



ONE

THE CRAWL-A-SEE-UM

The family trip when our nightmare began was supposed to be a celebration. In early March 2003, I was scheduled to travel to Greeley, Colorado, for a district board meeting of the Wesleyan church. Beginning the August before, our family had traveled a rocky road: seven months of back-to-back injury and illness that included a shattered leg, two surgeries, and a cancer scare, all of which combined to drain our bank account to the point where I could almost hear sucking sounds when the statements came in the mail. My small pastor's salary hadn't been affected, but our financial mainstay was the overhead garage door business we owned. Our medical trials had taken a heavy toll.

By February, though, we seemed to be on the other side of all that. Since I had to travel anyway, we decided to turn the board-meeting trip into a kind of marker in our family life—a time to have a little fun, revive our minds and spirits, and start moving forward again with fresh hope.

Sonja had heard of a neat place for kids to visit just outside

Denver called the Butterfly Pavilion. Billed as an “invertebrate zoo,” the Butterfly Pavilion opened in 1995 as an educational project that would teach people about the wonders of insects as well as marine critters, the kinds that live in tide pools. These days, kids are greeted outside the zoo by a towering and colorful metal sculpture of a praying mantis. But back in 2003, the giant insect hadn’t taken up his post yet, so the low brick building about fifteen minutes from downtown Denver didn’t shout “Kid appeal!” on the outside. But inside, a world of wonders waited, especially for kids Colton’s and Cassie’s ages.

The first place we stopped was the “Crawl-A-See-Um,” a room filled with terrariums housing creepy-crawly critters from beetles to roaches to spiders. One exhibit, the Tarantula Tower, drew Cassie and Colton like a magnet. This stack of terrariums was, exactly as advertised, a tower of glassed-in habitats containing the kind of furry, thick-legged spiders that either fascinate you or give you the willies.

Cassie and Colton took turns climbing a three-step folding stool in order to get a look at the residents of the Tarantula Tower’s upper stories. In one terrarium, a Mexican blonde tarantula squatted in a corner, its exoskeleton covered with what the exhibit placard described as hair in a “lovely” pale color. Another habitat contained a red-and-black tarantula native to India. One of the scarier-looking residents was a “skeleton tarantula,” so named because its black legs were segmented with white bands so that the spider looked a little like an Xray in reverse. We later heard that this particular skeleton tarantula was a bit of a rebel: once, she had somehow

engineered a jailbreak, invaded the habitat next door, and eaten her neighbor for lunch.

As Colton hopped up on the footstool to see what the rogue tarantula looked like, he glanced back at me with a grin that warmed me. I could feel my neck muscles begin to unknot, and somewhere inside me a pressure valve released, the emotional equivalent of a long sigh. For the first time in months, I felt I could simply enjoy my family.

“Wow, look at that one!” Cassie said, pointing into one of the terrariums. A slightly gangly six-year-old, my daughter was as smart as a whip, a trait she got from her mom. Cassie was pointing to the exhibit sign, which read: “Goliath Birdeater . . . females can be over eleven inches long.”

The one in this tank was only about six inches long, but its body was as thick as Colton’s wrist. He stared through the glass wide-eyed. I looked over and saw Sonja wrinkle her nose.

I guess one of the volunteer zookeepers saw her expression, too, because he quickly came to the birdeater’s defense. “The Goliath is from South America,” he said in a friendly, educational tone that said, *They’re not as yucky as you think*. “Tarantulas from North and South America are very docile. You can even hold one right over there.” He pointed to where another zookeeper was holding a smaller tarantula in his palm so that a group of kids could take a closer look.

Cassie darted across the room to see what all the fuss was about, with Sonja, Colton, and me bringing up the rear. In a corner of the room decorated to look like a bamboo hut, the keeper was displaying the undisputed star of the

Crawl-A-See-Um, Rosie the Spider. A rose-haired tarantula from South America, Rosie was a furry arachnid with a plum-size body and legs six inches long, thick as pencils. But the best thing about Rosie from a kid's point of view was that if you were brave enough to hold her, even for a moment, the zookeeper would award you with a sticker.

Now, if you have little kids, you already know that there are times they'd rather have a good sticker than a handful of cash. And this sticker was special: white with a picture of a tarantula stamped in yellow, it read, "I held Rosie!"

This wasn't just any old sticker; this was a badge of courage!

Cassie bent low over the keeper's hand. Colton looked up at me, blue eyes wide. "Can I have a sticker, Daddy?"

"You have to hold Rosie to get a sticker, buddy."

At that age, Colton had this precious way of talking, part-serious, part-breathless, golly-gee wonder. He was a smart, funny little guy with a black-and-white way of looking at life. Something was either fun (LEGOs) or it wasn't (Barbies). He either liked food (steak) or hated it (green beans). There were good guys and bad guys, and his favorite toys were good-guy action figures. Superheroes were a big deal to Colton. He took his Spider-Man, Batman, and Buzz Lightyear action figures with him everywhere he went. That way, whether he was stuck in the backseat of the SUV, in a waiting room, or on the floor at the church, he could still create scenes in which the good guys saved the world. This usually involved swords, Colton's favorite weapon for banishing evil. At home, he could *be* the superhero. I'd often walk into the house and

find Colton armed to the teeth, a toy sword tucked through each side of his belt and one in each hand: "I'm playing Zorro, Daddy! Wanna play?"

Now Colton turned his gaze to the spider in the keeper's hand, and it looked to me like he wished he had a sword right then, at least for moral support. I tried to imagine how huge the spider must look to a little guy who wasn't even four feet tall. Our son was all boy—a rough-and-tumble kid who had gotten up close and personal with plenty of ants and beetles and other crawling creatures. But none of those creepy-crawlies had been as big as his face and with hair nearly as long as his own.

Cassie straightened and smiled at Sonja. "I'll hold her, Mommy. Can I hold Rosie?"

"Okay, but you'll have to wait your turn," Sonja said.

Cassie got in line behind a couple of other kids. Colton's eyes never left Rosie as first a boy then a girl held the enormous spider and the zookeeper awarded the coveted stickers. In no time at all, Cassie's moment of truth arrived. Colton braced himself against my legs, close enough to see his sister, but trying to bolt at the same time, pushing back against my knees. Cassie held out her palm and we all watched as Rosie, an old hand with small, curious humans, lifted one furry leg at a time and scurried across the bridge from the keeper's hand into Cassie's, then back into the keeper's.

"You did it!" the keeper said as Sonja and I clapped and cheered. "Good job!" Then the zookeeper stood, peeled a white-and-yellow sticker off a big roll, and gave it to Cassie.

This, of course, made it even worse for Colton, who had

not only been upstaged by his sister but was now also the only stickerless Burpo kid. He gazed longingly at Cassie's prize, then back at Rosie, and I could see him trying to wrestle down his fear. Finally, he pursed his lips, dragged his gaze away from Rosie, and looked back up at me. "I don't want to hold her."

"Okay," I said.

"But can I have a sticker?"

"Nope, the only way to get one is to hold her. Cassie did it. You can do it if you want to. Do you want to try? Just for a second?"

Colton looked back at the spider, then at his sister, and I could see wheels turning behind his eyes: *Cassie did it. She didn't get bit.*

Then he shook his head firmly: No. "But I *still* want a sticker!" he insisted. At the time, Colton was two months shy of four years old—and he was very good at standing his ground.

"The only way you can get a sticker is if you hold Rosie," Sonja said. "Are you sure you don't want to hold her?"

Colton answered by grabbing Sonja's hand and trying to tug her away from the keeper. "No. I wanna to go see the starfish."

"Are you sure?" Sonja said.

With a vigorous nod, Colton marched toward the Crawl-A-See-Um door.