THE BUTTERFLY IN AN ELECTROCUTING MOTH GRID
Lok Yiu CHEUNG

CHARACTERS:

CAM — an aspiring (struggling) musician *gender unspecified
ERIN — an office worker, CAM’s roommate *gender unspecified

SETTING:
The balcony in CAM and ERIN’s shared apartment. Upstage is an elevated platform for their balcony. Downstage is the streets of Brooklyn, New York.

(Lights are off. CAM is on the balcony. Humming and the tapping of nails against a metal railing can be heard. The front door unlocks.)

ERIN

(voice muffled and distant)
Cam? You there?

CAM

(calling out in the dark)
I’m out here.

(A small ruckus can be heard offstage as ERIN makes their way around the apartment in the dark, bumping into furniture and overturning stuff on the floor to walk through.)

CAM

Did you sort out Mr. Eduard’s heater?

ERIN

What—?! Oh, yeah I did. (beat) Hey Cam, you don’t have a gig tonight, do you?
CAM

Today’s my day off.

ERIN

Okay, good. I need to talk to you about— why don’t you have any of the lights on?

(Light switch is snapped on. Stage lights flicker on CAM, who is looking up at the sky with their elbows on the railing)

ERIN

There. That’s much better.

CAM

(standing upright)

You were saying…?

ERIN

Do me a favour and call your parents, won’t you? They’re blowing up my phone ‘cuz they can’t get a hold of you.

CAM

You know I’m not in contact with them.

ERIN

It doesn’t change the fact that they’re your parents.

CAM

I wish you wouldn’t talk about things you don’t understand.

(ERIN doesn’t say anything. Seconds later, they let out a yelp and run out to the balcony, looking frightened.)

ERIN

Cameron, why the hell is there a corpse on our table?!

CAM

(grimacing)

The butterfly, you mean? I found it in our moth trap.

ERIN
I don’t care where it’s been! Did you pluck it out?!

CAM

It was still twitching when I got there.

ERIN

(wrinkles their nose)

Gross. What, did you scatter more insect remains around the apartment?

CAM

No.

ERIN

Why did you bother trying to save it?

CAM

It’s not meant to be there in the first place.

ERIN

Butterflies are attracted to light too.

CAM

It’s a moth trap, Erin.

ERIN

So? There’s no sign saying ‘MOTHS ONLY, BUTTERFLIES NO ENTRY’.

CAM

I think it’s a waste of beauty.

ERIN

It’s just another flying pest.

(Lights flicker. Both of them look at the light source, then at each other. ERIN doesn’t break eye contact, but CAM turns their body away.)

ERIN

I thought you said you could pay the bill this week.

CAM
I was going to make it, I swear—

ERIN

You’re three months behind payment.

CAM

I know, I know. I had a hard time making tips this week.

(Beat.)

CAM

(sighing)

I know what you’re going to say, so just save your breath—

ERIN

This isn’t going to cut out! You said you would pick up a gig ‘til you get scouted—four years ago. This can’t go on forever.

CAM

Lucky for you, you don’t have to wait forever. Last night I played my record for a producer at the club and they asked for my contact details. They said they’ll get back to me in a week.

ERIN

And they’re not going to ghost you for two months like last time?

CAM

What’s the matter with you?

ERIN

It’s been four years, Cam.

CAM

(shaking their head)

No, no, this is it. I can feel it. I was brought to the right nightclub at the right time and met the right person that can get me closer to my goal. You wanna know why?

(CAM has a confident smile on their face. ERIN continues to look unamused, fed up with CAM’s false hope—and their own too, which desperately wants the best for them.)

CAM

The blackbird visited me yesterday morning.
ERIN

It visits you every morning. You feed it.

CAM

Yeah, but it was different yesterday. Usually it takes off once I give it a treat, but it came into the apartment and flew circles over my records.

ERIN

I wouldn’t be surprised if it has a nest on the roof.

CAM

I don’t think blackbirds stay in one place for long. Why else would it come back if it didn’t have something for me?

ERIN

(grumbling)

Only took four years of devotion for it to show you a wink of a blessing.

(Beat. CAM catches on that the unpaid bill or the dead butterfly is not the only thing that has warranted ERIN’s frustration.)

CAM

Alright— what’s up with you today?

ERIN

For starters, I thought you finally paid the electricity bill.

CAM

I can make the money back in no time.

ERIN

Second, I was going to ask if you would maybe chip in—

CAM

If I can’t even pay the electricity bill right now, what makes you think I can—

ERIN

This isn’t about me.

(Lights flicker.)
CAM

What is it?

(ERIN struggles to answer, tilting their head towards the sky and blinking back tears.)

ERIN

(taking in a deep breath)

Milan’s gotten worse again.

(Beat. CAM’s heart sinks to the pit of their stomach.)

CAM

(shaking their head in disbelief)

No... Didn’t... Didn’t the doctors say everything was normal? When did they change their minds?

ERIN

They misdiagnosed him at the last checkup we were there for.

(CAM’s expression reveals how long it’s been since the last checkup, and how much MILAN’s health would have worsened.)

I thought that if everyone pitches in a little we could cover the cost for his treatment. Saro and the others are in on it, but we’re a couple hundred dollars short. I was going to ask you to help us.

(But before CAM can react, ERIN breaks down into sobs. CAM adlib words of comfort to soothe them.)

CAM

Don’t cry now, silly, I haven’t even given you an answer. You have nothing to worry about, I-I have money saved up, I can cover the rest of the cost. (swallows) And Milan’s a tough fighter, he’ll be back on his feet in no time, okay?

ERIN

The doctors say they don’t know how much longer he has.

CAM

When we saw him last, Milan was the same as ever. He managed to stay awake and joked around like the drop of sun he is. He’s still a drop of sun, even when his yellow hair is graying. The sickness can’t break his spirit. You can’t... you can’t put it in a cage, it would still beat its paralysed wings against the bars and... and try to escape...
(Beat. A look of horror and realization passes over ERIN’s face.)

ERIN

Oh. My. God.

What does it matter if you think he’s a drop of sun? Do you think it exempts him from suffering? This isn’t the time to be romanticizing this! So what if a hundred butterflies were caught in the moth grid?! How remarkable would they be then if you can’t tell them apart from one another?! The problem doesn’t go away on its own if you pretend it doesn’t exist! He’s dying a slow, agonizing death in a hospital with no loved ones by his side surrounded by a hundred other patients with no hope of recovery, how special is he now?!

(ERIN notices CAM’s eyes straying away towards the sky and becomes furious.)

ERIN

Oh, you can not be serious right now.

(beat. Guilt passes over CAM’s face.)

ERIN

For Christ’s sake, Cam, not all of us can hold out on threads of hope and have time in the world to dream! We’re in our twenties burying a friend who was about to start their first year of university before their life was taken from them and you’re still looking for some sign from the universe?!

I’m begging you to please get a grip on yourself and let go of it already— what is the bird gonna do for Milan, huh?! Carry God’s miracle in its beak to our window?!

CAM

No! No I can’t let go of it, okay?! I’ll get another job, I’ll pay for Milan’s treatment, just let me have this one thing to myself—

ERIN

Why?! Why not? What has it ever done for you?!

CAM

Don’t you get it?! It can’t mean nothing because — ‘cuz that means I mean nothing. Because four years ago I ran away thinking I had a calling in life, and now I’ve amounted to nothing. I don’t have a purpose, I don’t matter, and I can’t— I can’t have thrown my life away and sealed my fate.

How am I supposed to accept the fact that they were right, that I’m all they said I’d be and even less? How could I continue to live with the crushing realization that my life is entirely worthless, with people in my life pitying me and watching me waste the latter half of it trying to fill up the void it left me?
So maybe you were right. Maybe I should have pulled myself together and settled down with a proper job when I failed the first time. Maybe my ambition did swallow me whole and spit me back up alive—but I can’t go back now.

What purpose do I have now, if I’m not chasing after this dream, running headfirst to an unfathomable destination?! What would I be left with if I gave up on trying to search for it now?!

(Lights flicker. There’s a long pause between them, CAM is sobbing and trying to catch their breath, hiding their face in their hands. ERIN moves closer in an attempt to comfort them.)

ERIN

Cam—

CAM

Don’t.

ERIN

I’m sorry.

CAM

There’s nothing to be sorry about.

(ERIN wraps an arm over their shoulder. CAM takes deep breaths until they recompose themselves)

ERIN

We should go visit Milan.

CAM

Yeah, sure. Can you do Thursday?

ERIN

No, I have to work on a proposal.

CAM

I couldn’t do Thursday anyway. How about next Wednesday?

ERIN

Department meeting.

CAM

(wincing)

The week after the seventeenth?
ERIN
I have my presentation that week. What about the last week of the month?

CAM
The club’s holding a discount all week and an improv contest. It’s the best time for tips.

(Beat.)

ERIN
Guess we’ll visit him next month.

(Beat. *The unutterable worry hangs over their heads— ‘Will Milan make it to next month?’*)

CAM
A doctor told me that these days medical research is better than it’s ever been. They were at the club the other night. They said they’ll find a cure in no time. The only thing we should be praying for is that the medical bill doesn’t put him in crippling debt for the rest of his life.

(ERIN cracks a smile.)

ERIN
I do hope the producer gets back to you.

CAM
Thanks.

ERIN
It’d be nice to move out of this apartment.

CAM
(laughing)

Hell yeah, man.

(Beat)

CAM
I’m sorry about leaving the dead butterfly on the table. I’ll get rid of it.

ERIN

Are you going to come inside?

CAM

I’ll have a smoke first.

ERIN

Okay.

(ERIN steps off the balcony and exits the stage.)

(CAM pulls out a pack of cigarettes from their pocket. As they are lighting the cigarette, their eyes fall upon something lying in the center of the stage. The cigarette catches fire, but CAM lowers it from their mouth before they take a drag.

The blackbird lies dead in the middle of the road. Ran over by a car. There comes a long, faint buzzing noise. Lights flicker.

Their electricity is cut. Blackout.)