

NANCY SPRINGER

CHASING BUTTERFLY SHADOW

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"Chasing Butterfly Shadow" is the first of two stories we have from novelist Nancy Springer. Nancy has published nearly two dozen novels, and countless short stories. She has won a Joan Fassler Memorial Book award for her children's book, *Colt*. About this story, she writes, "In my experience, very old people, like very young children, are cognitive aliens to the rest of us. I think this is not because they are 'losing it' but because they are on their way out a here, one foot in another world. 'Chasing Butterfly Shadow' is my attempt to depict a very old woman's different view of everyday experience."

When Nona goes out to get the mail, she takes the new dog with her, letting him run. He is a little thing, a sheltie, not a Lassie look-alike but just another brown hairy, oblong, jaws worthy of a moray eel at one end, tail out of control at the other. Because of his plenitude of fur he appears cute, but when the people from the cinder-block church on the highway came knocking last night he turned all teeth and snarl. Nona held him back by the collar and let him speak for her. After the tract pushers went away she said, "Your mama raised you right, dog," and patted him and smiled for an hour. She has never liked tract pushers, trying to shove their religion down everybody's throat

The mail is waiting in the box out by the road, a quarter-mile away. It will take Nona an hour to get there and back, but she does not mind. She has stayed thin and healthy, and she looks forward to the walk. That sort of thing is what keeps you going when you are ninety-five years old.

In the sandy front yard, between the twin palmettos, the big azalea bush is in full coral-pink bloom. Nona slowfoots toward it. The dog, who does not care about azaleas, busies himself sending a squirrel back where it belongs, to the perpetual twilight of the pine forest behind the house. But Nona peers ahead, perceiving an aureole of movement around the azalea and intimations of blue and yellow amid its glory of pink. When she reaches it she comprehends: the azalea is alive with butterflies, dozens of them.

"Dog, you got to see this!" Nona calls.

He comes running. Nona's son Bill did not want her to get another dog because of the expense, but when her friend Maisie called her from the pound and told her this one was going begging, she wasn't about to say no. It is Billy's problem if he worries too much about money. Her husband was the same way when he was alive, and that is why he paid the piper before he had to, she is sure of it. The man was penny wise and pound foolish. He let money run his life, never understanding there were things above and beyond.

Nona stands by the azalea studying the butterflies coming and nursing on it and going away again, the Yellow Swallowtails and Red Admirals and others she doesn't know, one kind velvet black with a blue fringe, another sort tawny with white leopard spots. The dog bounces up to her, then rears like a pony with excitement. In the strong Florida sunshine, shadows of butterflies on the wing scud sharp and dark across the sand. The dog pounces on a flitting shadow with both forepaws, then jumps after it as it glides on, unaffected. His series of leaps follow the butterfly shadow across the yard until he loses it in the shade under the huge gray-mossed oak tree.

"Here!" Nona complains. "You never saw what I called you for."

He runs panting back to her, but immediately finds another shadow to chase, Pogo-stick fashion, across the yard. His spring-loaded zigzags make him appear more like a wind-up toy than the watchdog he is. Nona shakes her head at him.

"It ain't like that's a mouse or a rat," she tells him. "How would you even know if you caught it? It ain't real."

It is real enough to satisfy him. Nona walks on, heading toward her mailbox, but the dog remains behind, intent on chasing butterfly shadows.

The walk is long and slow but not hard. Most of the time Nona's lane lies under pine forest, so she is not out in the heat and glare. At the roadside, though, the sun beats down. Back in her yard, now, it will be making the azalea blaze like fire, like the burning bush of Moses, and the butterflies will be going up like sparks into the sky. Nona has trouble with the catch on the mailbox, but eventually conquers it. The contents are worth her effort: a Fingerhut catalog, a Carol Wright coupon packet, and a bright red-white-and-blue envelope that declares, "You Have Been Selected for Grand Prize Eligibility." When Nona's daughter, Lois, gets the mail, there is never anything good in it, just bills. Nona suspects that Lois sorts out the interesting things and hides them under her car seat before she drives back up the lane. She has never asked, and certainly she will not go open Lois's car and look, but she feels sure this is true. There has been no good mail since the day the Visa bill came and Lois saw it and was aghast and cried out like somebody snakebit.

"Six thousand dollars, Mother!"

"It is just money," Nona said.

"Just money! Why, Mother, don't you realize, you could be paying on that forever and never get anywhere!"

Nona does not care. "Forever" takes on a different meaning when you are ninety-five, when each day is a pearl strung on a necklace that has its ends way out of sight, up in eternity somewhere.

Anyway, Lois is away today, and Nona has gotten the mail by herself, and feels exalted. She walks back to the house, taking her time, watching the little longtailed garter-striped lizards whisk off the sunny spots in the lane and out of her way. When she gets home, clouds have come out of somewhere and covered the sun. No more butterfly shadows. The dog is sitting by her front door like a locked-out child.

Nona lets him in, lays her mail on the kitchen table to be enjoyed over lunch, and finds the big butterfly book. It is getting old, like her. Its green cloth cover is frayed, but its color plates are as bright as ever. She opens it and almost immediately identifies the leopard-spotted butterfly as a Gulf Fritillary, but then forgets to look up the elegant black one with blue borders.

Her researches stray to the tropical butterflies with their iridescent colors, their strangely shaped wings. There are pictures of butterflies from Burma, Paraguay, the Solomon Islands, the Ivory Coast, Ceylon. Faraway places.

She will clear the owl figurines off the mantel, she decides. Owls are not so wise. Probably they worry about money. She will give the owls away, and start collecting porcelain butterflies, if there is such a thing. Perhaps the Franklin

Mint has something. It does not have to be the actual butterflies. It can be butterfly vases, or mugs, or prints.

Not quite accidentally Nona leaves the butterfly book lying out and open. She is

feeling just a little weightless, lightheaded -- it must be time for something.

Lunch, that's what. Lunch, and her mail. She makes her way into the kitchen, where she microwaves herself Cup-A-Soup. When she sits, the dog lies at her feet

and does not pester to be fed. He has good manners. Strange that such a nice dog

should end up at the pound.

As Nona eats she opens the brightly colored envelope, looks at its brochure--turquoise-blue Caribbean seas, an Aztec festival in Mexico--and sends off her Grand Prize Entry at once, sticking her tokens on squares that say "Five-Piece Cordovan Luggage Set" and "World of Wonders Encyclopedia" and putting the cost on her MasterCard, since the last time she tried to use the Visa she was told it

was full. She seals the envelope and stamps it from the postage supply she keeps

on the table right along with the sugar. The great-grandchildren are coming over

this afternoon, and they will be glad to mail it for her and not tattle to the adults.

She opens the lovely parcel-brown Carol Wright envelope and looks through the offers. A 1248 Piece Personalized Stationery Set, only \$7.95. Nona has never understood why they call it that, stationery. It's like writing letters means you're not going anywhere. Limited Edition Endangered Species Decorator Plates--

they are nice, but they are not butterflies. She is looking for butterflies. Lose Weight Overnight Vitamin E Nighttime Diet--she does not need that, she has

always been thin enough to blow away. Cascade Dishwashing Detergent For Spotless

Dishes Sweepstakes She is just about to read the Easy Directions, Enter Now, No Purchase Required, when she sees on the next page: Breakthrough In Technology! Indoor TV Dish Antenna, only \$19.95.

Now that is something worthwhile. When she was a youngster, which somehow seems closer all the time instead of farther away, the only way to go anywhere was by horse and buggy, Heaven was the half-day trip to the county seat for the Fourth of July, and all the glory was yet to come, the automobiles and paved roads, radio and television, the great airships, trips into space. But now they can bounce signals off artificial stars-- at least they look like wandering stars overhead at night, because she saw one once, Bill showed her, and that was what it was like, a spark of light moving through the sky. And now they can send brightwing pictures from the far side of the world straight to her house. She wants to be linked to the stars and the sky, part of whatever is big and far away. At once she writes out a check, seals and stamps its envelope and puts it in the napkin holder with the other.

Billy will be coming soon to drop off his grandchildren. She will have to look at the Fingerhut catalog later. For now, she slides it under the corduroy seat cushion of a kitchen chair, where nobody is likely to notice it.

She hears the station wagon drive in. The dog jumps up. "Now, you don't have to bark," she tells him. "These people are family."

He barks a little anyhow, but not the way he did at the tract pushers yesterday. Bill walks past him with a sour look, but the children become loud and happy.

"What's his name?"

"Grammaw, can we walk him?"

She makes them wait till Bill is gone, then gives them the letters to mail. They go off with the dog on a leash, as she is not sure he will come when they call him if he gets distracted in the woods, and he might not know his way home yet. Next time they can let him run. Nona doesn't like to keep a dog in a pen or on a leash or a chain. Things were meant to be free.

"Hey, Gram." It is the oldest one, the teenager, who has stayed behind to separate himself from the little kids. "Did you hear the one about the dyslexic atheist? He didn't believe in Dog."

"That's not nice," she tells him. In fact she does not understand his joke, but she would not have laughed anyway. Seems like she's on a different wavelength than most people these days. Hardly anything anybody can say makes her laugh aloud anymore.

She puts the teenager to work packing away porcelain owls. He is still

grumpily

at it when the other children get back, their bluejay voices flying in the windows long before they come in the door.

"Grammaw, this dog is stupid!"

"Grammaw, you know what your new dog did? He tried to fight Bubba!"

She hardly listens to the details of the encounter with a neighbor's Doberman pinscher, of how the children had to drag the sheltie away so he would not get himself hurt.

"He's not stupid," she tells them stiffly when they are done. "He's just full of piss and vinegar."

"He acts dumb! He wants to chase cars."

"He wants to chase everything!"

The dog, freed from the leash and stimulated by the commotion, demonstrates by whirling after his own wayward tail. The children laugh, but Nona cuts them short.

"Go look at my azalea," she tells them. "It's loaded with butterflies."

They run out, and so does the dog. The sky is still clouded over, but in a few moments it clears, the sun starts to shine again, and Nona hears the children shouting "Grammaw! Come out, you got to see this!"

"I know what he's doing," she mutters into a box of owls. "He's chasing shadows."

"Grammaw! You sure this dog came complete with a brain?"

"Yeah! Maybe he was Some Assembly Required --"

"-- and they forgot to put one in."

Suddenly the dog starts to bark as if the tract pushers are coming back again, and Nona gets up from her owl packing and goes out as quickly as she can, which

is not very, not at her age. But the children have things well in hand. One of them is holding the dog by the collar, and he is snarling and Lois is there, getting out of her cute little car. It is no wonder the dog is raging at her. There is anger all around her like a dark halo. She carries two envelopes in her hand.

"Mother," she says, "what in the world are you thinking of? After all you've spent already. What do I have to say to make you listen? You've gone through everything Daddy left you. Bill and I are not made of money. How do you expect us ever to pay off the charges you're running up?"

Lois has hardly raised her voice, and she does not swear, not ever. Nona raised her right. But she is scolding her mother in front of the children, and she has never done that before.

Nona keeps her head up. "Those envelopes are supposed to be in the mail," she tells her daughter. "What are you doing taking mail out of my mailbox?"

"I thought I'd stop on my way home and bring you your mail, that's what. And then I find these. Mother, you just can't. Don't you remember all the so-called prizes you've sent for already? Hundreds of dollars wasted. Thousands, by the time we get done paying." She holds up the other envelope. "And what's this for?"

"An indoor TV antenna." That isn't quite accurate, and doesn't begin to do justice to the glory of the thing, but Nona is rattled. The way the dog is carrying on shows how furious Lois really is. Nona never realized before.

Lois cries, "A TV antenna? What possessed you? You have a perfectly good antenna already."

"Oh, rip them up if you want," Nona says, jerking her chin at the envelopes. "It doesn't matter." This is probably true. In the long view, the sky view, it probably does not matter at all.

"It matters that you-- would somebody please get that dog out of here?" Lois waits until the children comply, taking refuge in the house. Then she goes on more quietly. "It matters that you don't seem to understand, and about your situation. Mother, I don't know what to do with you. You're healthy, I know you want to keep living in your own home, but how can you if. . . . How in Heaven's name can you be so sharp about everything else and so dense about money?"

She sails into the house, calls Bill, arranges to take the children home to save him a trip. "I will pick up your mail tomorrow," she tells Nona as she leaves. After everyone is gone, Nona hears the silence ringing like great soundless bells.

She ought to put the owls back on the mantel, but does not. Instead she speaks to the dog, who waggles his ears attentively at her. Lord only knows what he is thinking, but that doesn't mean he is dumb. It is just that his thoughts run in ways that are strange to her. "You are not stupid," she tells him. "Don't listen to them."

The house seems dark and small to Nona. She goes outside for a little walk, taking the dog with her. He darts straight to the azalea bush, and much more slowly she follows.

It is getting late in the day. The sun is low, the butterflies are sated, they fly sluggishly if at all, and their shadows on the sand are dim. One hazy skimming shape goes past; the dog pounces on it and springs after it a short distance, then comes back. He stands with ears quivering and pricked so high they nearly touch, waiting for another. The azalea bush glows like sunset, and the butterflies rest in its cloudy softness, slowly fanning their delectable wings. They are southern ladies in church, Nona decides, souls rocking in the bosom of Abraham.

The dog waits. No shadows skitter across the sand. Time passes, minutes collecting on God's necklace. The dog barks impatiently, then springs. Straight

at a swallowtail on a lower branch he launches himself, snapping with those piss-and-vinegar jaws of his, jumping it to make it fly.

Nona does not mind that he then chases the shadow instead of the thing itself. She is laughing out loud, and trying to leap into the air with her ancient, healthy body, and clapping her hands like the noisy clapping wings of a dove, because her dog is wise as angels. He knows. He knows what is real. He knows where the stars wander, he knows the color of glory, he knows how to qualify for the grand prize. He knows that above the butterfly shadow flies the butterfly.