



A Cow Texas Short Story

Butterfly Effect

BY MAJORIE GRUPP

The fresh smell of paint was wafting up from the oven. The child smiled, looking up from his work. The interruption from the stranger was welcome, and the child took the hand proffered, and was led willingly away. Ovens continued to move past on the conveyor, and another child stepped into his place, spraying the vulcanising agent which hardened the paint on shells of the shining new ovens into a hard protective coating of black lacquer.

The factory was an enormous cavern, the whole world to the child. Occasional geysers of sparks fountained into the air from the

welding bays. The air conditioning system picked up in the afternoons, compensating for the heat of the unseen day.

The mechanised landscape had its own rhythms and cycles, and the child knew them all. The friendly stranger, with kind eyes, clasped his hand firmly, and walked quickly along the aisle, stepping over an overturned pallet of plastic wrap, stepping smartly aside to avoid one of the automated carts - which buzzed a carefully neutral two tone warning, nevertheless sounding irate.

Soon they had left the sheet metal fabrication floor behind them, and were in the rarified halls of the wiring stations, where looms of coloured strands were woven from stacks of carefully ordered spools - yellow, red, green stripes and black cables as thick as a thumb. The child's eyes were saucers - he had only ventured to these distant regions on two occasions, and then only briefly.

There were few children here, solemn boys and girls in white coveralls and neat grey caps. The boy felt gaudy in his bright blue painting smock over red trousers. But the stranger, perhaps sensing his curiosity, or perhaps driven by other forces, marched unrelentingly on, his shiny black shoes beating a techno drum line across the glossy concrete floor, toward the vast opening at the end of the hall. Freshly wrapped pallets of fresh ovens, loaded onto the automatic carts, disappeared into the gaping void.

A man stood, by the window, looking out across the vista beyond. The factory floor teemed with workers, machines, and of course vast numbers of the distinctive black ovens for which this company, indeed this region, was famed. Something, though, was amiss.

Barely visible to the naked eye, a small blue figure among the white flocks of electrical technicians was a speck of grit in the eye of a god. Insignificant to be sure, but scratching, irritating. An unseemly, impossible blight on the divine machinery of creation. He turned back to where the bank of security monitors showed what was happening in considerably more detail.

The boy walked, alone, in a very odd stance - his left hand held outwards, as though reaching to catch a unseen butterfly which eluded his grasp, fluttering always just beyond the tips of his fingers.

Or holding the hand of an imaginary friend.

Maxwell had seen this once before. As the general supervisor of this plant, he occasionally witnessed oddities such as what this small child was doing. Because he, as many others of his standing tried their best to ignore, knew that no matter how perfect a system, there would always be an imperfection. A virus, if you will. And sometimes, the smaller the virus, the easier it is to ignore, the larger the problem.

Yes, he had seen this before. It even had a name. The “Butterfly Effect.” And it was most certainly not a small virus. It’s wings had long lasting repercussions. In his multi-decadal tenure, he had seen this occur only once. And it was one moment in time too many. The scorch marks on his back served as a daily reminder of that morning.

“No,” he thought. We must stop this butterfly. We must stop it from flying away.

Maxwell hastily grabbed his coat off the chair, and rushed out the door. It was a bad move, a rookie error, he knew. You were never meant to leave your post before it was Time. Even the supervisors have supervisors. They were always watching. But Maxwell knew, he absolutely had no choice.

The air of the factory was much cooler than the climate controlled Observation Room, he noticed, as he clambered to put on his coat while running down the steps.

CLICK, CLACK, CLICK, CLACK CLACK

His footsteps echoed through the factory floor. The children all paused at exactly the same moment, and turned their heads to observe the commotion. Ovens on conveyor belts passed the children, tools in hand, as they stood there in awe.

Most of them had never seen anyone leave the Observation Room before. Except for one child. Just one. The oldest child of the factory floor, though you wouldn’t know by looking at him. One of the white-cloaked wiring technicians. Vance. He’d seen this happen once.

It was a long time ago, and he was very young at the time. But he remembered it like it was yesterday. How could he not.

In the vacant Observation Room, if someone were to be present, he would notice on one end of the screen a small boy in blue, hand outstretched, walking slowly but surely towards the end of the factory floor towards a bright, blinding light.

One the other end of the screen you would notice a middle-aged cloaked man, scrambling after them as if his life was depending on it.

But what you wouldn't notice, not unless you were particularly looking for it, amidst the sea of white cloaks, would be a slightly older boy sliding off into the darkness. A shadow in the shadows.

It is an oft repeated wisdom, that in every crisis is an opportunity. When the wings of the butterfly flap, there may be a hurricane. Shepherds and sailors have observed - there's often a nice sunrise beforehand.

Dashing across the shop floor, heads slowly following his progress, he was intent on his quarry. His earpiece chimed repeatedly, as spiralling delays across the factory brought his predicament to notice higher and higher up the administrative food chain.

Sweat beaded his brow as the child who was causing this calamity disappeared into the glare of Loading Dock 40. Crisis teams were scrambled. A gout of black smoke erupted across his vision as 125 ovens were incinerated in the kiln, their protective coatings neglected by the idle, watching children.

He swore, and and hurried on through the darkening acrid gloom.

The communications rack was a cramped space - especially if you were a little older, a little taller than the usual communications technician, such as Vance.

There was little light - but preparations were in place - a power drill and compact mirror would facilitate the trepanning urgently

required if he was to avoid the imminent and inevitable neuro lockdown. Consciousness Control would not allow the crisis to continue for much longer, whatever the cost to the lifespans of the workers .

He plunged the spinning drill bit into his skull, just behind his ear. And collapsed, insensate, to the floor of the cabinet, as blood pooled stickily around him.

Vance woke up in a sterile room.

It was cold; the bed sheets were white against the metal rails; a dim light shone off in the distant corner of the room offering ambient light. He strained his head to note the metal door at the end of the room.

To his right he noted a large mirror on the wall covering a large stretch of the wall. As his senses started to return; his overwhelming sensation was of the throbbing pain running from the back of his head down to his neck.

He also noted that his tongue and lips were dry; as though he had licked a square of sandpaper. He couldn't recall the last time that he had drank anything; or eaten anything for that manner.

The supervisors ensured that they reached their target performance indicators by limiting the breaks of their employees, keeping sustenance as a reward for those young workers that performed extra curricular duties in the factory. When they get called into his office they always come out looking broken; a sad, tired shadow of themselves. They usually don't feel like eating for days afterwards and end up vomiting up their extra rations.

The supervisors had been eyeing Vance off lately and had requested a performance review the day after tomorrow, he recalled.

Vance's train of thought was broken by a rattling at the door. There was a scratching at the keyhole. Someone was trying to break into the room.

The door opened a crack to reveal a figure dressed in blue.

The mannequin dropped slowly to the floor, collapsing in a tangle of limbs and blue smock.

There was no one else there.

How had the mannequin got there? No time to think. This was his chance to escape Maxwell's looming marathon gaming session.

He groggily rose from the bed, and staggered toward the door and freedom. His uncooperative feet somehow snared in the mannequin's trailing legs, and he was down, tearing a leg off the dummy in the process.

His vision clouded, and his ears hissed. Then he realised it was not his throbbing head - a noxious yellow fog was jetting out of the socket where the limb had torn from the torso, and was rapidly filling the room.

His eyes burnt. The force of the escaping fumes animated the figure, propelling it in a macabre flailing dance against the wall that it had slid against. The hissing and bashing of plastic limbs was overwhelming.

A klaxxon started to sound, adding it's urgent tones to the cacophony in the room. Vance picked himself up and staggered away, the yellow smoke swirling around him.

Across an empty moonscape of indifferent freeways, factory units and dustbowl empty lots, a young boy fled, one arm outstretched as though grasping for an elusive butterfly that forever eluded his grasp.

Somewhere behind him, the smell of burning ovens drifted on the breeze, as the conflagration spread.

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