

# Pillars of Society



Chuck Trunks

Pillars of Society

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Nampa, Idaho

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In one way or another, we're all suffering. If your particular burden wasn't handed to you by fate or your own unfortunate choices, then it was forced upon you by a cold-hearted ruling class that prioritizes profit margins above compassion, empathy, and even common decency. Sadly, suffering isn't limited to unmet basic needs; it extends toward a psychological dilemma between appreciating the gift of life and sensing the absurdity of it all.

Through the interactions of four fuzzy caterpillars, *Pillars of Society* unfolds as an allegorical tale of personal transformation, revealing the true costs behind budding awareness and eventual enlightenment. Carl, Bethany, Fitz, and Sigmund live and work in a colony located in a secluded pond surrounded by wetland trees and dotted with water lilies.

After witnessing Carl's clumsy yet colorful metamorphosis, you, too, will come to realize the source of your own existential suffering—emanating from either knowing the disheartening truths about the society you live in or believing in the lies of indoctrination. It's your choice.

This book is dedicated to butterflies and caterpillars like  
Bethany.

-Chuck Trunks

*“This work was written independently by the author without  
the use of generative AI.”*

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## Preface

I didn't think I'd start writing *Pillars of Society* so soon after publishing *A Rationale for Being*, but with the times being as they are—disquieting, soul-crushing, rudderless, etc.—I felt I didn't have a moment to waste before all of “whatever this is” becomes even worse. However, both books are interrelated. In the first one, *A Rationale for Being*, I offer the reader an escape route from a society that prioritizes “greed over human need.” In *Pillars of Society*, I reveal the true costs behind personal transformation and enlightenment within a similar society—one that divides people into one of two classes: rulers and slaves. The interconnectedness of the two books isn't difficult to understand, as individuals—in this case, I, the author—require empathetic vision, high-level awareness, and pattern recognition skills to have even the slightest chance of discovering a way out of a dystopian hellscape created by a corrupt and shameless ruling class. In other words, enlightenment illuminates the path to spiritual freedom.

For much of my life, I felt uncomfortable within my own skin and unsettled by what I had seen, heard, and experienced in our so-called civilized and benevolent society—one that had

supposedly learned from all the mistakes of the ancient societies that came before. But it wasn't until more than 11 years ago that I felt a profound shift in the way I saw myself and the world around me. My personal transformation didn't happen overnight; unfortunately, it took more failures than I care to admit—each one resulting in a better version of myself, where the gap between who I was and who I thought I was no longer existed. Once I was able to shake free from the last of the chains that bound me to illusions and distractions marketed as happiness, I turned my internal microscope into a telescope to uncover the real truths that underpin a society grotesquely bloated by hypocrisy, deception, and cruelty.

I spent years writing and publishing nine books showcasing how I was able to amass such knowledge and awareness, naively thinking my sentient message could permeate the stunted consciousness of people whose attention spans are conditioned more for commercial breaks, sound bites, bullet points, and 15-second videos than reading. But, in their defense, they, too, live in a society where the average American faces a daily tsunami of demands and notifications from every direction. It's a tired, yet effective ploy by a ruling class that sells tangential relationships and excessive busyness

as “having a full life.” By keeping the populace in perpetual motion and distressed over access to basic needs, the ruling class ensures they are too weary to challenge the wildly unfair status quo. Being all too familiar with what the seemingly insurmountable obstacles are for reading—time, focus, a quiet space, no distractions, etc.—I approached my 10th book a bit differently.

Like all my previous books, I wrote *Pillars of Society* with two cardinal rules in mind: be entertaining and be relatable—otherwise, the pages won’t turn. However, this time, I unravel the story within a fictitious colony of caterpillars located in a secluded pond surrounded by wetland trees and dotted with water lilies. I was inspired to write *Pillars of Society* after having read George Orwell’s allegorical novella, *Animal Farm*, last summer, but instead of a satirical narrative about the rise of communism, I wrote an allegorical tale exposing the cost-benefit of enlightenment. Hopefully, I’ve balanced just the right amount of cleverness and humor to not only temper the sobering truths about the society we live in but also to entice readers with a short-format book that will be engaging, fun to read, and certainly worthy of their precious free time.

# Introduction

Welcome to the colony! Consider yourself fortunate, as few humans have been granted access to the inner workings of a population of fuzzy caterpillars—a colony that strangely mimics our present-day society. You’ll come to know Bethany, Fitz, and Sigmund—longtime friends with Carl—who bear witness to his impending metamorphosis from a questioning caterpillar to an enlightened butterfly. The story opens within a cluster of water lilies located on the other side of the pond from the colony, where their distinctive personalities first come alive over a mid-morning breakfast of sun-warmed flowers. As Chapter One continues, details of Carl’s early life are unveiled, allowing you to understand why he’s extremely cautious and suspicious of everything he sees—especially while navigating the underground highway to meet his friends at a popular watering hole.

In Chapter Two, Carl—who’s still a caterpillar at this point—crawls into the Nectar Lounge thinking he’s about to enjoy an evening of lighthearted conversation over cocktails. Instead, he’s lured into an intervention of sorts, where his friends confront Carl’s growing disillusionment and vocal pessimism.

Feeling he's among the very few caterpillars who actually care about him, Carl opens up and shares his observations and the associated theories that support his ever-increasing withdrawal from society. In between rounds of drinks and appetizers only caterpillars could appreciate, you'll be exposed to Carl's thoughts about having to wear masks, believe in illusions, live scripted lives, chase external validation, and suppress awareness and individuality to achieve a slim definition of success in a society skewed toward enriching and empowering an entitled few.

In Chapter Three, you're invited to join Carl on his last day as a caterpillar. Tag along as he goes to the library, treats himself to a hot beverage at a well-known coffee shop, and exchanges sesame seeds for overpriced snacks at the grocery store. Share in his stunned disbelief when he discovers metamorphosis is still a reality—despite the ruling class's insistent rhetoric, claiming butterfly transitions are no longer genetically possible. Carl's first morning as a winged insect is anything but routine, forcing him outside his comfort zone to learn how to fly and face the colony in an entirely different skin. Near the chapter's conclusion, he first shares his new physiology with Bethany, who promptly organizes yet another get-

together with the gang—albeit, this time, at a nifty little dive bar not too far from the Nectar Lounge.

Reality hits hard in Chapter Four, where Carl's physical changes not only reveal the level of denial in his fellow colonists, but they also bring out the true nature of his supposed friends, leaving him to question his place in the world, let alone the colony. As summer cools into autumn, you will feel Carl's struggle to co-exist with complacent, docile caterpillars, as he's a high-flying free thinker who's shunned by both the ruling and slave classes. In the final chapter of *Pillars of Society*, with nowhere else to turn, Carl flutters to where the story began—the water lilies—to contemplate his next move and offer his rationale behind his final decision to a curious, newfound friend.

Alex watches and listens intently to Carl while he dissects and explains the concepts of ego, suffering, and legacy. However, the key takeaway from Carl's final monologue is his comparison of the four types of caterpillars to himself and his former group of friends, leaving you to ask yourself, "Which one am I?"

# Chapter 1: One Fine Day

## A Lunchtime Epiphany

Carl felt it—a sudden shift deep inside of him, unsettling enough to make him lose his appetite. He immediately stopped munching, causing the other three grazing caterpillars to pause and look up at him.

Always the opportunist, Sigmund seized the moment from an adjacent water lily. “Are you going to finish that?” he asked while eyeing the succulent half-eaten bloom surrounding his longtime friend.

“Be my guest,” replied Carl.

“Are you alright?” asked Bethany. She was situated directly beneath Carl, on top of the floating waxy leaf that stabilized the flowering part of the colorful plant.

“I’m fine!” he snapped. “Why wouldn’t I be fine? I don’t feel that hungry right now. What’s the big deal?”

“Geez, sorry I asked,” mumbled Bethany, who resumed gnawing on the dark-green leaf. Clearly, her feelings were hurt.

Carl didn’t have a reason to doubt her concern. He was both troubled and ecstatic about what he was feeling at that moment, and yet, he couldn’t share it with anyone—not even with Bethany, another longtime friend from the same burrow of the caterpillar colony whose rare empathetic nature matched his.

A third friend, Fitzgerald, who preferred being addressed as Fitz, listened to the exchanges from atop a nearby water lily before returning to his midday meal. “I wonder what’s bothering the little drama queen today?” he huffed to himself. Most everyone knew that Fitz suffered from acid reflux, but not a single caterpillar knew that it was his contempt for Carl that left a bitter taste in his mouth. Fitz befriended Carl, Sigmund, and Bethany as they were transitioning from larva to adolescent pupa. Soon, they were calling themselves “The Fab Four” after their favorite insect band, The Beatles.

Fitz's disdain for Carl grew in earnest after realizing his new friend seemed to question everything about the societal structure of the colony. In Fitz's 12 eyes, he, too, saw that the rules of the game were arbitrary and that the game itself was rigged to benefit an upper echelon of self-appointed elite caterpillars. But unlike Carl, he was willing to play the game and win at any cost. No matter how hard he tried to ignore them, Fitz couldn't understand caterpillars who refused to go with the flow. Instead of simply accepting the way things are (and have always been), Carl and caterpillars like him *had* to overthink, overanalyze, and point out the societal flaws of a colony that was the envy of all the other caterpillar colonies surrounding the pond. To him, they were whiny little bugs hellbent on disrupting a system that brought mostly peace and prosperity to 10 generations of caterpillars.

“The nerve!” seethed Fitz.

“Did you say something?” asked Carl.

Suddenly remembering where he was, Fitz replied, “No. I was just stifling a sneeze. The pollen in these water lilies always

tickles my nose. Say, it might be time to start heading back. Don't you think?"

Carl looked up at the partly cloudy sky. A gentle breeze rocked his two antennae back and forth. "I think you're right," he replied. "Hey, Sigmund! Bethany! Fitz and I are going to start heading back, okay?"

Sigmund took another big bite out of Carl's discarded water lily bloom and bobbed his head at Bethany, indicating that they should go too. With half-chewed purple petals spewing from his mouth, he shouted, "Hey! Wait for us!"

## **Homeward Bound**

Other than having to watch out for territorial dragonflies and a few creepy praying mantises, the caterpillar foursome didn't feel the need to look over their shoulders during the return trip to the colony. Ever since a small group of seed-eating goldfinches built their nests in nearby trees, other birds—like the ones who typically feast on raw, high-protein caterpillar meat—are too intimidated by the noisy yellow-breasted

neighbors to troll the pond. Carl inched forward next to Bethany, while Fitz and Sigmund were two lily pads ahead.

“Hey, I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier,” said Carl.

“It’s okay,” she replied. “I can tell you have a lot on your mind these days.”

Carl reared back on his jointed hind legs and hopped onto the next lily pad without getting wet. Bethany wasn’t so lucky. “Oh my god! Are you alright?” he shouted.

“Of course, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be fine? I got a little wet. What’s the big deal?” she teased.

“I deserved that,” laughed Carl.

“So, what *have* you been thinking about?” pried Bethany.

“I’m not quite ready to talk about it yet, but when I am, you’ll be the first to know. I promise.”

“Did you find new friends? Don’t tell me you’re thinking about leaving the colony!”

“Calm down, Bethany. It’s nothing like that.” Carl detoured to an adjacent lily pad so he wouldn’t have to jump as far as the last time. Bethany followed closely behind. “Have you ever lost something and spent the next few days racking your brain trying to remember where you left it?” he asked.

Bethany inched up alongside Carl, matching his slightly faster pace. The distance between them and their friends had extended to three lily pads. “Yes,” she replied. “I misplaced my spinneret last year and couldn’t produce any silk for a week.”

“I think I remember that,” said Carl. “How did you get it back? Did somebody find it?”

“No, I woke up one morning and suddenly remembered I had left it under a mushroom so it wouldn’t get wet. It was raining, and I wasn’t about to pass up on a tasty meal of swamp milkweed. When I went back to retrieve it, it was right where I had left it.”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about,” beamed Carl.

“What do you mean?”

He stopped inching forward and turned to look at Bethany. “When you woke up that morning, you had a moment of clarity. The answer to your dilemma found *you* when you least expected it. That’s what happened to me on the water lily this afternoon.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “And what’s *your* dilemma about?”

“Nice try, Bethany. Be patient, okay? I need some time to process everything.”

For the remainder of the trek, Carl and Bethany inched along the lily pads in silence. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. It was the kind of quiet that felt safe between friends who trusted and understood one another. While Carl’s mind drifted toward the sounds of buzzing bees, swaying trees, and chirping grasshoppers, Bethany relished the warmth of the sunshine against her fuzzy back, which was no longer wet. For as far back as she could remember, early spring was her favorite

time of year. But that wasn't the case for Carl. He preferred late fall, especially after all the brittle leaves had fallen, covering the yellow grass and leaving the dark-brown trees naked against a monochrome sky of gray. When asked how that could be, he often replied, "Everyone is so hyper when it's warm and sunny. I enjoy the calming effect of cold, rainy days and harvest moons."

From up ahead, they heard, "There they are!" Carl and Bethany looked at each other knowingly and said "Sigmund" at the same time. At the next lily pad, they saw that their two friends had waited for them, presumably to enter colony security together. The two slowpokes were five lily pads behind. As they inched closer to the two speedsters, both Sigmund and Fitz stopped munching on an oval-shaped dogwood leaf that happened to land on their lily pad.

"Eating *again*?" asked Bethany.

"We had to," replied Sigmund. "We waited for so long that we got hungry again."

Fitz dropped the leaf from his mouth and said, “I bet Carl was giving you one of his long-winded monologues about how colony healthcare is a sham or how voting for caterpillar representation is an illusion of choice.”

“Not bad, Fitz,” chimed Carl. “It sounds like you actually listen to me.”

“If you must know,” added Bethany, “we mostly inched in silence while enjoying the beautiful afternoon.”

The four amigos gathered in front of the security checkpoint. A flat river pebble served as a desk and a barrier. “Single file, please!” shouted one of the two burly caterpillar officers. “You know the drill!” Carl bristled at the lack of polite discourse and recalled a time when colony police didn’t automatically assume civilian caterpillars were guilty of something rather than innocent.

“Are any of you carrying any plant parts?” asked the fatter of the two officers.

Fitz, who was first in line, looked back at his friends and then back at the expectant officer. It was understood by all that he would speak for the group. “No, we just went out to eat,” he replied.

“Did you eat anything on the south side of the pond?” asked the other officer. They were both black-haired caterpillars who long ago gave up trying to stay in shape.

“No, of course not,” replied Fitz. “We’re well aware that the south side might be contaminated with pesticides from Mr. Abernathy’s potato farm. So, we ate some of the water lilies on the west side, underneath the weeping willows.”

“Aww, how sweet. And did you hold hands and sing kumbaya, too?” sneered the fatter officer. “Go ahead. You’re cleared.” He stepped back and allowed the middle-aged caterpillars to inch their way into the colony.

When they were out of earshot from the menacing officers, Sigmund sighed and said, “I’m so glad that’s over with. Those two always make me feel so nervous—and I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Me, too,” added Bethany.

“It’s control through intimidation,” announced Carl.

“They’re just doing their job,” said Fitz. “Can’t you see that? The world is a scary place—full of terrible insects wanting to do terrible things to us. They’re protecting us from all of that.”

Bethany looked at Carl, which made him bite his tongue. It was hard for him not to debate what he believed was a concocted untruth—one of many false narratives created by the self-serving ruling caterpillars to ensure they remain in power. But in that moment, he knew they all needed a nap, especially him. “Do you guys want to meet for a drink at the Nectar Lounge this evening?” he asked. After they all agreed to get together, Fitz began inching toward the entrance of the left burrow while Sigmund inched toward the right. Since Carl and Bethany were from the same burrow, they headed toward the middle entrance.

Once inside the tunnel lined with coiled maple leaves, Bethany turned toward Carl and asked, “You’re planning to argue with Fitz about what he said regarding colony security, aren’t you?”

“Gosh, Bethany, you can read me like a book.”

## **A Fitful Nap**

Carl was glad to be back in his private sanctuary—a cozy nook he took immense pride in after having converted the abandoned wormhole into a multipurpose space where he could rest and work. He stretched out on his bed of fluffy white cottonwood seeds and placed two sets of forelegs behind his head. He was sated and tired, but he wasn't sleepy. He tossed and turned, eventually rolling onto his side so he could look at the blue and orange matchbox whose surface was littered with all his books and writings. For most of his life, Carl found solace in intellectual pursuits, yet he was conflicted. So much of what interested others didn't interest him in the least, making him believe—especially during his larva and pupa stages—that there was something wrong with him.

His difficulty in making friends or endearing himself to his mother, father, siblings, and other family members began soon after his parents brought him home from the colony hospital. Carl was too young and too naive to understand that asking

too many questions, challenging the status quo, and offering unsolicited opinions were the source of his problems. By the time he entered Hive Middle School, he was already adept at hiding his true self, opting instead to act like everything made perfect sense to him and to prove to everyone—especially his skeptical family—that he was like all the other fresh-faced pupae: agreeable and obedient. Carl quickly settled into a life focused on gathering the required breadcrumbs that would lead him toward what was touted as “The Colony Dream.” But after Carl achieved that dream, he found out it was all a lie.

Disenchanted with what felt like a colossal betrayal, Carl’s true nature—the one he had tamped down all those years ago—grew restless from deep within him. He was ready to start asking even better questions, to strategize while challenging the status quo, and to carefully wordsmith his frequent unsolicited opinions. Carl was smarter now. And he was angry. Never before did he believe he was destined to make a difference. He was going to tell the entire colony that there were other ways to live—other ways to think, such as embracing individuality and rejecting conformity. But as soon as he began, it was “*déjà vu* all over again.” This time around, Carl lost more than his family and friends; he lost his wife,

career, colleagues, and eventually, his home—all because he removed the mask that so many caterpillars hid behind. Once again, Carl’s naive altruism was his undoing.

Uncounted among the casualties of his former life were his three friends Bethany, Sigmund, and Fitz. Still, he couldn’t help but suspect they merely tolerated his incessant need to expose the lies, distractions, and hypocrisy of the ruling caterpillars. However, if it wasn’t for their allegiance, Carl may have succumbed to purposely eating a pesticide-laden plant near Mr. Abernathy’s potato farm or knowingly venturing into hostile frog territory. “Suicide by tongue,” as they say. At times, Carl longed for the days when his lack of awareness allowed him to fully participate in some of the activities that his peers enjoyed. He recalled going to The Viper Room to see bands like The Honeydrippers, Adam and the Ants, and Papa Roach or to Silkworm Stadium to watch the colony’s beloved Centipedes take on the Crickets from across the pond in a winner-take-all soccer match. But who was he kidding? He found those events mildly interesting—but certainly not worth his time and effort. When the invitations stopped coming, Carl didn’t miss the raucous spectacles; he missed the companionship.

After a fitful nap, Carl rolled out of bed and inched toward the bathroom, where he combed his bristles in front of the mirror. To his dismay, he noticed a few gray hairs at the base of each antenna. “Oh well,” he reasoned. “At least I’m starting to look as distinguished as I feel.” He dipped his face in a fresh puddle of rainwater and rubbed pine needles under each foreleg. Then, for good measure, he dabbed a little patchouli on the back of his neck. It was clear that Carl was a caterpillar who prided himself on smelling fresh and clean. After all, he was about to go meet his friends at the popular Nectar Lounge.

## **Going to the Nectar Lounge**

Before they parted for their naps, Carl told Bethany he’d meet her at the Nectar Lounge, telling her he had an errand to run beforehand. That was a lie. He wanted to use the time to organize his thoughts should Fitz demand a rebuttal regarding what transpired earlier at the security checkpoint. And since the bar was 10 to 15 minutes away (depending on caterpillar traffic), he’d have plenty of time to come up with a winning argument—or perhaps he was lying to himself. Years earlier, Carl had perfected his criticisms of what most caterpillars believed was a normal society. The truth was, the solo trek to

the bar would allow him to gather additional data—yet more proof that the culture of the colony had changed for the worse.

Carl exited his humble abode and inched along the length of the burrow toward the underground highway, which ironically wasn't subterranean at all. In reality, it was simply the colony's main thoroughfare covered with wet leaves in varying stages of decay. As usual, he didn't see any other caterpillars out and about—except for the ones walking their pet termites. For the life of him, Carl couldn't see the attractiveness of owning such an unpredictable insect that unnerves most other caterpillars and destroys everything—especially wood, which makes up about half of the colony infrastructure. At first, it didn't make sense, but after years of studying the burgeoning phenomenon of termite ownership, Carl figured out why the ruling caterpillars ignored this strange, counterproductive obsession with termites. It always came down to the same two elements: power and control.

Whenever Carl shared his thoughts about caterpillars who organize their lives around noisy wood-eating pets that won't ever challenge their owner's lifestyle or decisions, he was typically called a “termite hater” or worse. He even wrote and

published a book about the craze called *Must Love Termites: A Tragedy of Sorts*. In it, he never once condoned harming or mistreating termites, and yet he was still unfairly labeled as the “Termite Terminator” by book reviewers of the colony’s one and only newspaper, *The Colony Cove*. In his defense—which the newspaper agreed to print—he wrote:

“Let me be perfectly clear. I do not hate termites or termite owners; however, I *am* skeptical of anything that not only divides the caterpillar population but also creates a lucrative revenue stream for corporate overlords. When I see solitary termite owners with one or more termites around my burrow, I see a lonely caterpillar who, like many of us, has been emotionally hurt or traumatized. But instead of choosing to fill the void with something healthy and inclusive, they choose an addictive distraction that inhibits their recovery and retards their ability to create new relationships with other caterpillars. Nobody likes to hear it, but termite ownership is a psychological disorder and, in my opinion, is a symptom of late-stage loneliness.”

Finally, Carl emerged from the dark burrow tunnel and inched onto the busy highway. Twilight filtered through the leafy

canopy—enough for him to identify the Nectar Lounge in the distance. Caterpillars of all shapes and sizes moved along the highway in both directions. In the center of the much-used thoroughfare, rivulets of rainwater served as a means for more expedient travel—an express lane of sorts. Caterpillars with the proper clout and connections could forego tiresome and time-consuming crawling and choose to float atop segments of banded pine straw. From Carl’s vantage point, it looked like organized chaos.

No matter how many times he prepared himself for public spaces, Carl couldn’t escape feeling waves of apathy, indifference, detachment, and general hopelessness from the hordes of individual caterpillars inching or floating by. Their faces—which used to show signs of warm acknowledgment—were more or less expressionless, with their six sets of eyes looking everywhere except at one another. Making matters worse was a new technology that had filtered down to the colony’s working class several years earlier. Incredibly, it allowed caterpillars to send and receive written or audible messages—including photos and videos—through their antennae. Of course, it was a free service in the beginning, but

now it costs each user seventy-five sesame seeds per season.  
*Well played, corporate overlords!*

At first, the communication tool (originally referred to as the Cater-Net but changed to Cater-Notes because no insect in their right mind likes the word ‘net’) was the biggest thing since sliced milkweed. However, it didn’t take Carl very long to figure out that Cater-Notes, which boosted the colony’s sluggish economy from a bear to bull market practically overnight, was eroding the most important facet of community: face-to-face discourse. Why was he the only one to notice what was happening? Of course, he knew that wasn’t true, but why wasn’t anyone else saying anything? Although Carl knew he was powerless to change the policies of the ruling class, he understood that he still had a choice—he could allow them to take over his mind and commandeer the few freedoms he still had left, or he could choose to continue to think critically and creatively and live life on his terms. At the time, he couldn’t understand why so many of his fellow caterpillars didn’t follow his lead.

As Carl inched closer to the Nectar Lounge, he scanned the passing faces, searching for a hint of passion or inspiration.

Instead, he saw only tight-lipped mouths and eyes that either locked onto their leashed termites, stared absently ahead, or dipped as they drafted, sent, read, watched, or listened to a Cater-Note. “Can’t they see it?” he sighed. “Can’t they see that this wildly addictive technology is yet another mindless distraction—one that brings faraway caterpillars closer while distancing them from those who are near? Don’t they understand that their presence is needed in any given moment? On what grounds did they decide (or accept) that the present moment was no longer worth their time? Don’t they know that life can only be lived in the very moment they’re so desperately trying to avoid? What are they running from? Boredom? Idle time? Wake up, caterpillars! Don’t you know boredom and idle time are what give rise to ideas and creativity?”

Just as Carl exited the underground highway to begin crawling toward his waiting friends, a mature female caterpillar—toting three rambunctious termites—huffed and rolled all her eyes at him. Obviously, she had overheard Carl. Instead of telling her he wasn’t speaking to her, he shrugged it off and inched toward the sound of one of his favorite bands thumping from the Nectar Lounge—the Bee Gees.

## **Chapter 2: The Nectar Lounge**

### **Barflies**

Carl would never come here alone unless he was on a mission to gather more data. But that wasn't the case this evening. Besides, he was well aware of the fleeting and often shallow discourse that passed as social interaction these days, especially in bars. What used to be a place for single caterpillars to meet and forge new relationships transformed into a hostile wasteland where dreams of love and companionship went to die in the most pathetic way possible. He recalled a scene from one of the last bars he visited solo. There was music, but no one was dancing. Caterpillars were communicating, but their lips weren't moving. Glazed-over eyes scanned the dimly lit room, showing neither interest nor intention. Without having received so much as a single nod or a smile from a female caterpillar or ladybug, Carl remembered checking his back to see if some jokester had taped a sign that read, "Beware: I'm a creepy night crawler that eats its young." When he found there was no sign, he shook his head in frustration, wondering why caterpillars would come to a bar

to buy overpriced drinks and food when they could stay home and ignore each other for free.

From the outside, the Nectar Lounge wasn't much to look at, but it had a rich history. Rumor has it that the old, hollowed-out log was once part of a lower tree branch used by hummingbirds to store sweet flower parts for the winter. At first, the caterpillars used the cavernous space as a warehouse facility; however, rising stress levels among the colony population forced the ruling class to convert it into a mental institution to house those who couldn't cope or keep up with the demands of a frenetic society built around consumerism and high productivity. Later, prior to becoming the Nectar Lounge, the mental institution was retrofitted with chicken wire and transformed into the colony's first maximum security prison. It wasn't until the entire prison system was privatized to trade inmate rehabilitation for profit that prompted the ruling caterpillars to sell the decommissioned penitentiary to the highest bidder.

DJ Fuzz, host of the popular radio show "Morning Fuzz," bought the property with help from several Centipedes players, who were looking for an investment they could

market using their pond-wide celebrity status. Not wanting their names associated with mental institutions or prisons, the investment group wisely named the bar in reference to the rumor about the hummingbirds. The bar was a smash hit, especially with the avant-garde caterpillar crowd—the perfect place to “see and be seen.” Even by grasshopper standards, the Nectar Lounge was huge. There were two dance floors, three separate bars, and an attached restaurant with indoor and outdoor seating. Carl preferred sitting in the restaurant area—which is where he and his friends agreed to meet—because it allowed for the best views of the entire space.

“Am I late or something?” asked Carl as he approached the blue and white bottle cap table that read “Corona Extra” across the top. He was the last to arrive. “I’m the one who usually gets here first,” he added.

“We haven’t been here for very long,” said Sigmund. “Fitz and I inched over to Bethany’s place, and the three of us crawled here together.”

Fitz nodded in agreement and waved over a cocktail waitress.

“Did you get your errand done?” asked Bethany. She patted the vacant space next to her, prompting Carl to sit beside her.

Carl sat down on the plastic straw, immediately appreciating the bounciness. It was nice to take a load off of all his legs and feet. “No, I overslept,” he lied. “I’ll just do it tomorrow.”

“Do what?” pressed Bethany.

“Umm, just some stuff.”

“There you go again,” hissed Fitz.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” asked Carl.

Both Sigmund and Bethany gave Fitz disapproving looks. He replied by saying, “One of us needs to tell him.”

“Tell me what?”

“We’ve been noticing the changes in you, Carl,” said Bethany. “I don’t mean to sound cruel or judgmental, but you seem uptight, reclusive, intense, and focused on what’s wrong with

everything. In fact, you've even said that you think we've already died and gone to hell. Do you actually believe that?"

Before Carl could reply to the group, the waitress, wearing a tiny yellow duckweed flower to the left of her antennae, addressed the table. "Good evening, folks. My name is Ruby, and I'll be your server this evening." She looked at Bethany first.

"I'd like a red clover martini, please."

Ruby directed her attention to Fitz.

"I'll take a rum and oak."

"A pansy colada for me," requested Sigmund.

"Could you say that a little louder?" laughed Fitz. "That's a girl's drink."

"I don't care," replied Sigmund. "They're sweet and go down easy."

Fitz laughed even harder, which made Carl, Bethany, and Ruby join him. “I’m not touching *that* one,” he added.

Ruby glanced at Carl to complete the order.

“Just a simple Bug Lite for me, please.”

After Ruby left, all eyes fell on Carl. “You’re not wrong to think that,” he began. “Imagine if you found a pair of glasses that allowed you to see the truth of the world—what the ruling class and all its members would never want a slave to see?”

“So, now you’re telling us you have a pair of magic glasses?” deadpanned Sigmund.

Carl ignored Sigmund’s comment and continued. “At first, you’d think you won the lottery. You’d begin to wear the glasses everywhere to see as many of the ruling class’s despicable secrets as possible. Then, you’d quickly learn that much of what everyday caterpillars are chasing are simply illusions that the ruling class invented out of thin air—hollow enticements to keep the slaves believing that they, too, can join the ranks of the upper echelon if they’re willing to work hard

and sacrifice enough. And finally, the inevitable catches up to you—you destroy the glasses and try to forget what you saw. But of course, you can never forget. That would be like sitting in the audience of a magic show and trying to will yourself into feeling surprised by a trick when you already know the secret of how it's done.”

“Oh! I love magic shows,” beamed Sigmund. “Have you seen the illusionist, David Copperhead? He's a snake, but who cares if he's amazing? Am I right?”

Bethany leaned forward and scolded Sigmund. “Didn't you hear what he just said? Gosh, Sigmund, you can be so insensitive sometimes.” She turned toward Carl, saying, “I think I understand, but it sounds more like a curse than a gift. Where do you think you'll go from here?”

“I know where he can go,” mumbled Fitz.

## On the House

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” snapped Bethany. “First, Sigmund acts like everything is a joke, and now you’re being hostile. I definitely know where *you* can go, Fitz!”

Sigmund grew sullen and dropped his gaze to the table surface while Fitz huffed and looked around for Ruby.

“It’s okay, Bethany. Not everyone is as caring and diplomatic as you,” said Carl. “Sigmund just wants to have a good time, and Fitz is entitled to his own thoughts and opinions. Quite frankly, I’d like to hear some of them.”

Bethany folded her forelimbs across her chest and sat back on her side of the straw. “I don’t think friends should behave that way,” she replied.

Carl put a forelimb across Bethany’s shoulders and looked at Fitz and Sigmund. He said, “True friends are willing to tell you—with tact, respect, and kindness, of course—something they know you won’t want to hear.”

“That’s true,” said Bethany brightly. She appeared to be relieved that Carl was choosing not to be offended.

Ruby surprised the group by approaching the table from the patio door. She was balancing four pixie-cup lichens on top of a two-hole flat button that was the same color as the flower pinned to the top of her head. “Now, who ordered the pansy colada?” she teased while placing the bright pink drink in front of Sigmund.

Sigmund smiled and said, “This looks fantastic. I can already tell I’ll have at least one, maybe two, more of these.”

Ruby distributed the rest of the frosty drinks and surprised the foursome again when she placed a half peanut shell in the middle of the table—chewy cherry stems on one side and mouth-watering sycamore sap on the other.

Carl scanned the table and looked up at Ruby. “I don’t think we ordered an appetizer.”

“Oh, it’s on the house,” replied Ruby. “As you can see, we’re pretty slow tonight.”

After Ruby left to attend to another table, Bethany leaned forward and whispered, “I think someone has a little crush on our friend Sigmund.”

Sigmund laughed and seized the moment to make a toast. He lifted his goblet-shaped pixie cup. “To friends,” he began, “Although none of us is perfect, we have to do our best in accepting one another based on who they are—not who we think they should be.”

“Oh, Sigmund,” said Bethany. “Do I even know you? That was perfect.” Then she shifted her gaze to Fitz and added, “Wasn’t it, Fitz?”

Fitz looked at Bethany, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he lifted his pixie cup—which prompted Carl and Bethany to do the same—and tapped his mixed drink against Sigmund’s. After each goblet received a tap from the others, they sipped in unison to christen the evening and acknowledge their friendship.

Fitz was the first to set his goblet down on the table. Without hesitation, he looked at Carl and blurted, “You act like you’re better than us.”

Sigmund looked at Bethany and deadpanned, “I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.”

“Fitz!” admonished Bethany. “Where’s the respect, tact, and kindness?”

“It’s okay, Bethany. I’m just grateful that Fitz is speaking his mind. Most caterpillars wouldn’t be that direct—or brave.” He turned back to Fitz and said, “Go on. Really, I’m fine.”

“When I first met you,” Fitz continued, “you seemed like a normal caterpillar—a little too serious and particular for my taste, but I liked you anyway. Back then, you were married, had a nine-to-five job, and lived in a house you owned. You used to do things and go places. Now, you’re single, don’t work, and rent where they’ll have you. You isolate yourself, dedicating all your time to reading, writing, and researching about things nobody cares about anymore. And yet, you walk

around with this self-importance, believing you have the answers to life's most mysterious questions as if—”

“Fitz, that's enough!” hissed Bethany.

“Let me finish,” said Fitz. “It feels like you assume people around you couldn't possibly understand your perspective, either because they're too uneducated or too stuck in their own, as you say, ‘indoctrination.’ Okay, now I'm finished.”

“Well said,” joked Sigmund while reaching for a cherry stem. “Now tell us how you *really* feel about Carl.” He almost put the stem in his mouth before remembering to dip it in the sycamore sap.

Bethany picked up her red maple martini and glared at Fitz. “Feel better?” she asked.

“Hey!” interrupted Carl. “I'm the one who's supposed to be feeling bad here—and I don't. Fitz is not only brave to tell me these things, but he's also right. Plus, it's not like I didn't already know these things. The magic glasses weren't constrained to the truths about society; they forced me to see

and confront the truths about myself. And just to be clear—for Sigmund’s sake—there aren’t any pairs of magic glasses. There’s still a magic element, but it comes from inside of me. Each one of us has a certain kind of magic—natural talents that we’re born with. Whereas *your* talents allow you to thrive and excel in today’s society, mine, unfortunately, make me look like a miserable failure.”

“That’s what I don’t get,” said Fitz. “You *were* successful, doing much better than all of us. Then, little by little, you threw it all away.”

Carl took a sip of his Bug Lite and replied, “No, Fitz, I didn’t choose to walk away from a successful life. I wasn’t *that* brave. I went kicking and screaming down this path. Don’t forget: my wife left me for a younger caterpillar, and I was laid off from my job. In other words, I needed help to start moving in the right direction.”

“Poor Carl,” whined Fitz. “You’re not the first one to see his life implode; most caterpillars simply land a new job and find a better spouse. In other words, Carl, instead of throwing in the towel, they get back on the horse.”

Sigmund took a break from munching on a cherry stem and deadpanned, “I think there’s room for one more idiom, Fitz.”

“I don’t get it, Carl,” said Bethany. “You admit you were successful, yet you’re willingly going down a path that’s destined for failure. What am I missing?”

“Well,” replied Carl, “based on Sigmund’s present consumption rate, you’re missing out on the appetizer.”

“Yeah, save some for us,” added Fitz.

## **Another Round**

“That’s the million-sesame-seed question, Bethany,” replied Carl. He waited for his friends to help themselves to the appetizer before continuing. “You’re right; it does seem strange—a sane, able-bodied caterpillar opts for guaranteed failure rather than recreating the success that had elevated him to an upper echelon of mainstream society years earlier. To most, I appear to have committed more than just career suicide; in their minds, I’ve intentionally excommunicated myself from society in general. On the surface, they’re right—

but they couldn't be further from the truth. Have you ever wondered why everyone seems to live the same cookie-cutter life? Soon after we're born, we're presented with a script that tells us how to live, promising success, fulfillment, and happiness if we follow it implicitly. For a moment, we hesitate, thinking there must be more to life than what's being offered. But our doubts are quickly remedied by the fact that most caterpillars live according to the exact same script: our parents, friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches, coworkers, etc. And when we point out the few who do seem to be living a unique life on their terms, we're often told those caterpillars are too weak to make it in the real world, suffer from mental or emotional problems, or simply want attention."

Fitz drained the rest of his cocktail and slid the empty pixie cup to the edge of the table. "That's what I was thinking," he blurted.

"Thinking what?" asked Carl.

"That you're weak, mental, or starving for attention."

At that moment, Carl felt the urge to destroy Fitz's bravado. Unbeknownst to the table's antagonist, Carl could easily see through his friend's facade. Fitz's aggression didn't stem from self-righteousness; it was powered by fear—and Carl knew it. Instead of succumbing to his anger, he polished off his Bug Lite and set the empty vessel next to Fitz's. As Bethany prepared to once again lay into Fitz for his boorish behavior, Ruby arrived at the table.

“Are we ready for another round?” she asked. She was referring to the group, but her gaze was on Sigmund.

Sigmund pushed his empty cup toward Ruby and replied, “Yes, please, but this time, could you make it with a little more colada and less pansy?”

“Yeah, that'll definitely make it *way* less of a girlie drink,” teased Fitz.

“I disagree,” said Ruby, whose glistening antennae were gently wobbling in Sigmund's direction. “I think it takes a macho caterpillar to order a drink like that and not feel embarrassed.”

Sigmund sat up straighter and smiled at Ruby while Fitz slumped on his straw.

“I’ll take another Bug Lite,” said Carl.

“And you?” asked Ruby, looking at Bethany. “It looks like you’re still working on your martini.”

“I’m almost done,” she said. “Can I get a Mai Fly this time?”

Ruby gathered the three empty pixie cups onto her button tray before asking, “Will there be anything else?”

“Yes,” replied Sigmund. “I’d like to order some pumpkin strips and one of those big cucumber wheels for the table, okay?”

“You got it, pansy boy.”

Once Ruby was out of earshot, Bethany giggled, “She’s practically throwing herself at you, Sigmund.”

Fitz wasn't as complimentary. "If you haven't noticed, she's a lot bigger than you. Maybe she's one of those ladies who prefer the dominant role. And if you're her pansy boy, I guess we all know who the submissive is."

Bethany dramatically rolled half her eyes while Carl shook his head at Fitz. Sigmund wasn't the type to demur so easily. "Hey, I think she's pretty cute," he countered. "Dominate, submissive—who cares? It doesn't matter. It's been so long since Dolly and I broke up; I'm willing to be Ruby's pet at this point." If it weren't for Carl and Sigmund taking the high road in response to Fitz's negativity, the group's midweek get-together would've ended before they finished their first round of drinks. Plus, Bethany no longer felt like she had to defend her two level-headed friends from Fitz's barbed remarks.

"Hey, tonight is supposed to be an intervention for Carl," reminded Bethany, "but it seems like we've been recruited as wing-caterpillars for Sigmund's love life."

Carl laughed with everyone else and continued sharing his story. "Although I had—and still have—the natural talent and associated skills to be successful in today's society, the fact is,

I wasn't ever comfortable with my previous life. Sure, I was successful, but I wasn't happy or fulfilled. Like so many others, I wore a mask every single day, convincing myself and others that, like them, I believed in the same illusions. Initially, I did believe the lies of government, corporate, religious, and academic leaders. How else would I have become so successful? The truth is—while I was racking up all those accomplishments and the accolades that went with them—I was slowly dying inside from a cancer that grows in the gap between what the ruling class forces you to be and who you really are.”

“You know what your admission sounds like, don't you?” interrupted Fitz.

“What?”

“It sounds like you've been in the closet all these years, and now you're finally coming out,” laughed Fitz, who thought his comparison was quite clever.

“I knew you'd say that,” replied Carl. “I'm not gay, but I've often thought how my predicament is similar to someone

who's had to hide their sexual orientation. The truth is most everyone wears a mask. If it isn't to hide their preference for same-sex relationships, it's to conceal truths about themselves they know will hurt their social standing."

"Like what?" asked Sigmund.

"For instance, it's wise to keep certain, often controversial, views to yourself: that you're an atheist; don't want parenthood; can't stand to be around termites; that there isn't an incentive for a male caterpillar to enter a marriage; view health insurance as a wildly overpriced coupon booklet; or that the dream of owning a home is not only an impossibility due to property taxes, but it's also a marketing ploy created by banks. Believe me, I could keep going," insisted Carl.

"Those examples sound more like intelligent discernment than hiding behind a mask," said Fitz, "you know, like reading a room before putting your foot in your mouth. Just because someone has a different opinion than the great and all-knowing Carl doesn't mean they're wrong."

From Carl's position, he saw Ruby approaching the table and knew he had but a moment to respond to Fitz. "That's true," he began. "The mask-wearing comes into play when caterpillars present themselves within a false light, like going to church when they don't believe in God, voting for unqualified candidates because their party nominated them, working for a company that openly destroys the environment and lies to its customers, or getting married and having larvae only because their friends and siblings did. In other words—acting in direct opposition to how you feel inside so you'll fit in and be accepted."

"Hi, folks, sorry to interrupt. Your drinks are behind a couple of orders at the moment, but I have your appetizers." Ruby set her tray on the table and distributed the food, served on top of two wood chips no bigger than SIM cards. Then she collected Bethany's empty pixie cup before smiling at Sigmund and disappearing through the patio door.

Fitz reached for a pumpkin strip and, while looking at Carl, sarcastically asked, "Since you're claiming to know who is and isn't wearing a mask, can you tell us if Ruby is wearing one?"

“No way. She’s as authentic as they come,” said Bethany, who delicately broke off a piece of pickled cucumber with her forelimbs.

“Did you not see her face, Fitz?” joked Sigmund. “I highly doubt they can make a mask that expresses love at first sight.”

“Yes, they do,” deadpanned Carl.

“Maybe so,” admitted the object of Ruby’s affection, “but it’s obvious she’s got the hots for *this* hunk of caterpillar.”

## **Wet Your Whistle**

While waiting for their drinks, the foursome opted to enjoy the appetizers and small talk regarding the recent weather forecast and its possible effect on the upcoming Centipedes game on Saturday. Carl reached for the last two cherry stems, thinking his friends were considerate to leave some for him. He dipped the ends in the sap and tuned out of the conversation, choosing instead to look around at his surroundings. As he surveyed the scene and compared it to the times when he first frequented the Nectar Lounge, the place lacked what you’d expect from a

traditional meat market. It was designed and laid out beautifully—right down to the décor—yet the atmosphere no longer swelled with a distinctive vitality radiating from caterpillars eager to meet someone special. Now it was a place where caterpillars ignored everyone except those who came with them. But even those tables of two, three, or four seemed devoid of a shared energy as they rudely juggled conversations between themselves and those who weren't there.

“What are you looking at?” asked Bethany.

Carl glanced at Sigmund and Fitz, who were still talking about the Centipedes. He leaned toward Bethany and said, “What do you notice about the three male caterpillars sitting by themselves at the bar?”

“I don't know,” she replied. “They're just sitting there having a drink. Am I missing something?”

“They've been sitting there the whole time we've been here, and they haven't moved once—not even to slide over and talk to one another. Instead, they're slumped over, their heads tipped downward, but they're not looking into their drinks or

reading a book. They're downloading stuff from Cater-Notes. Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"Not really," she replied while snapping a pumpkin strip and giving half to Carl. "Caterpillars just keep to themselves these days."

With his mouth full of pumpkin, Carl managed to emphatically point out, "But they're at a bar—a place to meet other caterpillars!"

"I understand what you're saying, but that's not how it works anymore. It'd be different if there were a live band playing."

"I doubt it," said Carl. "Instead of downloading stuff from Cater-Notes, they'd be uploading—mostly pictures and videos of themselves having an *amazing* time with the stage in the background, of course, proving to whoever is on social media that they're winning the game of life. It's pretty pathetic if you ask me."

Bethany looked at Carl sympathetically. “You really *do* have an old-school mentality,” she replied. “What’s wrong with capturing the moment with a few pictures to remember it by?”

“Now it’s my turn to say, ‘That’s not how it works anymore.’ Caterpillars used to take pictures and make videos that were shared mostly with family and close friends—and they were primarily from birthday parties, holidays, and coming-of-age events like graduations, award ceremonies, school dances, or weddings. Now, pictures and videos are of themselves, documenting every aspect of their lives—including the mundane and private—and sharing them with faceless strangers.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked Bethany.

“When a caterpillar is conflicted within themselves—living an outward life that doesn’t agree with what’s inside of them—they’ll seek any form of validation, even from strangers, to approve of their choices. That’s why they’ll ruin every moment by needing documented proof of their presence.”

“And that’s why caterpillars are taking pictures of themselves at concerts?” pried Bethany.

“Of course. They just paid 300 sesame seeds for a seat and 20 more for the watered-down Mosquito Ultra they’re holding. Deep down, they know they’re being ripped off, but the validation from social media will hypnotize them into believing they made the right choice.”

“Gosh, you’re so right, Carl,” gushed Bethany. “You would’ve been an excellent teacher—especially for pupae and young adults.”

“Okay, I’m back,” said Ruby in a chipper singsong voice.

Carl thought it was rare being served by a waitress who actually seemed to enjoy her job. She set her tray on the table and placed each beverage in front of the corresponding caterpillar. She waited for Sigmund to taste the newly concocted version of his fruity drink. “How is it?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “Muy bien, señorita. Es tan dulce como usted. ¿Entender?”

“You can speak Spanish too?” she beamed. “I don’t know what you said, but it sounds like you like me—er, I mean, the drink. Oh, gosh, sorry.” She blushed heavily and quickly crawled away with the empty tray.

“What did you say to her?” asked Bethany. She sipped her Mai Fly, waiting in anticipation.

“I told her that the drink was as sweet as her. That’s all,” he replied.

“That’s all?” she gushed. “Just don’t forget to invite me to the wedding. By the way, where did you learn to speak Spanish?”

Sigmund broke off a piece of cucumber and dipped it in what remained of the sycamore sap and replied, “I know a couple of caterpillars from the colony situated underneath the Spanish moss on the cypress trees along the east bank. They taught me.”

“Really?” she laughed. “I’ve never even been to that part of the pond—and you have personal friends there? I have to say,

Sigmund, you're an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. Next, you'll be telling us you had dinner with the goldfinches."

"Well, actually—"

"Hey!" interrupted Carl. "If we're done nominating Sigmund as *the most interesting caterpillar in the world*, I'd like to tell you what happened to me earlier today—you know, when we were eating the water lilies."

"I think I know what it was," chirped Fitz.

"What?" asked Carl, knowing a mean-spirited punchline was about to drop.

"You suddenly realized you were a slug in your previous life."

What wasn't swallowed suddenly sprayed through Sigmund's nose as he laughed at Fitz's one-liner. Carl was quick to check if any of the pink liquid landed on him. Bethany wasn't amused. "Very funny, Fitz," she said while turning toward Carl. "I, for one, would love to hear it."

## Last Call

Leaning forward so only his three friends could hear him, Carl whispered, “I think it’s happening.”

“*What’s* happening?” asked Sigmund in a too loud, slightly slurred voice.

“If you can keep your voice down, I’ll tell you.”

“Sorry.”

“I think I’m changing inside.”

“*That* boat already sailed,” chided Fitz, who really did like to use idioms whenever possible. “If I’ve done the math correctly, you changed about five seasons ago.”

“Yes, I know,” agreed Carl. “But I’m talking about the *big* change. You know what I mean.”

“You mean *the* metamorphosis?” questioned Bethany. She deliberately kept her voice down, especially when it came to saying the M-word out loud.

“I’m not surprised,” blurted Fitz. “First, you share your doomsday predictions with us, and now you’re saying you’re going to change into something that stopped happening to us eons ago. What’s the matter with you?”

“Why can’t I change? There isn’t a law against it.”

“Why would legislators create a law against the M-word when it’s not even a possibility anymore? Look around. Do you see any B-words floating by? Don’t you watch the news at all? Oh, right, you stopped downloading news altogether, saying it’s nothing more than agenda-driven propaganda.” After his mild tirade, Fitz, although a bit frazzled, sat back and began nursing his second rum and oak.

Carl looked around the table, committed to keeping his voice down. “That’s the thing,” he began. “I know you see it as well, but I’ll say it anyway. The ruling class only rewards compliance—and when it does, it’s typically not enough to

cover basic needs. That way, they keep the masses desperate enough to continue returning to 40-, 50-, or 60-hour work weeks that barely pay enough to keep a rented roof over their heads. Conversely, the ruling-class tyrants actively seek ways to crush matrix-free mavericks who choose to live off-script and limit their exposure to Cater-Notes to the bare minimum. To those in power, the butterfly is the epitome of dissent.”

Fitz set his drink down on the table and rejoined the conversation. “Even if metamorphosis were still possible for caterpillars—and it isn’t—why would you even want to become a butterfly in the first place? That’s like getting a face tattoo and still hoping a company will hire you.”

“I think face tattoos are pretty cool,” interrupted Sigmund, “but you have to have a certain kind of face to pull it off. Am I right?”

Bethany shifted herself to the edge of the straw and said, “If Carl’s story isn’t of any interest to you, maybe you should go use the restroom or something.”

Without hesitation, Sigmund replied, “Good idea. I was thinking the same thing. No offense, Carl.”

“None taken.” He watched his friend slide off his straw and crawl toward the restrooms. They were situated between the nearby vacant dance floor and the bar, which could’ve been mistaken for the reference section of a library.

“I hate to say it, but Fitz makes sense,” said Bethany. “What’s the upside of turning into something that’ll alienate you from the rest of society?”

“I’m already alienated.”

“Then why pursue the metamorphosis?” she pressed.

“Because it’s the next logical step and it’s available to take.”

“No, it’s not,” urged Fitz.

“Just because you don’t see butterflies doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Maybe they fly away and never return. Or maybe they’re just too elusive to detect for caterpillars who are

constantly busy, rushing here and there, working hard so they can play even harder. And when they actually do have a free moment from the grind, they'll squander it, handing their brain over to Cater-Notes and letting it think for them until it's time to head back to the circus. I'd be lying to you if I said the process of metamorphosis didn't scare me—it does. All I know is that it's going to happen and there's nothing I can do to stop it.”

“That's a bunch of donkey-droppings, Carl, and you know it,” huffed Fitz.

“Ease up on the profanity, hombre. There's a señorita present, remember?”

“Oh, so you speak Spanish, too?” asked Fitz.

“Sólo hablo un poco de español,” replied Carl.

“What did you say?” asked Bethany.

“I said, ‘I only speak a little Spanish.’”

Bethany giggled. “Geez, I really need to get out more.”

“Carl, in all seriousness,” said Fitz, “do you really think you’re going to change into the B-word? If it was still possible, don’t you think we would’ve heard about it on the news?”

“Why would the ruling class—who, by the way, owns the entire broadcasting network—want to announce *that* to the slave class? What’s in it for them? I can answer that: nothing. Actually, it could only undermine their goal of rewriting history to forge their place as self-serving autocrats. Remember, the worst possible scenarios for the top-tier caterpillars involve slaves who can think for themselves—slaves who will ask questions and demand answers. I don’t have any proof, but logic tells me that the M-word is alive and well and churning out B-words as we speak.”

The sound of a caterpillar bumping into a bottle-cap table made Bethany, Carl, and Fitz look toward the bar. There, they saw their friend, Sigmund, inching toward their table, wearing a silly grin against a flushed face. His antennae were wobbling all over the place, indicating he was either tipsy or smitten. On

closer inspection, the group couldn't ignore the red lipstick smudge on his right cheek.

Fitz was the first to begin the interrogation. "I see we never made it to the restroom, did we?"

Sigmund noticed his three friends were staring at his cheek, prompting him to absently feel it with one of his forelimbs. "Oh, I ran into Ruby," he explained sheepishly. "She gets off at 10, so we're going to the Wafer House for scrambled ivy and carrots."

"I guess her kissing you on the cheek was her way of saying yes to your suggestion," confirmed Carl.

"You'd be correct, sir," replied Sigmund.

Carl looked at Fitz and said, "Can you believe that? We're both in great shape and have intellects to match, yet this one over here gets the girl."

"I agree," replied Fitz, "I stopped understanding females a long time ago."

Bethany, who was obviously feeling buzzed from her Mai Fly chimed in. “Boys, don’t you know? Caterpillar girls just want to have fun.”

## **Chapter 3: Big Changes**

### **Groundhog Day**

The next morning, Carl decided to crawl to the colony library to exchange his four borrowed books for four new ones—but he also wanted to do a little more research on butterflies and metamorphosis, especially since he believed the changes were already happening within him. After a breakfast of dandelion leaves and strawberry juice, Carl left his little home and inched along the vacant burrow in the direction of Bethany’s place. Of course, there wasn’t a plan to meet since Bethany worked long hours as a stylist at Super Snips. Eventually, he made it to the underground highway, where traffic was light due to the midmorning hour. He crawled for a few minutes before exiting the highway at the dogwood stump. Next, Carl descended a small slope and navigated through a patch of waxy pachysandra plants growing wildly in front of the colony’s only library.

Situated underneath an upside-down rusted wheelbarrow, the library was touted as state-of-the-art after its recent renovation. Holes had been punched through the bottom of the

old wheelbarrow to create a natural lighting source, and sand was spread for better footing and quieter acoustics. Despite all the upgrades, Carl still felt the library's inventory lacked diversity, most notably among its selection of classic literature. Upon entry, he quickly reconfirmed that the library seemed to attract only two demographics: homeless caterpillars and welfare mothers with rambunctious young offspring. To Carl, the place felt less like an institution of learning and more like a shelter for caterpillars with no other options. Even the library staff looked like they were recruited from a single demographic. From their Kool-Aid-colored bristles, nose rings, and dead expressions, Carl could easily distinguish the staff from patrons; however, he couldn't tell if they were male or female.

Carl returned the borrowed books and set about searching for information that could shed more light on what was bubbling inside him. Although he believed he was qualified to teach a course on how caterpillars can change into butterflies, Carl still had a thirst to learn as much as possible about a subject that had dominated his life for over 10 seasons. He climbed to the third floor to escape the brain-rattling sounds of crying larvae and shouting pupae on the first and second floors and

perused the new arrivals section on what was supposed to be an adults-only floor. As a frequent visitor, Carl never understood the need for yet another play area on a floor designated for adults. Did they ever think about the caterpillars who came to the library for quiet study? But when he looked around, he understood their logic—nobody had so much as a book, writing pad, or pencil in front of them; they were immersed in droopy-eyed Cater-Note sessions.

Carl yawned at most of the titles—titles like *How to Make the Most of Your Sesame Seeds*, *50 Cool Things to Do in Retirement*, and *So You Finally Want to Start that Side Hustle*. He looked for titles that corresponded with his interest in personal transformation and found a few promising books, but they weren't about butterflies or metamorphosis. He ventured toward the classic literature aisle and, to his dismay, saw that it was even thinner than last time. Luckily, he spotted a copy of *A Farewell to Forelimbs* by Ernest Hummingbird—a book he always wanted to read but was never fortunate enough to stumble upon. Carl returned to the first floor, pleased to have found at least one book he could take home. He proceeded to the self-checkout to avoid having to interact with an enormous brooding staffer with a sour expression. He, she, they, or

whatever their pronouns were had shaved bristles on one side of their head and long green and red bristles on the other. Carl laughed to himself, thinking that if it were Halloween, they could go trick-or-treating as a half-potted poinsettia plant or a survivor of a make-believe Christmas apocalypse.

Undaunted, Carl decided to treat himself to a cup of caffeinated bark water at a nearby Char-Bugs. There, he could sip a hot beverage and dig into his new book. He retraced his steps through the pachysandra, crossed over the highway using a fallen twig as a footbridge, and jumped onto a bed of soft Kentucky bluegrass. He wormed his way in and around the tangled tufts of grass before finally entering the shop, where he was, again, greeted with the stark contrast between those who worked there and the patrons who came because they needed a change of scenery from the dullness of their offices and homes. Like those camped in the library, Char-Bugs customers grouped themselves mostly in parties of one or two. And with help from the ubiquitous Cater-Notes signal, they, too, were trying their hardest to be as far away from the present moment as possible. Conversely, the employees of Char-Bugs buzzed behind the counter faster and more arbitrarily than disturbed bumblebees; yet, despite the frenetic

pace within such a cramped space, they avoided crashing into one another like sonar-signaling bats.

Carl said, “Thank you” to an unsmiling caterpillar girl with two lip rings as she handed him his bark water. At the counter, he added small amounts of sugar kelp and milkweed to mask the bitterness of the imported tree skin. He found an empty table on the patio and sat down facing the shop’s busy crawl-thru. Carl attempted to read his new book but found it difficult to concentrate. Besides the piped-in music he never heard before—most likely AI-generated so the corporate bean counters of Char-Bugs wouldn’t have to pay royalties to starving musicians—Carl was distracted by the odd social interactions, or the lack thereof. Like the bar at the Nectar Lounge and the library, the atmosphere at Char-Bugs was predictably formulaic: conversations were relegated to either transactional discourse between employees and customers or private discussions within huddling groups of two or three. Over the next 15 minutes, while he drank his bark water, Carl didn’t see a single exchange between strangers. To him, it seemed as if caterpillars were no longer interested in expanding their potential or their social circle.

With enough caffeine to widen his eyes and make his antennae stand straight up, Carl tucked his book under a forelimb and exited the morgue-like Char-Bugs. Since it was on the way home, he decided to stop at Spider Joe's to pick up a few things. Carl used to enjoy shopping at the quirky little grocery store, but not anymore—not since the manufactured pandemic from seven seasons ago. Although the Bologna virus seems to have been *miraculously* eradicated from the entire pond, high food prices and grim-faced silence among its weary shoppers remain as permanent fixtures.

Carl pushed his cart to the checkout line, falling in behind the lady he'd seen earlier ransacking the corn kernel bin. If he had to guess, she was more than a few seasons beyond middle age and had, most likely, come to Spider Joe's from the Pilates studio next door. Like all the other attractive ladies in the store, she limited her eye contact to the items at the bottom of her cart and her attention to incoming Cater-Note messages. When it was his turn to checkout, Carl inhaled deeply and prepared himself for the inevitable canned dialog:

“Did you find everything you were looking for?” asked the cashier, an overly jolly fellow whose chipper act contrasted sharply with the reserved and somber environment.

“Yeah,” responded Carl in the same way his hind leg would jerk whenever the doctor tapped his knee joint.

Unfazed by Carl’s terse response, the animatronic-like caterpillar on the other side of the counter forged ahead with the next expected question. “So, what’s your big plan for today?” he said while looking for a price on a bag of dried pomegranate seeds.

Carl looked at the cashier’s nametag and deadpanned, “This *is* the big plan for today, Brad. It’s all downhill from here.”

Carl sensed that the pre-programmed Spider Joe’s employee was not accustomed to intelligent sarcastic banter. To compensate for the fish-out-of-water moment, the cashier picked up a bag of potato poppers out of the cart and gushed, “Oh, I love these. They’re so good with pollen flakes. Did you see those on aisle five?”

“No. No, I didn’t,” sighed Carl, wishing he didn’t have to go to places like the library, Char-Bugs, or Spider Joe’s.

Carl wheeled his cart to the return rack and removed the 80 sesame-seeds worth of groceries. As he inched homeward carrying the book and the half-filled bag in his lower forelimbs, the troubled caterpillar wondered if he’d feel less bothered by everything after becoming a butterfly.

### **Cleared For Takeoff**

After putting his groceries away, Carl was surprised by how worn out he felt. To combat his sleepiness, he opened the bag of potato poppers and sat down at his matchbox desk to read at least the first chapter of his new library book. He didn’t progress further than a few pages before his eyes grew heavier. He picked up the book and the poppers and repositioned himself on his bed of cottonwood seeds. In less than 30 seconds, Carl drifted into a deep slumber, the kind of sleep normally reserved for crawlers after a marathon or college students after an all-night study session. He slept soundly without dreaming. The last time Carl rested as thoroughly was

when he was only a three-day-old larva after having stuffed himself with two servings of milkweed formula.

When Carl awakened, it was dark outside. He had no idea what time it was. All he knew was that he was ready to get up and resume his reading and writing regimen. Instead, he remained motionless on his side, reveling in the fact that he felt tremendously rested—and ravenously hungry. He slowly rolled onto his back and immediately regretted doing so, thinking he had just crumpled his book and flattened the bag of half-eaten poppers. But when he sat up to inspect the damage, the book and snacks weren't there; they were on the floor. Carl felt something was stuck to his back. With his eyes still adjusting from sleep, he stumbled out of bed and almost fell face-first into his desk. Carl figured that whatever was on his back was causing him to lose his equilibrium.

He shuffled into the bathroom and positioned himself awkwardly in front of the mirror. Carl was not prepared for what he saw in his reflection. Not only did he have two sets of wings protruding from his back, but they weren't even close to the green and brown earthtone colors of his bristles, which were no longer visible on his body. The wings were cerulean

blue with streaks of darker blues radiating outwardly like bicycle spokes. Each wing was bordered by a black band dotted with white specks. Turning to face the mirror, Carl's initial shock was only the beginning. Instead of 12 eyes, he had two big orbs that provided him with wide-angle peripheral vision and the ability to see more colors. Instead of eight pairs of legs, he had only three pairs—enough for him to continue to crawl and hold things. Even his antennae were different—gone were the two stubby ones, replaced by two that were long and elegant. There was no doubt about it; Carl had done the unthinkable—at long last, he had morphed into a butterfly.

Ignoring his thirst and hunger, he checked his messages on Cater-Notes and saw that Bethany had written to him numerous times—twenty messages in all. Carl's first thought was that she was in trouble or there was some kind of emergency. But then he noticed the dates beside each of her messages. That's when it hit him; he had been asleep for eight straight days! "No wonder I'm starving," he said to himself. He began by opening Bethany's last message, sent at eleven o'clock the previous evening. Carl noted the current time; it was four-thirty in the morning. She wrote, "Hey, Carl. I'm really worried about you. I know you like to disappear on long

hikes by yourself for days on end, but you've been gone for a week. Are you alright?" Carl reached for the open bag of poppers and began reading another message from Bethany—this one from four days ago. She wrote, "Sigmund and I just left your place. We knocked on your door several times. You must have gone on one of your long hikes. Can you please let us know that you're safe?"

Carl finished what remained of the potato poppers and began looking for anything that would fill the void in his rumbling stomach. On his desk, he arranged a bag of dried pomegranate seeds, leftover cabbage leaves, a wedge of celery, and a half-eaten blueberry. Looking at it all, Carl knew that as a caterpillar, this amount of food would be more than enough to cover a Thanksgiving feast, but as a butterfly who hadn't eaten in a week, he'd need much more than what was presented. His plan was simple. He'd mow through the food like a buzzsaw through Styrofoam—then head out under the cover of darkness to practice flying until Bethany woke up for work.

Carl didn't feel a shred of conspicuousness until he emerged from the burrow and approached the security checkpoint desk, where two guards lay slumped over the countertop. As he

approached, one of the black-bristled guards lifted his head and growled, “Don’t forget to sign out.” Then he put his head back down as if he were asleep the whole time. Carl did what he was told while wondering if the guard had even seen him. He looked nothing like a caterpillar anymore and was hoping to elicit some kind of reaction.

He crept into the pre-dawn morning and angled toward a fallen tree branch jutting out over the misty pond. Carl took a deep breath and said, “Let’s get this over with,” as he exhaled. He climbed along the knotty limb until he reached the end, where he looked down into the inky black water. Strangely, he wasn’t experiencing any vertigo, nor did he feel fearful of the height, which could easily injure, maybe even kill, a caterpillar should they fall. Instinctively, he furled and unfurled his untested wings in preparation for the inaugural flight. He shuffled forward to the splintered tip of the branch and spread his silky new wings. But as he looked to the left at the glowing pink beginnings of first light, a gust of wind lifted Carl off his perch before he was ready.

Even as he fell screaming, Carl was mortified by the sound of his voice. He believed that if anyone had heard him—a fully

grown adult male—they'd think a three-week-old-pupa girl was in trouble. Fortunately for Carl, he only awakened a nearby family of water bugs, who quickly skittered away from the projected splash zone. Still screaming, he flapped his wings like a crazed katydid, squeezed his eyes shut, and braced for a watery impact. However, just before plopping into the frigid pond, Carl's wings gathered enough of the foggy air to find lift. Miraculously, he began moving upwards, but he still felt like he was out of control. Suddenly, it occurred to Carl—a fact he learned through his meticulous research—that once a butterfly damages their wings, they can't be repaired. Not only did he need to learn how to fly before sunrise—he needed to do it without crashing into anything.

## **Daybreak**

The pink glow in the eastern sky was all but gone, replaced with expanding shades of violet and blue. Streaks of yellow, orange, and white divided the bruised canvas into painted segments. Although the sun was still below the horizon, the entire sky was reflected in the eyes of two old bull frogs, who liked the peace and serenity of early mornings. Long past their days of being light enough to sit on lily pads, the two beefy

friends situated themselves on a partially submerged log covered with spongy green moss.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” asked Earl without turning to look at his longtime friend—a friendship that extended all the way back to their early days at the Tadpole Academy. Earl’s eyes were locked onto the erratic flightpath of a careening blue butterfly.

“Is he drunk?” replied Jasper, who closely resembled Earl. Family and friends could tell them apart by their relative sizes. Earl was plumpier than Jasper.

“He looks too panicked to be drunk,” answered Earl. “No, he’s definitely a newbie. He probably finished transitioning last night.”

Jasper flicked his tongue at a stray water bug but missed. “I can’t remember the last time I saw a butterfly around here,” he said.

“Me neither,” confirmed Earl. “Something isn’t right about that caterpillar colony. When we first hopped over to this

pond—even before old man Abernathy started farming potatoes—you’d see a ton of butterflies floating and fluttering everywhere you looked. But now, we’ll see one or two—and then just like that—they disappear.”

“Who knows? Maybe this blue one will stick around,” added Jasper.

Earl flicked his tongue out over the water—but unlike his buddy, he didn’t miss. He hauled in a shimmering mid-sized dragonfly and swallowed it down his gullet before Jasper could ask for a taste.

Meanwhile, among the upper branches of a trio of birch trees, Carl was desperately trying to come out of a barrel roll before he punctured a wing. Luckily, the breeze picked up, allowing Carl to stabilize himself before gently landing on one of the leafy branches. He folded his wings back and took inventory of his still-quivering butterfly body. As was his custom, Carl liked to talk to himself out loud. “Okay. Everything is where it’s supposed to be, but if I don’t get something to eat soon, I’m not going to be able to fly for very much longer.” While he was thinking, the sun broke free of the horizon, sending

cold rays of white light across the pond, illuminating the tops of purple water lilies in the distance. Inspired by his demanding stomach, Carl hatched a plan. He'd fly to the water lilies for a well-deserved breakfast and then check in with Bethany.

Hunger more than fear prompted Carl to leap from the branch, trusting that his latent butterfly instincts would kick in before his caterpillar mindset put him in the pond with the minnows. Unfortunately, the water lilies flourished on the east end of the kidney-shaped pond, in the direction of the rising sun. Carl fluttered wildly while dodging intermittent shards of piercing white light. Not only did he have to concentrate on staying airborne, but he also had to worry about momentary blindness. By flying in the long shadows of the distant weeping willows, Carl managed to make it to the water lilies without incident. However, landing on top of a delicate floating flower was an entirely different matter.

Carl honed in on what looked to be the sturdiest water lily among a sizable group bobbing next to a tangle of watercress plants. The targeted lily had a wide bloom with an even wider waxy leaf base—perfect for Carl, who needed room for error

should he come in too fast or at too sharp an angle. Surprisingly, his trajectory was perfect as he approached the lily's purple center. Carl was so pleased with himself that he forgot to grip the flower with his feet while landing, causing him to spill over the silky petals and onto the hard green surface of the leaf base. Other than a scraped knee and a wet bottom, Carl was okay. In fact, he felt more than okay; in his mind, he had earned his wings.

With what remained of his energy, Carl fluttered upward, feeling dizzy from hypoglycemia, and returned to the center of the succulent flower, where his new long tongue immediately began lapping up syrupy sweet nectar. As he gorged, going back and forth between the nectar and cellulose-rich petals, he felt his strength returning—first in his limbs, followed by the muscles that controlled his wings. Even his mind began to process thoughts quicker and with more clarity. If Carl had access to a magnetic resonance lab, he'd see that his brain's neurotransmitters were moving from synapse to synapse like Mexican jumping beans. After consuming what had to be enough calories to more than double his weight, Carl plopped down to the lily's leaf base with an ominous thud. He folded his wings, sat down, and leaned back against the

velvety stem of the plant. It wasn't long before Carl fell fast asleep.

## **Mission Accomplished**

A nearby buzzing noise awakened Carl from a dream about Bethany. In it, he was visiting with her at Super Snips while she worked. She was in the process of giving one of her younger male clients a buzz cut. As Carl stretched his forelimbs, he looked up and saw an orange and gold hummingbird hovering over the same lily he'd eaten from a little while ago. The delicate-looking bird appeared to levitate in mid-air as it drank the flower's remaining nectar. As an hours-old butterfly, Carl marveled at the grace of the hummingbird's blurred wings. He put two and two together and declared, "I guess the buzzing sound of the bird subconsciously made me dream of Bethany's work."

From the warmth of the sun and the shortness of the shadows, Carl figured it was mid-morning—and that Bethany was already at work. He mentally logged onto Cater-Notes and tried to send his friend a text, but the reception was too weak. Carl stood and prepared himself for his third liftoff of the

morning. His sudden movements startled the hummingbird, which disappeared in an instant. He fluttered upwards and angled himself toward a monstrous weeping willow tree, where he could find better reception from one of its higher branches. Carl wrote, “Hey, Bethany. I’m alive and well. Thanks for checking up on me. Could you meet me at the Char-Bugs near the library after work—say, around six thirty? I’ll explain everything then, okay?” It wasn’t long before Carl’s antennae began to vibrate. Bethany wrote, “I’m so relieved! Thanks for letting me know. I don’t normally check my messages during work hours, but I’ve been so worried about you. Yes, I know where Char-Bugs is. Can we meet at six instead?”

After confirming the new time with Bethany, Carl leaped from the sun-soaked branch and began his journey toward the opposite end of the pond. To his left, he could see old man Abernathy pulling weeds between rows of yellowing potato plants. Carl thought he heard him curse, but he couldn’t be certain. On his right, the intrepid butterfly gawked at the lushness of the adjacent forest—dubbed the “Emerald Forest” by the colony founders. As an earthbound caterpillar for most

of his life, Carl had no idea how spectacularly grand and expansive the forest was. It practically begged for exploration.

With his new sharper vision, Carl could see the colony fast approaching in the distance. He lowered his altitude to only five or six feet above the pond—the idea being he’d land directly in front of the checkpoint guards. Now that he was closer to the water, Carl was overwhelmed by the diversity of plants and insects that also called the pond their home. Besides the lilies, duckweeds, watercress, reeds, lotus, and cattails, there were grasshoppers, beetles, water bugs, stink bugs, ladybugs, mosquitos, ants, dragonflies, fruit flies, fireflies, spiders, bees, gnats, worms, and earwigs—but it didn’t end there. Under the surface of the still water, Carl noticed the shadows of many species of fish. When they swam into sunnier spots, he could tell what kind they were by the color of their shimmering backs. There were golden orfe, grass carp, sunfish, and even koi. Carl shook his head and muttered, “I can’t believe how much I missed out on while having been a caterpillar for all those seasons.”

Strangely, as he was selecting his landing spot, Carl noticed two slimy frogs staring up at him from a half-submerged log.

They never took their eyes off of him—even when he looked away for a moment. Their spirited croaking made Carl wish he understood their language. Little did he know they were talking about him.

“It looks like our little butterfly friend figured it out,” said Earl, who was already contemplating lunch despite having eaten two dragonflies and a slug.

The last thing on Jasper’s mind was eating. He managed to swallow a worm for breakfast, but after having topped it off with three flies, his stomach felt like it was officially on strike. “He’s headed back to his colony. Do you think he’ll stay?” he asked.

Earl peeled his eyes away from Carl and turned to look at his friend. “How do you not know the answer to that, Jasper? You’ve been living in this pond for as long as I have. Although this little blue butterfly appears to be more optimistic about his chances of bringing meaningful change to the colony, he’ll leave just like they all do. You’ll see. Just give it a few months.”

Carl wasn't comfortable with landing in front of the security checkpoint. There were too many rose and holly bushes nearby, and he wasn't about to risk tearing a wing on one of the thorny stems just to look cool. Instead, Carl chose the surface of a tree stump to land upon. Next, he floated himself down to the sandy edge of the pond, where he folded his wings back and crawled toward the security desk. Two guards, a different pair from the ones he saw earlier, were slouched against the desk as if it were the only thing holding them upright.

“Good morning,” said Carl brightly.

The meaner-looking of the two guards glanced at Carl and groused, “If you say so.”

Carl waited for a comment about his appearance. When it didn't come, he began crawling toward his burrow and said over his shoulder, “Well, I need to get home now.”

“Hold on,” said the other black-bristled guard. “Did you sign out this morning?”

“Of course.”

The same guard scanned the sign-out log and barked, “Are you, Carl?”

“Yes, I am,” he replied. At this point, Carl was certain the conversation would turn toward his being an obvious butterfly with pretty sky-blue wings.

“It says here you signed out at 4:43 this morning.”

“Yes, I did.”

“For what reason?” asked the first guard.

“I went to have breakfast,” answered Carl while slightly unfurling his wings, “and to practice flying.”

It wasn't like Carl to clumsily steer a conversation toward himself. He learned a long time ago that caterpillars have little interest in others outside their tight circle of family and friends. But in this moment, Carl was feeling both frustrated and insecure. Were they blind? Were they purposely

pretending he was still a caterpillar? Were they playing a sick game with him? Instead of calling out the elephant in the room, both guards went the other direction and replied in near unison, “Whatever.”

## **Invisible Butterfly**

Carl managed to make it to his little bungalow without needing to explain himself to any of the shuffling termite walkers he passed along the way. As he approached the sixth termite-toting caterpillar, he mindfully suppressed the urge to shout, “Hello? Anybody home? You’re about to walk by an actual butterfly—you know, the thing *they* told you could never happen!” Carl was proud of his restraint but disappointed in himself for getting angry at the same things over and over again. He was more than accustomed to watching single caterpillars choose termite-centric lives and Cater-Note messaging over making new friends, and yet he could never wrap his mind around *that* poor of a choice. In the end, Carl realized he could never accept antisocial behavior as the “new normal.”

Carl settled in behind his desk and began taking inventory of all he was working on before the transition: he had a new library book to read; he was editing his fourth book, *It's Not Your Frog: But It Could Be*; he was nearly finished writing his ninth book, *A Rationale for Bee Stings*, an overdue sequel to his third book, *Being Hoppy: The Pursuit of Frogs*; and he was in the middle of preparing a book review of Harper Bee's colony bestseller, *Tequila Mockingbird*. Carl felt he should spend the day reading and writing, but he was too excited about seeing Bethany that evening. Instead, he did a few household chores and made a trip to Spider Joe's to pick up food and other supplies for the next few days.

It was exactly six o'clock when Carl sat down. Although there were plenty of empty tables inside Char-Bugs, he chose a two-seater on the busy patio—in fact, it was the same one he sat at the day before he started transitioning. In front of him were two decaffeinated tree bark beverages. His was hot; Bethany's was iced. He knew she liked it like that; plus, he had hers made with a double shot of pine sap and added a cherry stem to make it even more special. Normally, if he were not meeting his friend who relished warm springtime evenings, he'd be sitting inside, away from everybody. While he waited for her to

arrive, Carl turned his attention toward the slow-moving crawl-thru. He never understood the appeal of the antisocial convenience, which became even more popular during and after the pandemic.

He watched the dull-faced caterpillars, moving at a glacial pace toward the ordering kiosk. Carl huffed to himself, “Even slugs move faster than these Char-Bugs drones.” Their heads remained dipped—lost in Cater-Notes oblivion—until it was their turn to recite an order into the microphone. They paid at the first window and collected their over-priced drinks at the second. To Carl, it seemed like the “cater-sheep” took the ruling class’s bait—hook, line, and sinker—that friendliness, kindness, and empathy were weaknesses. If the crawl-thru were a trend-setting fashion show, stoicism, boredom, and indifference were this season’s “new black.”

“Oh my god! Is that you, Carl?” came a voice from inside Char-Bugs. Bethany stumbled closer toward her genetically modified friend in breathless disbelief and gushed, “You really did it!”

Upon seeing Bethany, Carl stood up and unfurled his wings to the fullest. “Wow! That’s a lot of blue,” she said as she leaned in to hug him. As she stepped back from their embrace, she noticed that no one was looking at the two of them. She gave Carl an inquisitive look, which prompted him to say, “I know what you’re thinking. It’s been like this all day.”

“You mean nobody has said anything to you?”

“Nope,” replied Carl. “Caterpillars have looked at me, but it’s like they don’t *see* me. Isn’t that strange?”

“How is that any different from before?” prodded Bethany, who for the first time noticed that Carl ordered for the both of them.

“What do you mean?”

Bethany sat down at their table and stirred her drink with the cherry stem. “You used to tell me all the time how nobody seemed to notice you—like you were the invisible caterpillar. Remember?”

“Of course, I remember,” he said. “You would think things would be different after transitioning. No one noticed me at Spider Joe’s either.”

“What? You were at Spider Joe’s? When?”

“This afternoon—after I came through the security checkpoint.”

“What did the guards say to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Not a word about you being a butterfly and *not* a caterpillar?”

“Nope.”

“That’s definitely weird.” She thanked Carl for her iced tree bark and took her first sip after congratulating him on his incredible metamorphosis. “That’s so thoughtful of you,” she continued. “You remembered to add a shot of pine sap.”

“Actually, I had them add *two* shots.”

“It doesn’t taste like two shots.”

“Really? They probably ripped me off. I’ll go and ask them to add another one for you. Here, give me your cup.”

Bethany pulled her drink away from Carl. “Now I’m convinced the metamorphosis didn’t totally lobotomize your personality,” she quipped. “With or without wings, it’s still Carl versus the whole colony. The bark water tastes fine. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

The two friends were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn’t notice they were the only customers left in the Char-Bugs. While enjoying refills and sharing a “moon blast”—a slice of fermented strawberry soaked in a decadent mixture of honey and lilac nectar—Carl explained everything that had happened, from falling asleep with his library book to teaching himself how to fly at the pond. Bethany, for the most part, sat and listened—enraptured by everything Carl was telling her, especially the part about the hummingbird.

“How exciting,” she chimed. “I would’ve been scared out of my mind.”

“Believe me, I was,” admitted Carl.

“We’re closing in five minutes!” barked a perturbed shemale-like caterpillar from inside the Char-Bugs. Like most of the other staffers, she had more than one face piercing, Crayola-dyed bristles, and a body shaped like a Vienna sausage.

“Oh, my goodness! What time is it?” asked Bethany.

Carl stood up and gathered the empty cups. “It’s almost nine. Can you believe it? We sat here for almost three hours!”

As they crawled along a mostly empty underground highway, the longtime friends settled, once again, into a comfortable silence. A small group of partying caterpillars and ladybugs caught Carl’s attention. They were whooping and hollering on top of a pine straw mat, floating along a rivulet of rainwater in the same direction they were crawling. Whereas Bethany appeared too deep in thought to take notice, Carl was both disgusted and envious of what might’ve been a boisterous birthday bash. Carl could never let loose like that. He was weighed down by the terrible secrets he knew about the colony—about the world in general. He spent many years

trying to warn unsuspecting caterpillars of the traps set by the ruling class. They wouldn't listen; instead, they said, "Carl, you live in a prison that you built for yourself." He didn't debate them; he agreed with them. But Carl knew *their* prison was far worse—at least for him it would be.

"What are you thinking about?" inquired Bethany. She had been silently watching him as they crawled.

"I was wondering how Fitz and Sigmund will react to my transition," he lied.

"Would you like me to set something up with them?"

"I'd like that," replied Carl.

"Nectar Lounge on Saturday?" she suggested.

"Sure, but let's try a different place this time," he replied.

"How about that little dive bar, Aphid's Acorn, instead?"

"Where's that?"

“It’s in the same strip mall as the Beetle Position—you know, the mattress store where the bed bugs work.”

## Chapter 4: Aphid's Acorn

### Aphid's Acorn

Aphid's Acorn was a microcosm of contradiction. The nifty barroom tables were made from colorful guitar picks fastened on top of pink pencil erasers, and yet, the seating consisted of old cigarette butts. Fine art reproductions peppered cardboard walls lined with discarded hamburger wrappers. With guitar picks as tabletops, one would think the management would play country rock tunes by bands like The Eagles or The Turtles; instead, they piped in the complete opposite—classical chamber music featuring strings, woodwinds, brass, and pianos—everything but a guitar. Although it was customary—even encouraged—to carve initials into the furniture and dispense of sunflower seed shells on the floor, each table was adorned with a fresh bouquet of either duckweed or watermeal flowers.

Unlike the Nectar Lounge, Aphid's didn't employ a bevy of flirtatious waitresses. Caterpillars (as well as invisible butterflies) ordered their drinks and appetizers at the bar from Milo—if he was working that evening—or from Cecil, who

was one of the original owners. If you asked for a glass of wine to accompany the given music choice, they'd let you off easy if it was your first time in the bar. "Wine is for girly girls and sissy caterpillars," they'd tell you. "If you want a glass of fermented grapes, go to Weevil's Wine Bar at the other end of the strip mall. We only serve beer, well drinks, and cocktails." Another feature of Aphid's was that the eclectic watering hole maintained its illumination even after the sun went down—thanks to a nearby street lamp. The high-pressure sodium gas within the fixture's bulb bathed Aphid's interior with a golden yellow and orange light, giving the place a warm, yet subdued, ambience.

"Oh, look!" shouted Bethany. "There's Fitz."

Fitz was sitting at one of the guitar pick tables and appeared immersed in a Cater-Notes session, which is why he didn't hear Bethany. He had a cocktail in front of him and a scowl across his face. After asking her what she wanted to drink, Carl crawled toward the bar while Bethany joined Fitz at the table.

“Hey, Cecil. How’s it going?” chimed Carl, trying to sound like he was just one of the caterpillars.

“I’m Milo. What do you want?” deadpanned the perturbed bartender.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’d like a red clover martini, and could you make it extra dirty?”

“What else?”

“Do you have any beers on tap tonight?”

“Just Natural Lice.”

“Okay, I’ll take a Natural Lice, too,” said Carl. “I’m curious, Milo. What makes a martini dirty?”

Milo inhaled and exhaled theatrically as if Carl had just asked him if he could help him move on Saturday. “Olive juice,” he spat, before abruptly turning around to prepare the beverages.

Meanwhile, at the table, Bethany and Fitz talked in hushed tones. Carl watched them while he waited for the drinks. Every now and then, they'd both turn around to look at him. He waved at them sheepishly the first time. When they looked a second, third, and fourth time, he felt like a circus freak show attraction. From behind him, he heard a gruff voice say, "That'll be 17 sesame seeds." Carl put 20 on the counter and collected his 5-sesame-seed beer and Bethany's outrageous 12-sesame-seed cocktail. He crawled toward the table, watching Fitz's face the entire time, hoping to catch a tell-tale sign of his insecure friend's reaction to his undeniable transformation.

"Thanks," said Bethany as she took the fancy drink from Carl. "I'll get the next round." Then, before she put her pixie cup down, she blurted, "Show him, Carl."

"Show him what?"

"You know—spread your wings out so Fitz can see them."

That's when Carl saw the look of resentment move across his face like a shadow from a passing bird. He set his beer down

and opened his wings as wide as they could go. He watched Fitz look side to side as if he were embarrassed by the public spectacle. Bethany noticed Fitz's discomfort as well.

“Don't worry, Fitz. Nobody can see him,” she said.

“What?” he replied incredulously. “I'm looking at him right now!”

Carl folded his wings back, feeling slighted by Fitz's lack of acknowledgment. Having encountered many Fitz-like caterpillars throughout much of his life, Carl quietly sat down at the table and decided to let it go. It didn't matter anyway; Carl didn't need Fitz's validation or his approval. It was then that he decided to let Fitz go as a friend.

Bethany stared at Fitz with a bewildered look on her face. “Aren't you going to say anything? Our friend can freaking fly!”

Fitz casually sipped from a pixie cup containing his usual rum and oak. His expression was less than impish and more of an insufferable troublemaker. “I'm still processing what you just

told me,” he said sarcastically. “So let me get this straight. Carl here is invisible, *and* he can fly. Am I missing anything? Can he see the future and heal the sick, too?”

“What’s your problem, Fitz?” snapped Bethany. “It’s like you’re deliberately trying to be a jerk!”

“It’s all right, Bethany,” said Carl in a calming tone. “It’s a lot to take in all at once.” He looked at Fitz and continued. “No, I can’t see the future, nor can I heal the sick, but I can definitely fly. And as for being invisible, obviously I’m not. You can see me, but the other caterpillars choose *not* to see me—they’re either too busy to notice, distracted by Cater-Notes, or unwilling to accept that metamorphosis is still possible and very much within their reach. Does that make sense?”

Fitz was in no mood to acquiesce to Carl’s measured logic—in fact, he was looking for an argument. He leaned back against the squishy cigarette butt and said, “So, you’re a mind reader too?” I’ll buy the next round if you can tell me what I’m thinking about right now. I’ll give you a hint: it’s blue and has the audacity to believe it knows everything there is to know.”

“That’s enough, Fitz!” yelled Bethany, making Milo and two barflies turn toward the intense threesome.

“Are you drunk?” asked Carl while looking at Fitz’s near-empty cup. He kept his voice down out of respect for the other tables. “How many of those have you had?”

“I think you should leave,” said Bethany, who clearly looked upset. “If you don’t, Carl and I are going to go sit at another table. It’s your choice. I’m sick of your combative attitude. Just because you had a bad day doesn’t give you the right to take it out on your friends, especially when one of them has done something worthy of our respect and admiration.”

“Fine!” huffed Fitz. “I’ll leave.”

The two stunned friends watched Fitz drain the rest of his drink before he began crawling toward the front of the bar. As he approached the exit, Sigmund made his entrance—along with Ruby, whose forelimb was intertwined with his. Their expressions changed from anticipatory excitement to cautionary concern as their eyes followed their sullen friend out the door without so much as a “hello.”

Sigmund was about to question Fitz's hasty departure, but then he saw Carl. "Holy Crap! Are those wings?"

## **Déjà Vu**

Like a trained zoo animal, Carl stood up and spread his wings for the table's new arrivals. Both Sigmund and Ruby gasped at the demonstration. When they looked around the bar to see the reactions of the other patrons, Bethany jumped in and said, "The others can't see—or don't want to see. I don't know. It's complicated. Carl's better at explaining it than me."

Carl folded his wings back, happy to no longer be the center of attention. "They don't have a waitstaff," he said. "You have to order your drinks at the bar. The bartender's name is Milo, and he seems to be in a foul mood. Why don't you get your drinks first, and then we'll tell you what happened with Fitz? Okay?"

After Sigmund and Ruby crawled to the bar, Carl sat down on the other side of Bethany so Sigmund and Ruby would have a seat to themselves.

Bethany scooted over so she could turn and face Carl. “I’m glad he left. Would it have killed him to simply congratulate you? You’d think he’d at least want to know what it felt like to be an actual butterfly.”

“Believe it or not, I understand caterpillars like Fitz,” replied Carl. “Now I know he was never my friend.”

“Did he upset you?”

“No, not really. I kind of expected it.”

Bethany scrunched her face soon after taking a sip of her martini.

“That bad, huh?” said Carl.

She put her pixie cup down and smiled. “No way. It’s perfect! Now tell me why you think Fitz behaved like that.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“They’re back.”

The two lovebirds were giggling as they sat down across from their friends. When asked what was so funny, Ruby described how Sigmund asked the bartender if he had any Grey Poupon. “But the funniest part,” she laughed, “was when Sigmund had to explain the joke to him.”

“Wait,” said Bethany, “I don’t get it either.”

Sigmund leaned toward Bethany, his forelimbs on top of the table, a smile across his face. “You know—the fancy mustard seems appropriate in a place playing Bach and Mozart, don’t you agree?”

“I still don’t get it,” she said.

Carl looked at Sigmund and said, “I get it, buddy. Nice one.” He turned to Bethany and added, “It’s an old joke pertaining to an ad that Grey Poupon ran when we were just little pupae.”

After Bethany recounted what happened with Fitz, Carl rehashed the highlights of his metamorphosis, including his

experience as a first-time flyer. But instead of pressing him for more details, both Sigmund and Ruby were more interested in defending Fitz. “He’s probably just a little jealous right now. He’ll come back around—you’ll see,” reasoned Sigmund. Ruby added, “I think he’s under a lot of pressure at work.” But Bethany had yet to come down from her shocking disappointment. “Some caterpillars can’t be happy for anyone,” she declared.

As the evening progressed toward nightfall, the golden light from the streetlamp intensified—as did Sigmund’s and Ruby’s discomfort with Carl’s transition. It was subtle at first, but after more drinks they were less inclined to hide it. “I don’t get it,” began Sigmund. “You say you’re invisible, yet we can see you. How can you explain that?”

“Because you knew me as a caterpillar,” replied Carl. “Once a caterpillar begins to become more aware of the disheartening truths underpinning so-call ‘civilized society,’ they invariably turn inward, which allows them to uncover the truths about themselves. This newfound clarity is both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it’s as cathartic as being able to see after a lifetime of blindness; on the other, it’s a living nightmare

that never goes away—like being handed a death sentence or being told you have a terminal disease. That’s happened to me, starting more than 10 seasons ago in the prime of my life.”

“So, how much time *do* you have left, Carl? A few weeks? Six months? Less than a year?”

Carl was taken aback by Sigmund’s inconsiderate response. Not only had he become more Fitz-like, but he was also uncharacteristically unsympathetic—cold even. “I meant that metaphorically—not literally,” replied Carl. “In my case, the death sentence or terminal disease, whichever you prefer, refers to my societal death. For the last 10 seasons, I’ve watched my societal presence go from meaningful to irrelevant to invisible.”

“A little dramatic, don’t you think?” quipped Ruby, whose alcohol consumption obviously blurred the line between empathy and terse thoughtlessness.

Bethany was about to come to Carl’s defense when he stopped her. “It’s okay. It’s a fair comment,” he said to her. He turned back to Ruby. “I’m definitely overstating the situation so my

points aren't misconstrued. I may talk like the world is black and white, but I'm well aware that it's mostly gray."

Ruby gave Sigmund a sloppy kiss, then turned back to Carl. "My momma—God rest her soul—told me that life gives you what you put into it. Now I haven't known you for very long, but you seem like the type who bitches and moans instead of applying yourself. You need to be more like my cutie pie—more of a doer and less of a thinker. Didn't your daddy ever tell you, 'You got to get along to get along?'"

Carl sat back on his cigarette butt and looked at Ruby. He realized she was like all the other indoctrinated sleepwalkers, who couldn't begin to fathom that their inane logic was programmed into them as doublethink, a colony-sanctioned cognitive process that allows caterpillars to believe in ruling-class contradictions. There was no way he'd ever win her over, especially if he replied, "Getting along, as you say, simply means trading your ability to think for yourself, as well as your dignity, for the illusion of a well-lived life." It would be even worse if he said to Ruby, "And that, my friends, is why ignorance is bliss!" Instead, he told her, "Then, according to your parent's logic, I'm getting exactly what I deserve. I look

at society in the same way I look at airline, train, and sporting event seats. Since I'm only willing to offer society the least I can get away with, I'm typically seated close to stinky bathrooms, with steerage, and behind pillars up in the nosebleed sections."

"Good answer, Carl," chimed Bethany while gently patting him on the back and thinking how silky his wings felt. She looked across the table at Ruby. "Carl gets what you're saying—and so do I. It isn't fair, but, as they say, we *all* have to 'pay to play.'"

"Well said, Bethany, but it's more like 'pay to live,'" reciprocated Carl. "She's right. I'm not willing to pay any more than I have to—I wouldn't lower myself like that." As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted saying them. Normally, Carl spoke carefully, measuring his words to avoid offending the easily offended. Sure enough, Sigmund, playing Fitz's vacated role, stepped up to defend his bruised ego.

"That's what I'm talking about," he said to the table. "Carl knowingly chooses a path that will make him an outsider forever and then assumes a position of superiority over the

caterpillars who don't follow his lead. I don't know about you, Bethany, but I'm not going to sit around only to be looked down upon by King Carl." He took Ruby's forelimb and got up from the table. "Come on, baby. Let's go."

And just like that, Carl and Bethany watched, for the second time, a friend storm out of Aphid's Acorn all because Carl had become a butterfly.

### **After Aphid's**

Several months had passed since the "Aphid's Acorn Massacre," a label Carl came up with that night while he and Bethany returned to their burrow. Carl sat at his desk, having just returned from his pre-breakfast routine. Each morning, he'd make his way to the pond, where he'd stretch and exercise his spindly appendages before flying around for about an hour. Carl's "sound body, sound mind" philosophy hadn't diminished one iota since his transition—in fact, he was even more dedicated than when he was a competitive fuzzy caterpillar. He thought about the evening at Aphid's and laughed to himself. Although *he* was the one who was unfriended, it was Carl who ended up doing the consoling.

Bethany simply couldn't understand how anyone, let alone Fitz, Sigmund, and Ruby, could not appreciate and admire someone like Carl. She downgraded their status from close friends to casual friends and avoided any mention of Carl or butterflies.

Life for Carl didn't change like he expected. Other than substituting fluttering for crawling during his morning fitness routine, Carl's life as a butterfly was nearly identical to his former life as a caterpillar—except he was more invisible with fewer friends. For Carl, the irony did not go unnoticed. For a while, he wavered between depressing loneliness and fruitful solitude. In his isolation, he acquired a deeper understanding about himself and the colony he lived in; he honed his writing skills, publishing books about personal transformation and social commentary. He immersed himself in books of all kinds, aching for depth of the human spirit like a lost caterpillar searching for water in a chokingly dry desert. But not all of Carl's attempts at redemption were successful or even dignified. He swallowed his pride and tried rekindling long-dead relationships with his family, friends, classmates, and former coworkers only to be turned away for not having succumbed—like them—to the mindlessness of

indoctrination. After all that was said and done, he imagined a sign that read, “Thinkers need not apply.”

Carl’s investment in Bethany went from occasional visits at Char-Bugs to frequent messaging through Cater-Notes. It wasn’t because they had grown apart; in fact, they were closer than ever. The nature of their long-term friendship hadn’t changed, but its function did—once she began dating Nicholas, a terrific caterpillar who, unfortunately, felt threatened by Bethany’s male friends, especially Carl. Through their exchanges, he learned that Fitz had been promoted to Associate Director of Manufacturing for a food processing company that was recently cited for using cancer-causing coloring dyes in two of its breakfast cereals for larvae. He also found out Sigmund and Ruby had moved in together and adopted two rescue termites. According to Bethany, they’re planning a June wedding underneath the Spanish moss.

After months of self-reflection as a butterfly—on top of many seasons of introspection as a caterpillar—Carl made a breakthrough: he finally stopped reaching for anything that wasn’t in his control. In other words, he stopped wanting anything

outside of himself, preferring an attitude of acceptance over fighting a machine he could never stop. Carl knew the machine would eventually find him, making him kneel at its feet before finally destroying him. But that day hadn't come yet, which allowed Carl to spend more and more time exploring the Emerald Forest—a place he quickly learned was as devoid of butterflies as the colony. Logically, he knew he wasn't the only one. They were either hidden in plain sight like him or had flown away, never to return. Still, the forest offered some semblance of hope for Carl—something the colony ceased to promote, even before the ruling class released the Bologna virus on their own unsuspecting citizens.

Carl stood at a crossroads. He could continue straddling two worlds within the colony—neither of which he belonged to—or tempt fate, risking life and limb, to search for a reimagined world where caterpillar life is actually joyful, cherished, honored, and dignified. Unlike any caterpillar with his education and intelligence, Carl had logged as much time with broken degenerates on the fringes of society as he did with morally bankrupt winners of the mainstream status quo. Whereas the self-destructive caterpillars couldn't understand why Carl would choose to live among them, the conventional

elitists of mainstream society labeled him “unsuccessful, difficult, and irrelevant.” In both cases, Carl was an outsider with no tribe to call his own. He knew what he had to do; he needed to fly away.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Ego Trip**

In what would turn out to be his last morning in the colony, Carl awakened, feeling a renewed sense of purpose and direction. Deep down, he knew this feeling would come; he just didn't know when. He learned a long time ago that if he forgot the past and didn't worry about the future, immersing himself completely in the present moment, he'd be more in tune with the universe's cosmic messaging, telling him his next move. Other than with Bethany, Carl didn't share this aspect of his philosophy with others, knowing full well from experience it typically wasn't appreciated or understood. Instead, he quietly enjoyed a secret two-way partnership with the very source that created him.

While brushing his tongue with a sticky pine needle in front of the mirror, Carl couldn't help but laugh at himself for remembering an old self-help mantra that, despite its tired cheesiness, was highly apropos. "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," he recited to his reflection. Carl's mood was so spirited that even the guards at the checkpoint had no choice

but to sit up and investigate the change in the consummate loner.

“What’s up with you?” asked one of the guards while wiping his eyes with two sets of forelimbs.

“Huh? Nothing,” beamed Carl.

The second guard stood up and pressed his belly against the counter. He spit something out of his mouth and growled, “Well, whatever you’re doing, knock it off.”

Carl proceeded to the pond and conducted his morning workout with renewed vigor. While balancing on a shiny red holly berry for core strength, he decided he’d make one last stop before heading out to the Emerald Forest. His impending new life thrilled him, but it also came with justifiable trepidation. In order for Carl to pinpoint a time when he didn’t know where he’d sleep or where his next meal would come from, he had to think back to when he first graduated from college. After finishing his last set of sit-ups on top of a soggy red maple leaf, Carl flew to the other side of the pond, toward

the water lilies, where he'd enjoy what could arguably be his last guaranteed meal.

With his belly comfortably full, the sated butterfly floated down to the waxy green leaf that supported the water lily plant on the pond's glassy surface. He wasn't sleepy, but he knew he needed to rest for a bit while his body digested and metabolized what he had just eaten. Carl folded his wings and sat back against the soft velvet stem, thinking about three fundamental truths he'd recently uncovered—truths that allowed him to break free of the colony once and for all. To his surprise, he noticed a bright green grasshopper, a young adult male, sitting on an adjacent water lily leaf. He was staring at Carl with an inquisitive expression. He made no move to spring away since he, too, needed time to digest his breakfast. Although Carl knew he wouldn't understand his language, he forged ahead anyway, deciding he'd share the fundamental truths with Alex—a name he chose to call his new friend and solo audience member.

“Most caterpillars—and it might be the same with grasshoppers, too,” he began, “define the ego as the source of personal identity, self-esteem, and self-importance, and they

wouldn't be wrong, as the ego mediates between our conscious and unconscious minds. By itself, there's nothing wrong with having an ego per se; besides, it's a non-negotiable part of our metaphysical selves. However, the problem stems from ruling class devils, who maliciously seek any means necessary to maintain supremacy over the slave class, which includes exploitation of the woefully vulnerable ego. Are you with me so far, Alex?"

Alex blinked twice and rubbed his hindlegs against his forewings, producing a sharp chirping noise. Carl interpreted his polite response as, "Yes, please continue."

"The insidiousness begins somewhere between the late larva and early pupa stages, where, through incessant indoctrination starting at birth, the ruling class hijacks the malleable ego and turns it into a score-keeping entity that feeds off of meaningless validation from everyone, including strangers. You see, Alex, the evil monsters of the ruling class are the ones who decreed that life must be lived in only one way—a way that strictly benefits those who made the rules and rigged the outcomes. Therefore, the ego must always keep score of who is and isn't winning the game of life."

Alex cocked his head from side to side and repositioned himself, moving closer to his impromptu lecturer. Carl believed he understood what his audience was attempting to convey.

“Oh, I can tell you appreciated that insight, Alex, but you haven’t heard the best part. Did you know there’s a way to reset your ego to its original factory setting? Well, there is. Through the process of awakening to the point of enlightenment, it’s possible—even likely—to replace a corrupted ego with a factory-fresh version that’s associated with one’s authentic self. But the best part about the newly installed ego is that it doesn’t require empty validation to run; it feeds off inner peace and mutual depth from other authentic creatures.”

Alex was startled by something behind him but turned back around to look at Carl. He didn’t appear like he was ready to leave, which Carl saw as an opportunity to press forward.

“If you think that’s interesting,” he continued, “wait until I tell you about a second fundamental truth.” After hearing Alex’s

repeated chirps, Carl added, “Don’t get too excited. This one might depress you.”

## **Two More Fundamental Truths**

Carl stood up to stretch his legs. Having sat for so long, he stumbled, which caused him to open his wings to regain his balance, making Alex think the monologue was over. “No, no,” pleaded Carl, “I’m not leaving!” Alex must have understood. He quickly uncoiled himself from an imminent launch and sat back down. Carl tucked his wings away and remained standing. He paced back and forth on the waxy, stiff surface and folded his forelimbs behind his back, organizing his thoughts. Carl liked feeling as if he were a respected and popular college professor moments away from opening up the minds of his young, eager charges.

“We’re all suffering in one way or another,” he began. “If it isn’t from having lost—or never having had—access to basic physiological needs like clean air and water, regular healthy meals, a place to call home, and reliable healthcare, suffering can also emanate from unmet emotional and psychological needs as well. Who wouldn’t suffer from a lack of fellowship,

intimacy, acceptance, purpose, or fulfillment? Then again, imagine an insect that has everything it needs—no shortages whatsoever. They’d be free of suffering, right?” Carl paused for effect before continuing. “No, they’d still be suffering from the fact that—no matter how they live their life—they know they’ll die, resulting in a lifelong existential struggle between feeling grateful for the gift of life and sensing the absurdity of it all.”

“Unfortunately, in the slave classes—from caterpillars to butterflies, grasshoppers to bumblebees—the magnitude of suffering is far greater than that of the corresponding ruling classes. Of course, that should come as no surprise. After all, the ruling class’s self-appointed kings and queens have unlimited access to every conceivable physiological need, including everything from creature comforts to shameless luxuries. These entitled bloodsuckers either extinguish their emotional and psychological needs with their blackened hearts or simply purchase them with a signature. In their wake, after cannibalizing the hopes, dreams, and backbones of their fellow insects, the powers that be leave behind remnants of basic needs for the slaves to fight over.”

Alex's head shake seemed to mirror Carl's own disgust—or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

“I’ll be honest—I don’t care about the souls of the ruling class,” continued Carl. “At some point, in this life or the next, they’ll have to answer to the atrocities they unleashed on their innocent brothers and sisters. No one forced them to partner with darkness; it was their own willful choice to trade their souls for an unearned life of excess. Conversely, I only care about the souls of the slaves who, despite being forced to carry a lifelong burden of suffering from unanswered physical, emotional, and psychological needs, continue to press onward, finding love, working hard, raising families, and helping others.”

Carl crawled toward the edge of the leaf, allowing him to look directly at Alex, who acknowledged him with two quick-tempo chirps.

“During my transition from a caterpillar to a butterfly, beginning more than 10 seasons ago, I learned of a third fundamental truth—one that divides the entire caterpillar population into four distinct types, all of whom are suffering.

Again, I'm only referring to slave-class caterpillars, who make up 99.99% of the colony population. Coincidentally, three of my caterpillar friends and I are solid representatives of each type."

Carl spread his wings in preparation for what he was about to say. This time, Alex remained motionless and focused his attention on the talking butterfly.

"Let's start with me because—face it—I'm obviously the most physically different of the bunch. As a caterpillar who morphed into a butterfly, I represent the very few who've managed to find a way back to their authentic self—the one with the factory-fresh ego that needs only inner peace and likeminded depth from other authentic creatures; the one who can see through the lies and think for themselves; the one outside the matrix; the one most alienated and hated by the ruling-class snakes. The pathway to metamorphosis—or enlightenment, as I like to call it—is the most spiritually rewarding of the four types, but it isn't necessarily the winning choice, as there are no winners in this kind of society."

Carl felt a gentle breeze lift him off his feet, reminding him that his wings were still unfurled. He quickly folded them back and gently regained his footing.

“Whereas butterflies are by far the rarest of the four types, my former friend Sigmund and his soon-to-be wife, Ruby, are strong representatives of the most common type—encompassing approximately 90% of all enslaved caterpillars. These caterpillars cannot or refuse to understand butterflies, choosing instead to label them as strange, suspicious, lazy, aloof, stubborn, self-important, arrogant, attention-seeking, troublemakers, etc. Caterpillars like Sigmund and Ruby are the bread and butter of the opportunistic ruling class, as they are the most susceptible to subjugation, control, and exploitation. These are the ones who can be lulled, hypnotized, and brainwashed into believing anything the ruling class deems important and newsworthy. In essence, they’re like unwitting foot soldiers for the privileged elite, ensuring butterflies remain invisible, unemployed, unhoused, unfriended, and ostracized from the community.”

A group of goldfinches squawked in cadence above the bobbing water lilies, making Carl and Alex look up at the same

time. The birds were silhouetted against the brightening sky. The unlikely duo watched the high-flyers separate from one another as they approached a stand of birch trees. They lowered their gazes to each other once the noisy goldfinches settled into their familiar nests. Carl continued his oral dissertation.

“The next type of caterpillar belongs to a group that’s a lot smaller than the one I just described but much larger than the butterfly group—say, around three or four percent. My former friend Fitz—short for Fitzgerald—is a perfect specimen for a group of bitter caterpillars who not only understand butterflies, but they also know how much courage and sacrifice it takes to become one. The bitterness they feel toward their butterfly counterparts stems from an internal sense of shame for not being strong enough to choose the path they know is right for them. Their shame is expressed as anger toward a butterfly whose only fault is its mere presence, which serves to remind the conflicted caterpillar of their cowardice.”

“The final type of caterpillar,” continued Carl, “is as special and rare as the butterflies themselves. Like the caterpillars in Fitz’s group, these caterpillars—like my dear friend

Bethany—understand butterflies and are well aware of the challenges necessary for metamorphosis. However, instead of hating them for their pursuit of the truth and their need to live life on their terms, Bethany and caterpillars like her admire and look up to butterflies who’ve defied the odds to escape the matrix of indoctrination. But these unique caterpillars aren’t satisfied with simply admiring butterflies from afar; they learn from them. Whereas bitter Fitz-like caterpillars know they should follow the path of enlightenment but are too afraid of the personal costs, caterpillars from Bethany’s group have come to terms with the fact that the process of metamorphosis is not in their DNA. They’re not afraid of the consequences that come with enlightenment; deep down, they know their best contributions come from being caterpillars.”

Not knowing how to communicate to Alex that his lecture was over, Carl awkwardly bowed solemnly, thinking his choice of movement was a universal signal conveying the same message as a closing stage curtain: “The show’s over, folks!” He wasn’t wrong; Alex offered two quick chirps followed by a longer chirp as if to say, “Thanks for entertaining me while I digested my breakfast.” And with that, he sprung away in a sudden blur,

disappearing as fast as a hummingbird, leaving Carl alone in the middle of a forest of floating water lilies.

## **Saying Goodbye**

As Carl prepared himself to launch from the lily pad, he was reminded of the epiphany he experienced months earlier alongside friends he no longer spent time with. Carl didn't feel sad, lonely, or unfairly singled out as a pariah; he understood that as a butterfly, he was simply flowing with the natural order. By letting go of what he could not control or influence in the colony, Carl felt himself gravitating toward the Emerald Forest—a place without any assurances other than he wouldn't be surrounded by needless misery and suffering brought on by a ruling class believing that “some caterpillars are more equal than others.” Carl didn't lie to himself or pretend there was a silver lining; he knew there was nothing more to learn about the doomed colony apart from watching it implode on itself like all the ancient colonies that came before. Lost in their insatiable greed and pathological need to possess and control everything provided freely by nature, the myopic ruling class failed to learn anything from their fallen predecessors.

A slight breeze gathered beneath his wings and lifted Carl high enough for him to reach one of the top branches of an adjacent weeping willow tree, where he could land and check his Cater-Notes account one last time. He felt silly checking an account that, for many seasons, barely saw any activity; Carl was as invisible in the virtual world as he was in the real world. He checked anyway and saw there were no messages. He thought about writing a note to Bethany but opted not to since he'd been giving her little hints of his intentions for months. Carl leaped from the branch and immediately caught a warm updraft, elevating him above the trees surrounding the pond—the only home he'd ever known and the one he was about to leave.

He was so high he could see a barn, shed, and even the Abernathy homestead beyond the furrows of potato plants. A handful of workers were spread out, using shovels to carefully unearth the plants before manually extracting the tubers from tangles of twisted roots. They worked quietly and efficiently, mindfully stacking the dirt-covered vegetables inside weathered wheelbarrows. The farm activity reminded Carl that autumn was fast approaching. He began noticing that

some of the trees were more naked than others—their leaves having fallen and collected along the water’s edge, making the pond look smaller than it was. Other than two- to three-second bursts of song from hidden goldfinches, the pond was eerily silent—as if it were mourning the loss of yet another butterfly who only wanted peace and joy for himself and others.

Although the pond and farm were bathed in late-morning sunshine, dark clouds loomed in the distance, behind the Emerald Forest. Carl wasn’t worried; he knew the forest offered countless opportunities for shelter from the elements. He looked down and saw that he was fluttering over the middle of the pond. If he hadn’t seen a tiny splash, he wouldn’t have noticed the two bullfrogs perched on a half-submerged log. He recognized the two old croakers instantly.

“Do you see our little blue friend up there, Jasper?” asked Earl, whose tongue just came back empty from a trio of water striders—a rare miss for the veteran hunter.

“Yup, I see ‘em. What’s he fixing to do, you think?”

Earl moved back on the log so he wouldn't strain his neck while following the erratic trajectory of the butterfly. "He's getting ready to leave," he replied.

"How do you know?" asked Jasper.

"I've been watching him for a while now," said Earl. "Normally, he's not out here this late, nor does he fly that high up."

Jasper lowered his head and rubbed it against the spongy moss under his legs to scratch an itch on his chin. He turned to Earl and said, "That doesn't mean he's leaving for good."

"It means he's following the same pattern as all the others. He's saying his goodbyes, Jasper."

Carl fluttered up to one of the upper branches of a majestic ponderosa pine that stood at the entrance of the Emerald Forest. His blue wings looked even brighter against the dark green needles and brown pine cones. He chose a landing spot that allowed him to peer deeper into the forest while still being able to see the entrance of his soon-to-be former home. He

thought about what would happen to his belongings, artwork, books, and other writings. He wondered how long it would take for someone else to live in his place and whether or not his forgotten family and friends would even notice his absence.

There was a time when Carl worried about the legacy he'd leave behind upon his death. Throughout his larva and pupa stages, he was frequently reminded by the authoritative adults around him that "we should leave the Earth better than how we found it." However, Carl's path toward enlightenment allowed him to expose those very same adults *knowingly* doing the opposite. At first, it angered him, inspiring him to create artwork and write books that shed light on the evil forces that preyed upon their own kind. Eventually, he realized his work was created and offered to the masses in vain as his warnings were met with eyes and ears focused on Cater-Note lies, stupidity, vulgarity, and nonsense. The ruling-class elites didn't worry about online butterflies who were aware of the shameful truth; they simply cancelled them through suppressive algorithms.

Carl took one last look at the pond before turning away from the light and fluttering into the darkness. Little did he know that he would be forgotten before the first snowfall that winter. It was as if he were never there. Had he known that, Carl wouldn't have been surprised. He already understood that nothing really mattered and that everyone would be forgotten—like they were never there in the first place.

The End

## About the Author

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on. *A Rationale for Being* is Chuck's ninth book.

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