

Butterflies

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MY DAUGHTER SQUATS down and inches her tiny index finger toward the caterpillar. “Gentle,” I warn, as she pokes its orange and black bristles and shrieks with discovery. Quickly she forgets the woolly worm and propels herself toward a pebble that catches her eye. This is her second summer, and she spends most late afternoons tottering around our backyard. The hot days blend together. She tastes dirt, beats rhythms on rocks with open palms, rolls in the grass, looks through tree branches at the blue sky. Sometimes she plays with her toy shovel and bucket, tearing through the garden beds alongside me and my daily weeding.

The fuzzy wuzzy slinks out of sight. One summer, when I wasn’t much older than my daughter, we had hoards of them on the farm, must have been hundreds. Wherever I looked, I spotted them, specks of copper fluff here and there. I still haven’t forgotten—their hairy bodies, so soft—how I would hold two or three in one hand and trace their backs with my other, stroking them like barn kittens.

My daughter sits in the grass. She combs the green through her toes. I

join her, cross-legged, pick a handful of blades and toss the pieces up into the air. She laughs, her tummy jiggles a little. I do it again, and she tilts her face upward, opens her mouth, tries to catch the bits on her tongue like snowflakes. She sits still just long enough for me to press a waxy dandelion across her arm. The yellow trail means you like butter, I explain, sharing what my older cousins promised was our family’s deep folk wisdom, passed down to me decades ago.

Those fuzzy wuzzys on the farm, they held knowledge too. They predicted the length of winter by the stripes on their backs. When they didn’t want to be caterpillars anymore, they transformed into something else, something even better. They were magic, I was certain, and I knew I needed to have my own fuzzy wuzzy, to care for it, give it a place to live, and claim part of its magic for myself. Under one of the old oak trees, I cleared a smooth spot in the dirt, constructed a little lean-to with twigs, and mashed a lunch of leaves with a stone. I brought one of the fuzzy wuzzys to its new home, fed it, and named it.

I turn on the back faucet to fill a plastic tub and my daughter slaps the



water. She delights in the sound and splash of breaking the surface. She fills a cup and pours the water out into the tub, fills the cup, pours the water out. Again and again. This is one of the ways she likes to pass time, making the water fall. I wet my hands and smooth her wispy red hair, a bit of coolness against the August heat.

That summer of the caterpillar invasion was hot like this one. I can see myself sitting in the shade of the oak with my fuzzy wuzzy, watching it crawl up my arm. I put it into the twig home and when it came out, I put it back. I quickly noticed how many more fuzzy wuzzys covered the trunk of the tree, moved in the dirt by the roots, crept through the lawn. I decided I wanted them too, to collect them, to love them all. I found a rinsed out gallon ice cream bucket with a lid and skipped through the yard, picking up the bugs, one by one, adding each to my treasure. I felt proud, these creatures were mine, the cuteness and the magic, and what they would become, mine, I had them, me.

The afternoon light begins to soften. Before my daughter and I go inside, I turn over the plastic tub so the water runs in little veins down the hill to the

tomatoes. I pull out the toy shovel from under a pile of dirt and kick some rocks out of the walkway.

My palms prickle with the memory: I sat on the stairs outside of the kitchen screen door. I held my hand in the bucket, submerged my fingers in the velvety, creeping wiggleness, filled with joy as the squirmy tickles raised hairs on my arm.

My daughter inspects a last corner of the yard, her back turned to me. She's so small, I think, changing so fast. Am I doing this right? I call her and she comes to the stoop where I take off her wet clothes. I tell her we'll put on a dry outfit inside. Before we step through the door, she holds out a clenched fist for me to see, smiling brightly.

I forgot the caterpillars. Left them to the side of the stairs. My dad found them a week or so later. My stomach sucked in when I peeked under the lid of the bucket. He made me look. Nothing but orange and black hairs and sticky goo. We threw them in the field.

I hold my daughter's hand and open her fingers, one by one.

Inside, only orange and black hairs and sticky goo.

(I blame myself for the decrease in butterflies.) ●

