

Mrs. Butterworth



Every supermarket decision has a family memory connected to it. You'd never expect a package of spaghetti or a can of creamed corn to leave you crying in the aisle at the store.

Excerpt from Charlie Walton's book, *When There Are No Words*.

Every parent who has lost a child knows these words to be true. Whether it is baby food or a toddler's newly discovered favorite, junk food for teenagers or an adult child's old time favorite, the grocery store can be a tough trip.

I lost my son, Stephen, when he was eighteen, so it was the junk food - potato chips, Funyuns, French bread for pizzas, Ragu sauce, pepperoni, Cheetos, cheesebread, cereal of all kinds, Chex mix and so on that haunted me and made me not want to grocery shop. But – it was the golden face of Mrs. Butterworth that brought me to my knees.

As I stared in horror at her face, I remembered sticky little handprints on the wall when the highchair had been just a little too close, I remembered a chubby little toddler sitting next to me at the table, talking seriously, his green eyes wide. “I sink I saw her wink at me,” he said of Mrs. Butterworth, sounding a little like Tweety Bird.

“Really?” I asked. Mrs. Butterworth always winked on the commercial – she seemed quite lifelike.

I took Mrs. Butterworth and made her walk toward his plate. She tripped when she was just the right distance from his plate and syrup spilled from her head right onto his pancakes. He looked at me and I saw it coming in his eyes – laughter. There is something so precious about a toddler's laughter. It seems to start deep within and rolls from their chest until they lose their breath. He cackled, he gasped, his body shook with laughter as Mrs. Butterworth regained her footing and said, “Oh, my – silly me!”

He laughed even more.

Therefore, Mrs. Butterworth made a ritual of tripping and spilling syrup onto his pancakes. Sometimes she let out a shriek as she fell, other times she would say something about how clumsy she was or how she had tripped over her apron. Whatever she did, he rolled.

When Stephen was 15, the two of us often shared a quick breakfast before rushing out the door. He usually ate pancakes that he cooked for himself now and I joined him for a granola bar and a diet coke. I was lost in thought one morning, a particularly stressful day ahead of me, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mrs. Butterworth come walking toward me. She was helped by a hand as big as mine with slender fingers wrapped around her base.

“So – how you been?” she asked in a voice that tried to sound feminine but came out a little like a drag queen. She tripped suddenly and screamed in apparent horror. “Oh, crap!” she said as she stood back up. It may be the only time that Mrs. Butterworth has

ever said crap – I’m not sure. I laughed until I was sick and left for work with a smile in my heart.

But now, I did not laugh when I saw her face. I cried. Other shoppers probably thought I was insane. I walked away. I couldn’t look at her. Cheetos and Funyuns and potato chips had already stabbed at me over on aisle four, Captain Crunch had almost tripped me, the Tombstone Pizzas had made me as cold as they were in the freezer just to look at them, but the little golden faced lady broke my heart.

For the next four years, I had a peculiar interest in shortening and oil – you see, they were across the aisle from Mrs. Butterworth and I had to keep my back to her. She was an old friend, but I couldn’t face her. She was an unintentional emotional grenade. It was a sad situation and such a shame for two who had been so close not to acknowledge each other’s presence, but I just couldn’t look at her.

I always knew she was there, kindly smiling and understanding that I couldn’t face her. But just last week, I felt the golden stare strongly on my back as I once again feigned interest in the Wesson and the Crisco. For the first time in four years, I dared turn and peek at her. She boasted of ½ the calories - so, she, too understood being mid forties, huh? I dared turn a little more to fully face the little lady who had meant so much to Stephen and me – the fully golden one, with all the calories. The tears came, but a smile came with them. The memories that the golden face evoked were gentle, worth remembering forever. Older grief is, indeed, kinder.

I put her in my shopping cart and took her home with me. She stands on one of the top shelves in my kitchen pantry, guarding my granola bars and my memorieshandprints on a wall, a toddler’s laughter, a teenager making his stressed mom laugh.

And, Stephen – you know, buddy, this morning when I reached for a granola bar, I sink I saw her wink at me.

Written in memory of Stephen Beam by his mom, Marcia Carter.