

Pestilence

We noticed them on the first day—stuck dumbly to a window, inching slowly along a porch railing—but these were brief, passing encounters, quickly swallowed by the ordinary clamor of our lives.

The next day, we woke up, watched the news while we drank our coffee, let out our dogs, dressed ourselves and our children, washed the breakfast dishes, and walked into the coolness of an April morning to meet them creeping along the sidewalks, collecting on our windshields, and dangling unnervingly in midair, suspended by thin, silken threads.

Caterpillars. They were about an inch long, lime green with a black stripe along their backs and covered with fine white fuzz. They looked completely benign, garden-variety. What alarmed us was the sheer volume of them: they seemed to have multiplied tenfold overnight.

Well, of course we had things to do; no one could afford to spend the whole day pondering this mystery. Children went off to school, adults to work, and the caterpillars were discussed by each group in their own private languages. In our town we pride ourselves on our modesty and humility, so we were all reluctant to offer a theory. After all, who were *we* to speculate about this strange visitation? The workings of the world are shrouded in mystery. We were satisfied to go about our days, pondering, waiting for what would happen next.

The children were especially interested in these vermicular visitors. They squashed them gleefully, then knelt to examine the splattered guts, which were, surprisingly, not green like the outsides but a cool, calm blue, the color of a clear sky in the early morning. Mrs. McConnell, who taught third grade, turned the mystery into an educational opportunity. She sent her class out to collect specimens, which were confined to glass jars and placed along the windowsill. They were all given a twig with a new-budding leaf and a bit of grass. The children lined up and watched them inch around their new homes, but their attention soon flagged, and Mrs. McConnell was compelled to remind them that science requires patience and doesn't hurry.

Meanwhile, reports came in from the farmers who lived outside of town that the event—we weren't sure what to call it: an infestation? a plague?—was wholly isolated within the perimeter of our town. The farmers gathered in Miller's Farm 'n Feed and turned this mystery over and over, stopping their conversation occasionally to step out the door

and frown at the things, which were crawling harmlessly, obliviously, around the parking lot.

We wondered, *Why?* And, *What did they want?* We tongued these questions vainly with our thoughts, but truly they did not seem to want *anything*. As we watched them crawl around the sidewalks and the rooftops, climb aimlessly up and down the tree trunks and telephone poles, they seemed as bewildered by their sudden arrival here as we were.

That evening as we made supper, many of us tuned into the local AM radio station where Bob Dorfman hosts a nightly news program. Generally, this program is dominated by weather and high school sports. With so little news to share, Bob often has a difficult time filling an entire hour, so he resorts to recaps of PTA meetings or long-winded updates on his personal genealogy research. Alice Davidson, our mayor, is interviewed so often and so gently that it has become a running joke. “Hey, Alice,” we might say, if we bump into her in town. “I hear Bob’s really going to grill you tonight about the new pothole on 3rd street.”

That evening, though, we waited restlessly for any new information about the caterpillars. “Well, folks, I guess we’re all wondering about the same thing tonight,” said Bob’s familiar monotone. “Since I don’t presume to be an expert on bugs myself, I took the liberty this afternoon of putting a call into Dr. Gerald Oberhauser, who is an entomologist—an insect scientist—at Northern State University. I personally wasn’t sure whether he would be interested in our little problem, but he was so excited that he’s going to drive up here in the morning!”

Well. The anticipation of this visit added heft to “the bug question,” as Bob aptly dubbed it, and that night, as we lay in our beds, we felt that weight heavy on our chests. They were out there, we knew, hidden by the night. The very darkness outside our windows pressed in on us and seemed to squirm.

When we woke in the morning, the memory of the caterpillars felt like a dream, and we went to our doors and windows and looked out half-expecting them to have disappeared. Instead, they had multiplied. They were everywhere. They covered our lawns and streets like a roiling green and black carpet. They coated the trees and cars and even the sides of our houses like moss. They were like a strange, writhing weather.

School was cancelled, to the delight of the children, many of whose first inclination was to run out into the swarming streets and play. Parents were understandably wary, however. After all, we didn’t know anything about the bugs. Were they dangerous? Poisonous? Many of us had already spent hours scouring the internet, but there seemed to be no recorded precedent for an event like this. Anyway, they didn’t *seem* harmful or malevolent. If we picked one up, it would crawl innocently around our palms. Some of the younger children had to be reminded not

to ingest the worms, but otherwise the greatest danger seemed to be that their clothes would stain with the crushed, blue innards.

Some older children donned their snowsuits and carried sleds out to the big hill in McCarran Park, where they proceeded to slide down over the layer of tiny bodies. It was better than fresh powder, they shouted triumphantly to each other, laughing. Soon, worm-ball fights broke out in the streets. Children made bug angels in the yard. Inspired by our intrepid offspring, we brought our snow shovels out and tried to clear our paths and driveways. Others attempted to clear their sidewalks and rooftops with power hoses. By midmorning, we had mostly recovered from our initial shock, and our natural industriousness kicked in. Caterpillars or no caterpillars, there was work to be done, goods to be bought and sold, services to be rendered. Joe Arnold hadn't missed his weekly 11 a.m. appointment at the barbershop for thirty-two years, and he wasn't about to start now. He strapped on his cross-country skis and glided down Main Street to the barbershop, where Floyd Norman, the barber, had just arrived to open up.

As the day progressed, we did our best to acclimate to this strange situation, and to organize responses to the novel problems that, inevitably, arose. Mayor Davidson dispatched our town's two snowplows to clear the streets, creating high, wriggling banks of bugs along the sidewalks. Many of our frailer and more elderly residents were housebound, afraid that they might slip and fall, and so the Lutheran and Catholic Churches both organized their congregants to deliver food and pay visits. Several volunteers gathered at the town hall, ready to be assigned a task. A crisis developed after Pete Donahue over at the water treatment plant had to shut the facility down because the sewers were clogging. Volunteers were sent to clear the storm drains and cover them with plywood.

By midafternoon, another issue had presented itself: the worms were ravenous. They were eating every green and growing thing. Our lawns, our hedgerows, our just-sprouted gardens, the new buds on the trees—all gone, consumed. For the first time, we were forced to recognize that this infestation might have lasting consequences. No prize eggplants for Mrs. Bateman at the state fair this year, for instance, and no fall foliage if the trees didn't recover.

But despite these unhappy realizations, our spirits remained high. We strapped on our skis and snowshoes and wrapped our boots in plastic bags and plunged through our days with affability and resolve. The mood was cheerful, even festive. It was like a holiday. We felt that we were somehow being tested, and we were determined to rise to the occasion. We were attentive to the needs of our neighbors, and everyone was ready to pitch in and do their part.

That evening, we tuned in again to the Dorfman radio hour. "Well, friends," said Bob, "I think we can all agree that this was a day for the

history books.” Around our hearths and kitchen tables, we smiled at one another in agreement.

Then the visiting entomologist, Dr. Oberhauser, described other events that bore a similarity to our sudden invasion and mentioned a few comparable insect species, belaboring their scientific names. The long and short of it, though, was that the good doctor was stumped.

“It’s really too early to speculate,” he said when Bob pressed him gently for an explanation. “I think it’s safe to say, however, that whatever precipitated it, this infestation is a once in a millennium event, completely unique in the entomological record.”

Once in a lifetime, sure—we were prepared for that—but once in a *millennium*? The word itself sounded slightly insectoid, evoking a million wriggling legs. A mixture of excitement and fear swirled inside of us. That night, our minds were beset by questions. Most pressingly, *Why us?* What about our little town had attracted them? Perhaps it was random happenstance, just an arbitrary gesture of the universe. But no. We couldn’t accept that. It was easier to feel that we had been singled out, *chosen*, even though that idea rubbed up against our natural humility, and for what purpose, we couldn’t begin to fathom.

The television crews showed up the next day. Some of our local youths had taken videos of the swarming streets and uploaded them onto the internet. Overnight, these videos had gone viral, attracting the attention of the broader news media. Suddenly, our town was a phenomenon, a spectacle that would be shown on the six o’clock news to dilute the usual grim fare of crime and war and politics. News anchors stopped us on the street for interviews. They wanted very much to know how we *felt*. Were we alarmed? Angry? Afraid? Did we think that the Governor should call a state of emergency? Should the President send in the National Guard? It was overwhelming. Some of us expressed opinions that we didn’t even know we had.

Online, speculation swirled. There were any number of theories. Alien invasion. Biblical plague. Global warming. But how could anyone be expected to extract anything sound and bona fide from that swirling whirlpool of ideas? We had no wall to knock with our knuckles in search of a sturdy stud. All we had were airy thoughts, and gutters that needed to get cleared.

Most of us tried to block it out. We did our Saturday chores the best we could (there was no question of mowing the lawn, of course, since the lawn had been devoured, and we didn’t dare hang our laundry on the line). We broiled our chickens and baked our roasts and said grace. But still, many of us could not resist the urge to turn on the news, and when we did we saw ourselves, standing on the sidewalk on Main Street, holding umbrellas and speaking authoritatively, calling the government to task, voicing angry concern for the safety of our children. Through the screen, we looked ourselves in the eye and what we saw was pride

and vanity. We seemed puffed-up and imperious, and when the segment was over, we turned off the sets and finished our suppers, chastened and ashamed.

The next day was Sunday, and we trudged to church through the writhing streets. Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Catholic—all our major congregations gathered in record numbers, and together the whole town prayed for forgiveness, forbearance, and strength. Both Pastor Paul and Reverend Sam preached on Second Corinthians: “If evil come upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before thee, and cry unto thee in our affliction, and thou wilt hear and save.”

After the services, as we mingled and drank coffee together, our spirits were much revived. The familiar smell of that watery church coffee mixed with a general air of camaraderie. Some who had drifted away from their churches were welcomed back with hugs and handshakes. Old, dusty enmities were forgotten. Mrs. Blanchard and Mrs. Olson, who had not spoken in nearly twenty years, chatted sheepishly about their potato salad recipes.

We talked of other times and other ordeals. The drought of 1987, for instance, when the sky stayed clear and blue for so many months that it seemed to acquire a weight of its own, to press down upon us with its vast emptiness, and the entire wheat crop was lost. Or the winter of 1966, when the air was so cold that it seemed to freeze into tiny shards of ice in our throats. Some of us were old enough to remember the bad years after the mine shut down, when dozens of families left their houses empty and unsold. And of course, we had our own private calamities: loved ones lost to war and disease, the endless indignities of aging, children who went off to college and never came back. No, this was not the first time that we had been tried and tested, and our fortitude had always strengthened our bonds of fellowship.

As we stepped buoyantly, optimistically, into the bright spring air, we saw that a change had occurred: no mighty west wind had swept the bugs out to the sea, but a strange, white film was developing on the bare tree branches and the eaves of the buildings. Inside the webs, we could see the caterpillars busily spinning, building. The gauzy material was sticky to the touch and slightly iridescent: from most angles it was white, but when it caught the light in a certain way it shimmered bright green and purple, like a pool of gasoline.

By late afternoon, the webs were so large and dense that the trees resembled sticks of cotton candy. Dr. Oberhauser took dozens of samples of the material, remarking to passersby on the speed with which the insects constructed their nests.

“It’s a part of their metamorphic process,” he told us giddily over the radio that evening. “They’re entering the pupal stage of their holometabolic development. Soon, they’ll emerge in their adult form.”