, they saw sunlight disappearing into a black hole.

Katherine shuddered, then definitely shook her head. “You’re not so important are you, pit?” She kicked the edges of the bricks scratching marks into them.

“No, not important,” Rachel repeated.

They both knew it was a lie.

Tears shimmered in Rachel’s eyes. “Mum never blamed me, but Dad did.” She wiped her face. Touching Katherine’s arm softly, she took a breath. “I need to tell you here, right in front of the pit.” She stuttered. “It’s so hard to say, but you have to believe me. You’re my sister and I love you. I would have saved you if I could. I wanted to save you.”

“I know.” Katherine awkwardly put her arm around Rachel. “You’re my sister and I love you too.”

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"You did it, didn't you? You pushed Katherine."

"I didn't, Daddy. I didn't, Daddy." Rachel's pale cheeks go red and tears wet her seven year old face.

Rachel doesn't like her Daddy's loud voice.

He grabs Rachel's head, forcing her to look past the oleanders at the red bricks. Just a square in the ground. Charcoal wood and burnt firelighters lie in disjointed piles inside it. The pit isn't beautiful now with bright lights and dancing flames. There's an aluminium lamp attached to a wall near the pit. Rachel turns her head towards the lamp. The tall reddish haired man doesn't let her look at the shiney aluminium with its silver reflections. His heavy hand pushes her head close to the pit, past the red bricks. She can just make out bits of the the earthen floor lying deep under the soot and ashes.

Deep inside the pit. Deep.

Katherine had been playing when she tripped, grasping for the dancing flames. They engulfed her small arms and she fell into the pyre of garden refuse and chemical

fumes. She screamed for Rachel and Mamma. The gardener ran to her. They all ran to her. But the petrol burned fire. Acid flames covered Katherine's brown hair and her head, burning her hair, her face, her body. Acid flames covered her arms and her little body with its chubby folds and soft baby skin.

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Katherine turns the page of her Maths text relieved to leave the algebraic equations. Geometry. She likes working out the problems, making the circles complete and the geometrical lines cross and join into perfect prisms and pyramids. There are answers, solutions. *There has to be a point for the pain. The awful pain. There's got to be an answer.* She presses her fingers against her lips. *I know there are miracles. The Professor said there are miracles. I'll have soft skin and pretty hair one day. One day, I'll wear my hair up. I'll be like everyone else. One day.*

She looks out of her window into the backyard where her mother's parsley and the orange marigolds grow. *The lawn needs mowing.* Katherine focuses on two kookaburras perched on the washing line. *Laugh kookaburras, laugh. Please laugh.* It's as if the plain grey and white birds hear her and suddenly start laughing and playing on the washing line pegged with sheets and Rachel's white shorts. The birds laugh and laugh until their long triangular beaks look like smiles and their ordinary feathers sparkle. *You're beautiful. Beautiful.* Katherine touches her hair which is long and straight now. *Thirty-seven operations. Will I ever be beautiful? Will anyone ever*

want me? She forces herself to turn away from the kookaburras and focus again on her Maths.

Next morning, Jessie waves at Katherine as she enters the school yard. “‘She speaks, O speak again, bright angel, for thou art / As glorious to this night.’ Well, it’s day, so I won’t go on with that quote. I’m exhausted. I studied *Romeo and Juliet* all night. I might even get as good at it as you are.” She smiles. “But I’m still not in love with Mr Roberts.”

“Very funny.” Katherine walks with Jessie towards their lockers. They talk about last night’s homework and study and the heat until Katherine says, “You know yesterday, on the bus with Marc and his mates?”

"Don't bother about them. They're stupid, that's all."

"Jessie, listen. I have to bother about them ... and about other things." Jessie looks at Katherine. "We've been friends for a long time." Katherine waits for a moment. "Are we good friends?"

"Of course we are."

Katherine lifts her hair exposing the scars, exposing her neck and her shoulder. "Can you see that?"

"Yes." Jessie shifts uncomfortably.

"Is it the same as the scar above your collar bone?" Katherine touches Jessie's small scar, making her jump backwards. "Is it thick and rough and hard in places and grafted with new skin again and again?" Katherine's brown eyes are dark, challenging Jessie. "Did you get third degree burns on fifty percent of your body?" Shivering, she speaks deliberately, slowly. "And the surgery and vomiting afterwards and the pain and no father and your mother crying with you?"

"No," Jessie whispers.

"Girl who has to hide. Girl who no-one will love. That hurt. A lot. But it was terrible when you compared what I've been through with your tiny scar."

"I didn't mean it. I just wanted to make you feel better."

"It made me feel like nothing. I may be ugly, but at least I don't want what I've been through trivialised. Then I'm really nothing."

"It's not trivial. I admire you. You're smart and you are pretty, Katherine."

"Sure I am. Pretty as a princess." Katherine rubs her hands. "Marc and his friends laughed at me." Tears edge into the corners of her eyes. "I want to look like you. I

want your little scar to be mine. I want a father to take care of us and my mother not to work so hard and the scars to disappear so I'm like you."

"Don't be like me, Katherine." Jessie bites her lip. "I didn't think. I don't know anything. I'm sorry."

"I want to be a kookaburra."

"What?"

"A kookaburra." Katherine wipes the palms of her hands. "It doesn't matter."

"I'm really sorry. You're my friend. I never want to hurt you. Please. Please."

Katherine nods.