

## BUTTERFLIES

By

Clifton Lee Gibson

Next in line, I waited my turn to punch the heavy bag hanging on a yard filled with pinch-faced killers. I shuffled my feet in place, “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee”; through my head, this singsong cadence bobbed and weaved.

Nineteen ninety-seven, B-Yard, Corcoran’s maximum security state prison was the setting of the debut of my anticipated impersonation of the greatest fighter of all time. Sentenced to life without parole, condemned to die in prison and I was only twenty years old. Razor wire, electric fences, and gun barrels surrounded me, all put in place to ensure that society’s sentences stuck. There were over 800 tattooed laden thugs milling about, pushing forward an aura of anger and violence, and secretly dragging around fear and pain. To say I was scared and naïve would be an understatement.

Preparation for my Mohammed Ali impersonation was shattered when a Hispanic tattooed blur brushed past me. Clutched in his retribution-delivering hand was razor blades melted into plastic. Without warning or notice he viciously slashed the throat of another wannabe boxer punching the heavy bag of past regrets. I stood frozen in place, wide-eyed and dumbfounded as the assailant calmly walked away. As he watched his attacker retreat into the herd of hardened prisoners, oozing blood blanketed the life map of tattoos littering his body. He

struggled out of his boxing gloves, peeled off a sock, and wrapped it around his wounded neck. Tossing me the gloves, he said “Your next youngster” and walked towards the nurse’s office. I dropped the gloves and any idea of being a bee. Instead, I floated like a butterfly away from the scene as an alarm announced with a shrill for everyone to freeze and prone out, face down. Lying there, head resembling a cobra, eyes the size of saucers, I surveyed the pitiless pit of people joking, laughing or squirming in place seemingly annoyed at the inconvenience. Meanwhile my heart sounded like a stampede of horses thundering in my chest circling my rib cage. How did I get to a place in my life where this was my new normal?

My name is Clifton Lee Gibson, 39 years old, born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and birthed to a poverty-stricken, dysfunctional, violent family of seven. With a younger sister not far behind, we made nine. We solved our disagreements through arguments or fistfights-- to the victor goes the truth. We lived in a wooded area just outside my birthplace. I would turn gullies and ditches into castles and forts. I ruled lizards, snakes, frogs, and other creepy crawlies with an iron fist; after all, might was right. I fantasized about winning my arguments while mentally re-writing history. A bored sibling often invaded my refuge and delusions and fragile truces would ensue. We played a lot and found a precarious balance between beat downs and buddies.

Life took a tragic and drastic change when our sole breadwinner, my father, was murdered. Devastated, destitute and with the soul of our family gone, life took on a new meaning and any semblance of safety became a fantasy. As if the murder of my father was not enough, a tornado ripped through our small town, destroying our house. Punch drunk and reeling, we stuffed our feelings, packed up our belongings and moved to California.

I looked, spoke, and dressed differently than the other kids. Instead of distinguishing me, my differences’ became my self-deprecating downfall. I felt unloved, worthless, and less than.

Arguments and fights were my salve, whereas the suppression of my painful emotions became my salvation. I was under rule at home by bully brothers and ostracized at school by my classmates. Awkward, angry, and socially stunted, I turned playgrounds into mosh pits. The merry-go-round would come down with cooties when I used it and my teeter-totter rarely left the ground. Free lunch was embarrassingly anything but free. I often sat alone and felt every fit of background laughter was directed towards me. Wanting others to share in my misery, I developed a sarcastic wit and shocking behavior. Eventually I attracted other trauma-bearing children and gained a pseudo-silver of self-esteem. However, my buddies became painful memories as I moved from town to town, seemingly every year or so.

I developed into a hurt, angry impulsive, violent, drug-addicted criminal. I smoked cigarettes and weed from the age of seven to seventeen. I selfishly stole stuff in order to buy weed or abate my jealousy of not having things that the other kids had. I felt material things would bring me love and acceptance. The marijuana numbed my emotions and suppressed healthy mental growth. I lived a life outside the norm and the law. I choose to stay in a cycle of negativity. My feelings churned, thoughts spun and beliefs swirled into words and actions cementing a tragic destiny filled with tragedy. With an inner cauldron bubbling, I became morally broke with corrupted principles spearheading my choices. My life and choices spiraled out of control until one night; senselessly I shot and killed an innocent man.

Nothing could have prepared me for the guilt and shame that I experienced for my evil deeds. My soul was soiled, my spirit stained, and I hated myself for causing so much suffering and pain. Knowing I was responsible for the death of another human, I felt like the lowest creature on earth. I sat huddled in a garage when I learned definitively that Armen was dead.

Regret and remorse erupted from my heart and poured from my eyes. In that moment, every bad deed and awful choice littered my face with tears as my conscience became conscious.

From the ages of 17 to 20, I went from juvenile hall, to county jail, to a level four maximum-security prison. Reality sank in. I challenged my negative beliefs. The process of re-establishing contact with my inner-child and core-self began. My stained spirit and soiled soul began emitting a beacon, beckoning in and taking hold of kindness, compassion, and love. I found new role models in books and principles in paperbacks. I was restructuring my life and reforming myself. I stopped subscribing to negative thoughts and hanging with negative people, in a prison world of outlaws. I was still fragile in my new stance of a positive self-image. I needed to mature and develop courage, so I immersed myself in education and avoided ignorant-minded people.

Eleven years into my sentence, I ended up at the state prison in Lancaster. Eleven years of witnessing institutional violence and the constant threat of riots replaced by the Honor Yard and inmates on the honor roll. It should not be underscored the comparisons between California's normal prisons and the Honor Yard. I was accustomed to guys wearing mean mugs and snarls, daring me to say something, but the anger and venom changed to smiles and handshakes, asking me if I needed anything. It was a bizarro world from what I was accustomed. I went from avoiding eye contact by bowing my head, to tears tumbling down my face in rooms full of men. Self-help classes and books became my conduit to insight and transformation. They lit the darkness within so I could sift through the muck in which I was stuck. I tackled the unresolved traumas that were perpetuating my feelings of depression. A big help was openly talking to groups of honorable men who also made bad choices that they openly regretted. I learned, grew, and developed my inner child into a kind, caring and helpful man. I turned my

negative mindset over to positivity. I wanted to make this world a better place and it begins with me not subscribing to ‘stinging like a bee.’ I now talk the talk of positivity and walk the walk of productivity.

This led me to having the confidence to pursue a higher education. I enrolled in college seeking a degree in Behavioral Sciences in hopes that it would assist me in reaching at-risk youth. Voraciously my seemingly awakened insatiable appetite for higher learning devoured semester after semester. My comprehension and understanding of the world and myself grew even more. Believing in the power of education, Professor Roy Bindhan and California State University Los Angeles stepped up and took a chance. Together they doggedly pushed policy and made it possible for a class of Lifers to earn a Bachelor’s degree. I am proud to be currently sharing the road to transformation with others. A road that continues to get more and more crowded with butterflies. The connections I have made during my transformation have solidified my purpose in life of being the change I wish to see in the world.

Lastly, on 11-16-2012, within Lancaster’s education department and four days before his birthday, I met Joel. Atrocious choices, Senate Bill 9 and a love for education brought us together in this prison concrete cocoon. Eventually, over the next three years, we became inseparable. We worked out, walked in circles, and floated effortlessly in and out of superficial or deep philosophical conversations. Kind caring and patient, Joel would ask thought provoking questions testing my stance on life’s issues. Lap after lap, as if two tethered caterpillars suspended in animation we spun in unity. A comfort and strength grew between us. Often times we would just stroll, not saying a word, time stretching before us dreaming of things to come; Vin Scully regaling me in my ear buds while Joel had Muse, or some top forty, inspiring his next writing. We were around each other so much people would tease that we were married. Joel,

never one to let an opportunity pass, affectionately started calling me Lil Mama. He would laugh as my crimson cheeks, lit up my mirthful eyes, filled with love.

When he paroled it was one of the best and worst days of my adult life. Suddenly, my friend and confidant was gone but not forgotten. For days after, I would walk laps by myself pushing aside my sadness while wishing him well. I imagined his paroling was like releasing a butterfly from a concrete cocoon. Fluttering about, seeking his path, and allowing the world to see the beauty that lived within. Maybe I will start calling him 'Butterfly' and watch his rose-colored cheeks light up deep, soulful brown pits that sparkle with life's second chance. I still get a little melancholy when I think of our separation. There are nights that I need a friend, his image comes to mind, mentally I walk those laps once again, and my eyes fill with tears. He has brought so much to my life and continues to bring more. Butterfly has met a jewel of a person and they both continue to enrich my life with insightful treasures.

For me, it is important to have healthy minded people in my life. They helped me through the mire that I wallowed in and encouraged positivity. My change attracted many supporters: From Elizabeth, Loyola's' JIFS clinic, Efty, Sean, Elisa, Chris, Michael, Will, Jarrett, Allen, Dortell, Jamal, family, and many more now and in between. The kindness, patience, and encouragement to be better and do better has completed my personal aura of love. I believe everyone in prison would benefit from positive re-enforcements. I personally needed someone positive to believe in me. Life became worth living again and I owe that to those that believe in me. Now I live in honor of those that I harmed, love and those that need someone to believe in them. I feel that everyone who has succumbed to a stupor of negative thoughts or behavior is as a caterpillar trapped in a cocoon. They need a little help with chipping away the inner muck that has them stuck so they may emerge as the beautiful butterfly that lives within them.