

Weintraub

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Migrations

by

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In their long migration from the northern states west of the Rockies, populations of monarch butterflies follow the shoreline once they sight the Pacific, flying south in thin, sinuous files until they reach their winter homes, groves of eucalyptus and Monterey pines scattered along the coast from Bodega Bay to Baja California. Not all of them make it, of course, and I once dreamed that I was looking out over the sheer cliffs that descend from the Pacific Coast Highway to the sea and was almost blinded by the light and color shimmering off the surface as if huge strips of burnished copper foil had been rolled over the waves. Then I realized that the bright metallic sheen was from the light of the lowering sun reflecting not only off the waters but also off of the outstretched wings of thousands of dead and dying monarchs, speckling the surface with a golden iridescence to the limits of the horizon.

This vision is not as farfetched as it might seem, since a sudden thunderstorm or cold front or violent dispersal of the winds could disrupt the migrations of these animals, forcing them out to sea, where -- freezing, weakening, disoriented -- they would drop, one-by-one, onto the surface. In fact, there are World War II accounts of crews of merchant marine ships and troop transports awakening to find their decks carpeted with swarms of butterflies blown miles off their course. "It was like a huge living tapestry," reported one sailor. "Really beautiful." Yet, still, they had to be swept overboard to avoid being crushed underfoot and turning the deck into a slippery hazard.

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But for the most part evolution has taught these migratory flocks to seek shelter in the face of storms and to avoid flying over large expanses of water, and year after year, North America's monarchs arrive at their winter sites along the Gulf Coast or in the high mountain ranges of central Mexico or in Pacific Grove, California, where my wife and I decided to pay them a visit one January.

Neither Emily nor I had ever had the least interest in insect behavior. Nor were we particularly fond of adventurous or unusual vacations. In fact, as far as I can remember, neither of us had ever felt much desire -- in a general sense, anyway -- to commune with nature.

But one late September morning, in our third year of marriage and her ninth month of pregnancy, Emily stepped out onto the back porch of our third floor apartment on Chicago's South Side to witness an extraordinary sight. I had already left for work, but it was still early, and when she looked down at the pair of maples that lay in the shadows of our building, she was surprised to see that most of the leaves had apparently turned to a dull yellow brown overnight.

"At least I thought they were leaves," she said. But a moment later the sun rose above the roof of the building and the clusters of monarchs that were clinging to the foliage and to the maples' branches opened their wings simultaneously to catch the morning's first warmth.

"I'd never seen anything like it," Emily said. "It was like suddenly finding yourself in the middle of a Monet painting. The one at the Art Institute, the haystacks in the sunshine, only more vibrant, and three-dimensional, too. In all my life, I've never seen anything like it, and I have no idea how long I stayed out there in my nightgown and slippers, just watching them."

"In your nightgown and slippers?"

"I had my robe on."

"But you must've been cold. You should've gone inside, watched from inside the kitchen."

"I was going to, but then they started to leave, one at a time, over the houses, toward the lake. Finally, a strong gust of wind blew down the alley, and they began to fly away in droves. I felt a little chilly then, but before I knew it they were all gone, and I went back inside. I tried to go back to sleep, but I guess I was too excited by what I'd seen, and I couldn't."

I must admit, I was angry at her for exposing herself like that in her condition, and since I knew nothing then about the mass migration of monarch butterflies, I was sure she was exaggerating. My angry skepticism, in turn, angered her, and I wasn't aware until a few days later that the *Tribune* had confirmed her story. Apparently, the Lake Michigan shoreline is along the route of several large migrations, and although, on their journey southwest, these eastern populations rarely venture into the city, an aggregate of unusual size had passed through our neighborhood that day. Many other Southsiders had shared my wife's experience, and, in fact, a full-color photo of one of the swarms was printed on the *Tribune's* front page the next morning.

But early that same day, Emily gave birth to our daughter. Naturally, I had no time to read the newspaper, and despite my delight and pride at becoming a father, I was nevertheless annoyed when she ordered me to look up the scientific nomenclature for the monarch butterfly before she would agree on a name for our baby. I had been leaning toward Ruth, my mother's name, but when Emily learned that the Linnaean terminology for the North American monarch was *Danaus plexippus*, she insisted on Dana. No one in either of our families had a similar name, but by that time my sister-in-law had shown me the *Tribune* article, and how could I then object, knowing that our daughter's birth had been heralded by a visitation of monarch butterflies in unprecedented numbers?

Emily, of course, repeated the story enough times over the years to ensure that Dana would be continuously embarrassed by it, and while we were still living in that Southside apartment, she would awaken me early every morning on the week of our daughter's birthday and lead me out onto the porch overlooking the alley just as the light began to illuminate the tops of the trees beneath us.

The monarchs never reappeared. Yet even after we moved to our home in the western suburbs, Emily still longed to relive this experience, and since she was also eager to share it with me, she began to collect information on the migrations of butterflies and their winter retreats. "If they're not going to come see us again," she would say, "maybe we should return the favor and pay them a visit."

She soon learned that every October large aggregates of monarchs travel south and also west over the Sierra Nevadas to the Monterey Peninsula, and that thousands of tourists visit their

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habitats in the parks around Pacific Grove until they return north in February.

But fall and winter were busy seasons for Fox Lithographics, and as our operations and clientele grew, it became more and more difficult for us to get away, even during the summer. By the time Dana was in high school, Emily was working with me full-time, and we rarely could leave Chicago for more than a week, usually traveling no farther than Michigan City or the Wisconsin Dells. In fact, not until we sold the business, almost thirty years from the day that Dana was born, could we even consider a winter vacation.

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Of course, by then we had the time and the means to witness a far more impressive display. Whereas a hundred thousand or so monarchs regularly winter in Pacific Grove, tens of millions migrate high into the transvolcanic mountain ranges just west of Mexico City. There in the secluded forests of Chivatí-Huacal and Sierra Pelón, most of the eastern and Midwestern populations of North American monarchs gather, dangling from the branches of the oyamel pines in huge clusters and encrusting the trunks from root to summit like Byzantine mosaics of gold and striated black.

One of the largest habitats, at Sierra El Campanario, is open to the public, and tours originate from the hill towns below. As I mentioned before, we've never been adventurous travelers, and although we probably could have tolerated the journey into the rural highlands, the spicy food, and even the uncertain water, the final phase of the trip – a jolting bus ride over narrow, rutted logging roads and then a one- to two-hour hike up mountain trails to a height of ten thousand feet above sea level – would have been difficult for us under the best of circumstances. With Emily's heart condition, it was no longer an option.

Her first attack was a mild one, and she was back working on our billing within two months. But the second one, a year later, was far more serious. We barely reached the emergency room in time, and that very night I decided to sell our company. I could always consult on a part-time basis, but I couldn't bear to spend my days managing Fox Lithographics without Emily working on the books in the office next door, and besides, as Dana had been reminding us for the past two years, it was about time we both began enjoying our lives together.

Dr. Schneider agreed. In fact, he thought that a winter vacation would be therapeutic for

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both of us, particularly after the difficult negotiations over the sale of our business.

“It wouldn’t hurt to get away,” he said. “Someplace where you can leave all your worries behind for couple of weeks.”

I asked if he was sure that Emily was strong enough.

“So long as you’re not thinking about rock-climbing or hang-gliding. In cases like these, a change in surroundings is often recommended, particularly when the surroundings you’re changing is Chicago in the winter. Mental health and attitude can be as important as physical conditioning. See that she takes her medication regularly, don’t overdo it, and she should be just fine.”

When he told me that he didn’t think a trip to the West Coast would be overdoing it, I began to make plans. Before her divorce, Dana had lived with her husband for a year in Berkeley where he was a graduate assistant. We visited them one summer, and although we could only afford a week, we also traveled up Napa Valley to Mendocino, stopping in several bed-and-breakfasts along the way and back before flying home. It was, in part, to recapture that experience – as well as to see the butterflies – that we reserved the master bedroom in the Thomas Sheridan House just outside of Pacific Grove. From there we could easily drive to Carmel and Sausalito and then we would spend a leisurely week in the wine country and a final five days in San Francisco.

But Emily caught a cold two weeks before our trip, and although she recovered quickly, I knew she was still weak, and I was prepared to cancel our reservations. “Don’t you dare!” she warned me. “Particularly after those last three days in bed! The only fever I’ve got now is the cabin kind and I’m about ready to fly out of my skin. Besides, you spent so much time over the arrangements, I’d be heartsick if you canceled them now. Let’s not worry. We’ll have a wonderful time.”

I replied it would still be prudent to call Dr. Schneider, but Emily insisted that she felt fine, as strong as ever. Yet I also sensed that she was terrified that the doctor might be overly cautious and recommend that we postpone our vacation. She pleaded with me not to call. “A pack of Kleenex and two aspirin a day will take care of everything,” she said.

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But the morning we were scheduled to leave was bitterly cold, even for Chicago in early January, and the taxi ride to O'Hare through morning rush hour – over an icy highway into prickly torrents of hail – took far longer than we'd expected. If our flight had not been delayed, we would have surely missed it.

Of course, once we finally checked our luggage, we then feared that the flight might be canceled or – and this was more Emily's concern than mine – that we would be so late in arriving that we would have to find our way to Pacific Grove in the middle of the night, driving over unknown roads after a long and fatiguing day.

"Stop worrying," I said as we waited at the gate for the new departure times to be posted. "I'll be careful, and I'll drive slowly. And if we have to stop, we'll stop. The butterflies'll still be there when we arrive."

"But you know how you hate to drive in the dark, particularly when you don't know where you're going and the weather's bad."

"I've got my maps, and who said the weather's going to be bad?"

"I don't know," she said, "I just can't seem to get it out of my head that all the world's just like it is out there." She turned toward the windows overlooking the runways where we could see planes taxiing slowly through tiny whirlpools of snow gusting across the tarmac like wisps of smoke. Clouds of vapor rose from their wings and engines, disappearing into a gray sky darkening to slate. "I keep on thinking that when we finally get there you'll have to drive through the same ice and snow and in the dark, too. Remember that night when they closed I-57 because the snow was drifting so badly . . ."

"Emily, that's silly! We're going to Pacific Grove, not Carbondale!"

"I know it's silly. But you know how I worry, and I just can't seem to get it out of my head."

Of course, there was no snow nor ice nor frozen winds when we finally reached San Francisco. But there was plenty of fog, and after circling for half-an-hour, the pilot was preparing to reroute the flight, when the fog beneath us suddenly lifted, and we could see the lights of the city. Banking sharply to his right, he veered almost straight downward, startling most of the passengers and landing smoothly at San Francisco International over four hours behind schedule.

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It was dark by then and the fog was again thickening as I drove from the airport. Unfamiliar with the controls of the rental car – I had to stop along the shoulder to find the switch for the windshield wipers – and with my poor night vision, I quickly became disoriented, and I was soon driving east over the San Mateo Bridge toward Hayward rather than south to Monterey. I was reluctant to disturb Emily – who had developed a deep headache at the end of our flight and was then trying to sleep – but without her help reading the map and the road signs, we would never have reached our destination that night.

We finally arrived at the Thomas Sheridan House shortly before eleven. The brochure described it as “spectacularly situated on a promontory overlooking the ocean,” but as I pulled into the lot, I could see nothing but fog and darkness, although as we were braking to a halt, I could hear the thunder of waves and feel them crashing against the rocks beneath us. The house itself was built on a rise, and after we walked up a long gravel path, Emily had to pause for a moment before she could ascend the wooden staircase that led to the veranda.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” I said, admiring the white Victorian structure above us, with its Queen Anne turrets, its colorful leaded windows, and, particularly, the lacy fretwork that framed the entrance of its wraparound porch. But Emily, who usually appreciated these things far more than I did, seemed more concerned about mounting the staircase in front of her, and I thought I saw in her eyes that same fear I had seen when she was last leaving the hospital, uncertain about crossing the few yards that separated her from the taxi parked at the curb.

“Emily, are you all right?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just let me lean on you a bit,” and she hooked her arm around mine as she led me up the stairs.

By the time we reached the top, her weight seemed to have doubled, and she was again breathing heavily.

“I’ll bring the car around and carry the bags up after we register,” I said, and as I rang the bell, I added, “I wonder if we could get something to eat.”

“I’m not very hungry,” said Emily, just as a heavy woman with a wide, beaming face answered the door. “Well, aren’t you the tardy ones!” she exclaimed. “Mr. and Mrs. Fox, right?”

“That’s right,” I said, and after she introduced herself as Mrs. Page, we followed her into the house down an entry hall adorned on both sides with prints and engravings depicting whaling expeditions and clipper ships.

When we reached the desk at the end of the foyer, she removed the registration book from one of the drawers, and after she showed me where to sign, she looked around vaguely at the shelves behind her. “I think I left your keys in the kitchen,” she said. “I’ll get them and show you to your room.”

As we waited for her return, I glanced into the parlor that branched off from the opposite side of the main staircase. It was lit only by a single Tiffany-style lamp, and hassocks, ottomans, and winged chairs with claw-and-ball feet were crowded together among the shadows. Velvet curtains fringed with tassels hung from ceiling to floor, hiding the windows, and every surface – end tables, bookcases, the mantelpiece – was cluttered with model sailing vessels, compasses, chronometers, and other nautical devices.

“We’re sorry to be so late,” I said as she handed me the keys. “Our flight was delayed.”

“That’s no problem,” she replied. “These things happen. I’m sorry we couldn’t hold your dinner for you, but if you haven’t had anything to eat . . .”

“A sandwich or two would be welcome.”

“I’m not very hungry,” said Emily. “Just an aspirin and a good night’s sleep is all I need.”

“How about a pot of tea?” asked Mrs. Page, her eyebrows wrinkling with concern as she looked into my wife’s face. “It would be no trouble at all.”

“That would be very nice,” said Emily.

“I’ll bring it up to you once you’ve settled in,” and she started up the staircase. “It’s on the third floor. The master bedroom.”

Emily again leaned heavily against me as we climbed the stairs. By the time we reached the master bedroom, Mrs. Page had already turned on the lights and was opening the slats to the high window across from the bed.

“Best view in the house,” she said, “although there’s too much fog to see much of anything now. This is one of the turrets, and it looks northeast out over the bluff. It was designed especially to receive the first light. Mrs. Thomas Sheridan was up early every morning to see the

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sun rise over the waters, she enjoyed it so. She was originally from New Bedford, Massachusetts, and the house was built especially for her in the New England style. There's even a widow's walk right above this room. The staircase down the corridor leads up to it. . . . I can close these shutters if you'd like to sleep late tomorrow morning."

I looked toward Emily who was now sitting in a chair beside one of the bed's high posts. "We should get up early," she said. "To see the butterflies first thing."

"The earlier the better," said Mrs. Page. "They like to catch the sun in their wings as soon as the fog burns off."

"Are they all here?" asked my wife. "Are the monarchs really here?"

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Page. "In full bloom. They say every seventh year's the best, and this is the seventh year. And tomorrow's supposed to be a gorgeous day. All the fog should be gone by mid-morning." She then reminded us that breakfast was served between seven and nine.

"We'll try for seven," I said, and Emily smiled back at me, pleased at having arrived at such an opportune time.

Since I still had to remove our luggage from the car, I accompanied Mrs. Page downstairs. The walls of the stairwell were also decorated with nineteenth-century prints of sailing vessels, and pieces of scrimshaw were mounted in the small alcoves at the corners of each landing. "There seems to be a nautical theme to the house," I commented.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Page. "Mr. Thomas Sheridan was in the China trades, and his bride was from a family of New England merchants and whalers. He built this home especially for her as a summer residence, and many of the original furnishings were actually shipped over from the East Coast. Unfortunately, Mr. Sheridan never had much of a chance to sleep in his own master bedroom. He had to leave on a trip to the Orient only a few days after they'd settled in. I don't know if the story's really true, but they say he deliberately changed the course of his ship, *The Sou'wester*, out of San Francisco, to sail past the promontory so that his bride could wave good-bye to him from the widow's walk. What we do know for a fact, of course, is that he never returned."

"That's a shame," I said.

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“Fortunately, Mrs. Thomas Sheridan had sufficient property of her own to keep up her lifestyle, since she never remarried. When she lost her San Francisco home in the fire after the earthquake, she took up permanent residence here. She was in her nineties when she died, and then the property passed on to her grandnephew who’d looked after her in her final years. The family owns it to this day, and as you can see, they do their best to preserve its historic character.”

“I see she was fond of the monarchs, too,” I said, gesturing toward a mounting of a dozen butterflies hanging to one side of the reception desk. It was clearly an old piece, the matting under the glass having yellowed with age.

“A lot of people really don’t approve of such things nowadays,” said Mrs. Page, “but the family won’t allow us to take it down. Look, you can see by the brightness of the color that the butterflies were very young when they were mounted. Many others around here have inherited similar decorations, and they usually keep them out-of-sight. But they were quite popular in Mrs. Thomas Sheridan’s day, and I suppose we can’t really blame her for being a person of her times. After all, she was quite a friend of the monarchs from the start. She contributed generously to the upkeep of their winter groves, and in those days it was considered part of the tradition for her to appear every October – practically until the day she died – up on the widow’s walk to welcome the butterflies as they flew along the shoreline into the peninsula. She always said it was one of her greatest pleasures to see them return year-after-year.” She grabbed my arm suddenly and leaned her head toward mine. “You’re not superstitious by any chance, are you?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t think so.”

“Just last October we had a younger couple staying in the master bedroom, and the woman – not the man, mind you, just the woman – said she was kept awake all night by the sound of footsteps walking back and forth over her head. To me she seemed to be sort of the hysterical type, but on the other hand, this wasn’t the first time such a thing had happened. Those other instances, though, were before my time here.”

“I’d better get our bags,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” she shouted after me as I headed quickly down the hallway toward the door. “It’s always been in early October. Never at this time of the year!”

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By the time I returned with the luggage, Emily was asleep. I made a second trip downstairs for the sandwiches and the tea and carried the tray up to the room. I wanted to ask Emily if she'd taken her medicine, but she was sleeping so soundly, I decided not to awaken her. Eventually, I drank all the tea myself as I skimmed through an 1897 edition of *Captains Courageous* that I'd found in the small bookcase beneath the window. On the flyleaf, written in a florid scroll of purple ink, was the inscription "This is the Property of Violet Sheridan."

I have some recollection that our sleep was unsettled that night, although I don't remember ever being fully awake. But a groan from Emily's side of the bed, in the gray of the early dawn, brought me to a sitting position.

"Emily?" I asked softly, aware that I was up before our travel alarm had rung, and then when she groaned again, I leaned over and saw that her complexion was as pale as the gray light passing through the wooden slats of the window shutters.

I grabbed her hand. "Emily!" I cried, but there was no return pressure, although her palm was warm and I could see her breathing. I dialed the reception desk, but there was no answer, and after quickly slipping on my pants, I hurried downstairs toward the noises that led me into the kitchen.

Mrs. Page and a younger woman were beating eggs and buttering muffin tins. Both were wearing checkered aprons, and Mrs. Page's forearms were dusted with flour.

"Is there anything . . . ?"

"My wife needs a doctor, right away. An ambulance, maybe."

"But the popovers . . ." said the younger woman, and then realizing that this was truly an emergency, she said to Mrs. Page, "Quick, go ahead!"

Mrs. Page, wiping her hands on her apron, led me out to the reception desk.

"Here, here's the number," she said, lifting a sheet of paper laminated in clear plastic, linked to the desk with a brass chain. "I'll take care of it. We've got a paramedic unit in town, and they'll be here in a jiffy. I'll call our doctor, too."

"It's her heart, I think," I said. "She's had heart trouble. . . . Her doctor said she'd be ok," and I didn't know what else to say or what to do.

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“That’s all right,” said Mrs. Page, dialing. “We’ll have someone here in a jiffy,” and as she held the receiver to her ear, waiting for an answer, she asked, “Do you think some tea . . . ?”

“No, no,” I said. “Just the doctor. Quick,” and realizing that there was nothing more I could do there, I ran back up the stairs to Emily.

Her eyes were still closed, and her head seemed to have shrunk deep into the powder-blue pillow. I took her hand, and it was still warm, although it was dry and almost without weight, and then, suddenly, my hand was gripped tightly in hers. Sunlight had begun to flow into the room, the window’s wooden slats separating it into strips of brightness and shadow, and as a blinding stream of light fell across Emily’s eyes, she opened them.

“There!” she said clearly, as if she were wide-awake and calling from somewhere in the middle of the afternoon.

“Emily?” I asked.

“And there. And look, there! Isn’t it wonderful? So much brighter, even more beautiful than before! See, I told you so, didn’t I? You didn’t believe me, but I told you so, didn’t I?”

The doctor arrived only a few minutes later. I could hear him pounding up the stairs, step-by-step. Mrs. Page, her forearms still speckled with flour up to the elbows, followed right behind him, and a siren was approaching from outside. But they were all too late to do anything for her.

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I returned to Pacific Grove the following month, this time staying overnight in the Conference Center. It was late in the season by then, and most of the monarchs had already gone. But there were still a few stragglers remaining, clinging to the wet leaves of the trees in Washington Park, their wings, the color of dry parchment, closed tightly against the cold of that dreary February morning. A few had fallen to the grass, and despite the signs warning against disturbing any of the animals, I would occasionally pick one of them up gently in my hands, and as I warmed them with my breath, they would open their wings across my cupped palms. Usually, their pigment had faded to a dull ochre, not much brighter than the pale underside of their wings. I assumed that these were butterflies incapable of breeding and flying long distances, but I was still heartened when most of them, following a few beats their wings, took flight and ascended back into the pines.

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Still, it was a mistake to return to Pacific Grove, and I knew, as I drove past the Thomas Sheridan House on my way to San Francisco, that I would not be back again. But before many more years pass, I would like to visit the monarch sites in central Mexico. Dana, who tells me she also dreams now and then of huge swarms of butterflies, would also like to see them massed in their winter homes, and she's promised, as soon as my two granddaughters have grown to high-school age, to accompany me there one day. I tell her, though, not to wait too long. After all, I'm not getting any younger, but, even more important, I've heard that several harsh winters have severely reduced the Mexican populations. Moreover, despite conservation efforts, their habitats are being threatened by increased logging, and the people who live in the foothills below the mountains are clearing more and more of the land. But there are still guided tours to several of the sites that are, I understand, neither too strenuous for the traveler nor damaging to the butterflies, and I am confident that at least once in my life I will be able to trek up the mountains to ten thousand feet above sea level, and view the monarchs in all their glory, clustering on the branches and trunks of the trees, millions of them, opening their wings to the sun.

5,100 words

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