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Garden Hammock

Paul Sikes

I open the slider leading out to the backyard. I feel the sun on my face, but what I seek is the shade of the garden, the protection of the trees, an intensity of green-growing things, and the peace of a swaying hammock.

If I make the effort to notice, I hear a constant background chatter of cicadas. Birds are calling to each other in the trees. As I make my way toward the hammock, these sounds become muffled by the shrubs, trees and gardens that form this shadowed haven. Then I spy my two grandchildren on their knees, heads together, watching something wriggling on the ground. I say nothing but move more slowly, trying not to disturb their investigation.

Under the trees now, I feel a cool breeze and hear a slight buzzing of bumblebees searching for nectar in a flowering berry bramble that circles one of the trees supporting the rope hammock. The grassy ground is a little spongy today due to recent rains, so I can move undetected until I am nearly standing on top of my grandkids.

I can see now what they are seeing – a caterpillar. This fuzzy fellow looks like the last two inches of a bottle brush, covered in yellow hairs with extra-long black and white bristles at either end. It looks otherworldly - more like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* than Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. No wonder the kids are mesmerized (and uncharacteristically still!).

"You guys know not to touch one of those, right?" I caution.

"Grandpa!" squeaks Isaac with a wide, welcoming grin. He recently turned two. "We know, Grandpa. Momma always says 'look, but don't touch,'" states Abigail sagely, because she just started kindergarten and is incredibly mature for her age.

"That's a banded tussock caterpillar," I state, not to be outdone by their wise mother, my oldest daughter. "What do caterpillars turn into? Do either of you know?"

"Butterflies!" first Abigail, then Isaac repeats.

"Not this one. What's like a butterfly, but not exactly?"

Silence, and that 'give me a hint, please' look on Abigail's face. Isaac was back looking at the creepy crawler itself, caring less about the science of metamorphosis.

"It starts with an 'm' and looks a lot like a butterfly."

"Moth!" proclaims Abigail, pride and self-satisfaction showing on her face.

"That's right!" I exclaim, pride and self-satisfaction showing on my face too.

"Okay, you two, Grandpa is going to take a nap in the hammock. Don't let me bother you. I'll be right over here."

I grab the near side of the hammock with both hands spread out beside and behind me. I gingerly squat until my rear touches rope. I take a deep breath, say a little prayer, tighten my grip on the hammock's edge and lean back. I swing my legs up and around and recline into the hammock, letting gravity pull me down into its embrace.

"Aaaaaahhh," I may have said out loud as my body sways side-to-side, slowing, slowing.

"Grandpa, can we get on, too?"

Silence, and that 'can't I just rest a bit, please' look on my face.

"Grandpa?"

"Sure, why not?" I smile and open my arms wide.

