

JOANNE FOX

Flirting with Nuns

That summer, butterflies invaded every corner of Thea's world. Their silvery wings clanged on the wind chime in the flowering cherry. Dad said Mom could have hung up a bunch of saucepan lids and saved the expense. In the bedroom Thea shared with Belle, furry butterfly bodies slumbered across the twin quilts. And, on a Friday bristling with thunder, painted butterflies hitched a ride on the pink suitcase when the girl's mother took flight.

Thea saw tears in her goodbye smile. It shocked her - as if she'd found a shard of ice in a defrosted strawberry.

Mom stroked each bob of hair. Thea's, blonde and smooth. Belle's, dark and tangled, the face it framed raw with crying. "Be good for Daddy, won't you? Take care of each other. I'll be home on Sunday."

Then she tore herself from them swiftly, like a plaster. Mom didn't want to be clung to, guessed Thea, gripping Belle's small, sticky hand. No, what she wanted was two whole days of silence. To Thea that seemed a punishment. But Mom said it was called a Retreat.

While Dad battled with Belle's outrage, Thea fetched the dictionary from the desk in the tiny box room. It said Retreat meant withdrawing from an enemy. And she wondered what she'd done to make Mom back away from her this way.

Just last week she'd glimpsed Mom wrench Dad's jacket from the wardrobe hard enough to sever the metal hook from the wooden coathanger. Left behind on the rail, it swung a forlorn tick-tock.

"Mom, can Chloe come for tea?"

Mom knocked her elbow on the wardrobe door. "Oh - Thea! I didn't hear you." She pursed her lips at the receipt she'd found in Dad's pocket. "Let me call her mother. All right?"

"Can't I call Chloe?"

"Umm, no, I'll do it," said Mom, light but firm, her eyes not quite meeting Thea's.

Normally she'd have offered cupcakes and games if Thea wanted to invite a school friend home. But nothing had seemed normal since Dad's latest business trip. Thea wondered if the receipt was for the presents he'd brought back for them. A new piano book for Thea; Raggy Donkey for Belle.

Already Belle carted Raggy Donkey everywhere. Right now she had him locked beneath her arm, watching cartoons, while Dad popped corn in the microwave.

Thea lifted the dictionary up to him. “Are we the enemy?”

His blue, bothered gaze sought hers. “No, angel. Here, let me see. It’s not always the first thing you read in a dictionary that’s what you need to know.” He ran his finger down the page. Dad did everything slowly as if he’d thought a lot about it. Whereas Mom always seemed to be hurtling in three directions at once.

“Look. Retreat can also mean a peaceful, secluded place. That’s where your Mom is. An old house in the hills, with a stream running by it, and woods to walk in.” He bent towards her with a sad smile. “When we were at University she’d go every summer. I used to tease her about it. Not to be nasty. Only because I didn’t understand the attraction. No phones. No T.V. No talking.”

Thea pictured the naughty kids in school, glowering at the teacher who had split them from their chatty friends. “Has Mom been naughty?”

The microwave pinged. Dad stood to open it. “No. No, of course not. And I’m sure the nuns are very kind.”

Nuns? No-one mentioned nuns before. Thea turned to the letter N. Read about poverty and prayer. If nuns were poor, maybe that was why Mom left her jewellery in the terracotta pot by the sink. Her engagement ring sulked there each time she washed up. But now her wedding ring had joined it too.

Thea sat at the piano, finding order in the cheerful scale of C Major. Fat raindrops accompanied her on the windowpane. The rain had been squally all day, as if it was building up the energy for something. And in the garden, the jangle of the wind chimes grew louder. There were five butterflies. One for each of them, Mom said, including the cat. The tune was pretty, when the breeze was light. But not on nights like this.

When the hall telephone rang, Thea thought for a second it must be Mom, with her usual funny question about who whistled up the wind. Then she remembered phones weren’t allowed in the Retreat, so it couldn’t be.

“I told you not to call here again,” she heard Dad hiss.

By bedtime the gale was barrelling round the house. Thea cast off the quilt and tugged it back a dozen times. Too hot. Too cold.

“Move up,” said Belle, abandoning her own bed.

“Oh, Belle. Don’t push. Not Raggy Donkey too. There’s no space.”

And then hotter still, with Belle curled in against her. Even the cat was pacing, shut in from the storm.

Thea imagined the room of her own she’d been promised. They just had to earn enough money, Mom said, so they could afford a larger place. With Dad doing all this extra work for Simon, his old University friend, surely they could

move soon.

The trouble was, Dad was away so often. Already he'd missed Thea's first proper school concert. And when Mom needed a wisdom tooth out, Chloe's mother drove her home from the dentist because Dad was too busy.

Thea wondered if the long awaited house would ever be worth it. Mostly sharing with Belle wasn't so bad. Belle's shuffles and snores could be a comfort when Thea tossed sleepless, listening to the ebb and flow of arguments downstairs. And if Thea played the brave big sister, she could convince herself as well as Belle that they were safe from anything bad.

Her own room, though. She still liked to dream of it. Curtains the colour of the sea. Walls painted with sky and clouds. No creepy crawly butterflies anywhere.

"I want Mom," whimpered Belle, as a flash of lightning ripped into the night.

"We have to count for the thunder," said Thea. "One, two, three..."

"I want Mom," wailed Belle louder.

Dad came in and clicked on the lamp, making them blink. "I bet your Mom's listening to this storm and thinking of you. Bet she's sending you her love on the wind." He pretended to pluck something from the air, and then opened his palm to show them. "See? Here it is!"

Belle gazed, delighted, at his empty hand. But Thea wasn't fooled.

"Can you have a storm in a Retreat?" she asked. It seemed at odds with what she'd learned so far.

"Well, yes, Thea. I suppose you can." Dad gathered up the quilts. "Come on. Let's camp out in the lounge until it's over."

They trooped down. Dad unfolded the sofa bed. He set up the dining chairs around it with a sheet across for a tent, and went to make hot chocolate.

"Mom puts marshmallows on top," whined Belle when it was ready.

Thea saw weariness drag at Dad's face. "I'll get them," she said.

From the kitchen, the wind chime's jagged symphony sounded even angrier.

It reminded Thea of when the music teacher gave out percussion instruments and everyone hammered along in chaos. Her classmates loved it. Especially the boys. While they banged and crashed, she tapped ever lighter on the triangle, squirming at the din.

Those butterflies set her ears on edge. No wonder Mom had left home, with that noise and Belle's tantrums and Dad's secrets. She couldn't stand it another minute. She took the long kitchen scissors out of the drawer.

The gale snatched the back door from her as she stepped down onto the path. A rare, blind fury pushed her towards the butterflies, thrashing in the teeth of the wind.

“Stop it,” she yelled, snapping the scissors wildly. “Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.”

A fork of lightning lit up the swing Dad built, the arch of it heavy with honeysuckle. Silver wings landed in the mud as thunder cursed overhead.

“Thea!”

She felt herself scooped up off her feet. In a few strides Dad bundled her back indoors and shook her by the shoulders.

“Don’t you know how dangerous that was?”

“Mom wants peace and quiet,” Thea burst out, shocked to discover she was crying. Great, huge sobs that sounded more like her sister’s. She hadn’t known they were hiding inside her. “Mom will never come back with all this!”

“Of course she will. Your mother would never leave you girls.” When he hugged her, Thea felt him shaking. And she’d thought she was the scared one.

“But she took the biggest suitcase. And she never laughs the way she used to. And she doesn’t listen properly when I play the piano any more. She’s somewhere else in her head.”

Dad broke away and looked at her. Thea saw her dressing gown had left damp patches over his crumpled white T shirt. “Listen. Life’s been a bit crazy lately. And you know your Mom’s so busy. She just needs some time, Thea. Needs to have a break from everything. But she’ll come back on Sunday. I promise you. Ok?”

She nodded. Although she tried to pretend, what stuck in her mind was the way Chloe hadn’t come to tea that day last week. After Mom phoned Chloe’s house, she’d told her that Chloe and her mother had gone to live with relatives. Mom seemed kind of unnerved. And Thea wondered if Chloe would ever again giggle beside her on the way to school.

Who would she live with, Thea asked herself, if Mom and Dad split up? Dad, who always moved to the outside of the pavement, even though he had to do a clumsy dance when they crossed the road. Dad, who ate the white from Belle’s boiled egg when Mom wasn’t looking. Or Mom, who would throw a party for the cat’s birthday, and conjure up stories in silly accents if anyone showed a trace of boredom.

Next morning Thea woke on the sofa in a tangle of quilts, cushions and birdsong. She left Belle sleeping, and went to the kitchen.

Unshaven and rumped, Dad had the sewing box on the table. He was threading silver butterflies into a cat’s cradle of loops and knots with a big

darning needle.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Thea, leaning against him.

“No problem. See? Good as new.” He held up the wreckage.

Keys creaked in the front door. Mom tiptoed in, almost as though she was afraid of what she’d find. Her face was paler than when she had the wisdom tooth out.

Thea threw herself at her. Breathed in the familiar scent of roses. “Mom! You’re a day early!”

“No, poppet. I should have been here last night. Forgive me?”

“I’ll wake Belle up.”

“Let her sleep.” Mom’s glance took in the pile of washing, the chocolate stained mugs by the sink, the ruined wind chime. “Looks like you’ve had quite a time of it.”

She should leave them to make up, Thea thought, when Mom let her go at last. She stole away to the lounge, leaving the door ajar to make sure Mom was truly home.

“The minute I got there, I knew I was in the wrong place,” Mom said, muffled in Dad’s arms. “But once the storm blew up, I was stuck.”

“What happened to figuring out what you wanted?” came Dad’s voice, gruff but glad.

“It was always you I wanted. You and the girls. Nothing happened. I was just flattered, I guess. I don’t know what I was thinking of.”

“Were you that bored with me?”

“Just lonely.” Her voice cracked. “And selfish. You were always the grown-up one. Confronting things, while I looked for distractions. Haven’t quite shaken off my old habits, have I. Running off from problems. Flirting with the nuns, as you used to say. Suddenly I realised I could lose everything.”

Then there was the chink of metal against the terracotta pot. Next time she saw those rings, Thea just knew they’d be back on Mom’s finger.

“We won’t be hearing from Simon again,” Dad said. “Neither of us.”

Thea inched beneath the quilt. If they’d fallen out with Simon, Dad would be home more. She would watch over her sister’s dreams forever, she thought. Just as long as her family could be together. Five of them, including the cat.

Joanne Fox has been writing stories since her schooldays in Derby. However, it has only become a serious obsession since she left mental health nursing in 2006. She likes to try out a range of subjects and styles. Some of her stories have been published in women's magazines, and she has had successes in competitions such as the Frome Festival. She now lives with her husband and Golden Retriever in the West Midlands, where she enjoys help and encouragement from her local writers' group. Currently she is working towards a themed collection of short stories.