



## Caterpillar Babies

*I was all ready for our garden party when . . .*

*By Ryan Stovall*



**Ten miles north of Bangor, Maine, 5:08 a.m.**

Cup in hand, I step forth into a crisp Summer dawn, gently waking to this slightly misty Saturday morning. I'm completely unaware of the assault that's about to commence.

Our dog, Wu, immediately circles and squats, leaving one more canine cupcake I'll need to remove before today's garden party.

Guests will be arriving at 11:00. But I can relax. Everything's ready. The bed-building, the planting, the weeding, the transplanting, the fertilizing, the pruning, the staking, the weeding, the watering, and the spraying (not to mention the weeding)—it's all finished. I've even completed my rock work. ("Finally," as my wife, Katie, likes to tell our friends, as if it's been a matter of decades instead of just a few short years.) From the edge of our driveway, a flagstone path bends round one lush, rock-lined bed to our front door, then bows out again and descends a series of steps between the tiger lilies, forget-me-nots, and morning glories. At the bottom of the steps is what I call the Nook, a small piece of lawn enclosed by hip-high rock walls where I've arranged chairs for my guests. A small table spread with a white cloth awaits, ready to hold drinks and snacks.

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*I majestically  
survey my  
domain and—  
Plop. Something  
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right shoulder.*

From the top of the steps, I majestically survey my domain and gloat one more time at the sheer genius of my strategy: placing the refreshments there ensures that my guests will walk through the entirety of my gardening and masonry accomplishments, forcing ample opportunity for them to marvel and wonder.

*Plop.* Something falls onto my right shoulder.

Caught mid-sip, coffee cup still at my lips, I suppress a slight shudder. As every experienced gardener knows, bird doo happens (and folks think those are sun hats we're wearing!).

I twist my head around to look and catch sight of a two-inch, slightly hairy caterpillar scooching quickly toward my back.

Relieved, I almost laugh. Then plucking him from my shoulder, I bring him around for a closer look.

Immediately my eyes narrow. Army caterpillar, or tent caterpillar—I've never been completely sure they're not the same thing. Regardless, the results are always white cobweb-like glops that cling to trees and bushes, surrounded by denuded limbs chewed clean of every last fleck of green. Worse, maturing cater-

pillars drop from the limbs to spread their destruction even more.

I look up. The oak branch 15 feet up is a naked, goo-covered wad. The enemy is come. Indeed, judging by the extent of the defoliation, he's been there for a while, plotting, chewing, and reproducing while I toiled unsuspecting beneath him.

I rush inside, suddenly desperate for more coffee. And food: I need to be fortified before dealing with this last-minute calamity.

**9:05 a.m.**

I assemble my troops: twins Alena and Thomas, 4-year-olds but within striking distance of their fifth birthday, and Tara, recently turned two. Together we return to scout things out.

"There they are, guys. You see them?"



"What's all that white stuff?"  
(Thomas)

"That's really high, Papa!" (Alena)

"There they are!" (Tara)

The three of them habitually talk all at once. I do my best to answer everyone. "They spin some sort of web. I think it protects them from birds. And yes, there they are. We'll need the ladder."

Stunned silence, and a worried look from Alena—the ladder's notoriously rickety. She, no doubt, is remembering last Summer's ladder misadventure: I was trimming trees behind our shed when the ladder mutinied beneath me, sliding away to one side and leaving me clinging precariously to the eaves.

"What happened to the tree?" (Thomas)

"There they are!" (Tara)

"The caterpillars eat all the leaves. Yes, there they are."

"What are you gonna do, Papa?" (Thomas)

"I'm going to climb up the ladder with the pole saw and cut that branch."

"Then what are you gonna do with it?" (Thomas)

"We'll take it to the burn pile and burn it. That'll keep them

from going to other trees and chewing them up.”

“Are you gonna do it now?” (Thomas)

“Be careful, Papa!” (Alena)

“There they are!” (Tara)

“Yes, now. I’ll be careful. Yes, Miss Tara—there they are.”

**9:20 a.m.**

Tension and apprehension are running high: the pole saw is nowhere to be found. Finally I remember I lent the danged saw to our neighbor, Jim, more than two weeks ago.

I drop by. No one’s home. And Jim is not answering his phone. I leave my second voicemail and send my third text while calculating how long the drive into town to buy a new saw at Lowe’s would take. It’s an hour round trip if everything goes smoothly, which would leave me a scant few minutes to accomplish caterpillar removal before my guests begin to arrive. I press the call button next to Jim’s name again.

“What are we gonna do?” (Thomas)

“You could cut the tree down, Papa!” (Alena)

“There they are!” (Tara)

**10:14 a.m.**

Jim finally responds(!) and says we’re welcome to retrieve the saw from his backyard.

**10:21 a.m.**

The necessary equipment finally assembled, I place the ladder against the oak trunk and carefully begin my ascent. Katie has come out and gathered the troops around her at a safe distance, ensuring no one is in danger of being struck by the falling limb.

**10:30 a.m.**

Thanks to a thick twist of toilet paper jammed into either nostril, the

bleeding has mostly stopped. And the ice pack is beginning to lessen the swollen, tight-feeling sting where my cheek struck the ground. Also to be thankful for is the fact that Katie has finally managed to reduce her laughter to the occasional chuckle, although her cheeks are still unforgivably wet where the tears streamed down. She graciously offers to hold the base of the treacherous ladder, should I care to make a second attempt.

“Are you gonna fall again, Papa?” (Thomas)

“That was funny, Papa! You walked on the ladder just like the stilts clown at the circus!” (Alena)

“Good job, Papa! Snack?” (Tara apparently thinks our mission complete and is ready for some nibbles.)

**10:42 a.m.**

The branch gives a sharp crack, hinges down to slap against the trunk of the tree, then twists and falls. I descend the wobbly ladder and drag the branch aside, then set my troops to stomping any survivors who’ve shaken free from their nest.

“Why are their guts green, Papa?” (Thomas)

“Ew—they pop when you step on them!” (Alena)

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” (Tara, each “Ha!” accompanied by the downward smash of a four-inch velcro sneaker).

**10:45 a.m.**

I drag the branch through the woods to our burn pit area, a small opening where I dispose of trimmings too big to compost. My troops run ahead, as always pyromaniacally eager to witness a fire.

I place the branch atop a small pile of leaves and other detritus and pull a lighter from my pocket. I kneel down.

“Is it gonna hurt them when they burn?” (Thomas)

I look around. My little man’s voice is wavering, as is his lower lip, and his eyes have gone as round as buttons.

“No,” I say, then repeat it more softly. “No, buddy. It’s OK. It’ll be quick for them.” I draw him to me for a hug.

“It *will* hurt them! I don’t want you to burn them!” (Alena)

I rock back on my heels. "I have to, sweetie. Otherwise they'll eat a bunch more trees and all the flowers in our garden."

"No!" My older daughter has a sharp mind and quite the will. No chance I'll be able to pull *her* in for a hug.

"O-kay," I say. "What should we do with them then?"

"What about Wu? Will he eat them?" (Thomas)

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" (Tara, oblivious to our conversation, is still stomping away at the branch.)

Alena's looking desperately unhappy. "Can't you let them go like the chipmunks we catch in the trap?"

I glance at my watch. 10:50. The Chipmunk Sanctuary, a swath of deserted, hopefully chipmunk-friendly woods, is a 15-minute drive one way.

Any early party arrivals will be pulling in within moments.

There's no way I can both save caterpillars and be back by 11:00.



### **The Chipmunk *and* Caterpillar Sanctuary, 11:06 a.m.**

Climbing into the bed of my pickup, I grab the offending branch and hurl both it and its gooey glob of insect defoliators into the bushes. Then I jump down and get back in the cab.

"OK, all set," I say, twisting around: my troops are safely car-seated side by side across the back seat. "All caterpillars are 100% safe in their new home. All good?"

"All good, Papa!" (Alena, beaming)

"What are the caterpillars going to do?" (Thomas)

I smile. "I don't know, Thomas. Have lots and lots of little caterpillar babies, probably."

As I pull back onto the road, U-turning toward home and my hopefully patient guests, the thought of Katie regaling everyone with *her* version of my latest ladder mishap sends a shiver through me. Little Tara sums up the morning from her car seat:

"Caterpillar babies. Good job, Papa. Snack?" ❖