

Little Farm Horror Movie:
Everything You *Never* Wanted to Know About Tent Caterpillars
10th Anniversary Commemorative eBook

by

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Fans of Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series will remember a seminal event in her novel *On the Banks of Plum Creek*: when Laura was a child, a plague of grasshoppers descended on her tiny town in Minnesota, devouring the wheat crop of every farmer in the area, including her Pa's.

When I was nine years old, growing up in Central Minnesota, I read *Plum Creek* over and over, like I did all the other Little House books. But there was one chapter I could only bear to read once: about the grasshoppers plague. Almost writhing in revulsion, my eyes glued to the page, I could *see* the strange glittery cloud Laura described, *hear* the plop-plop-plop as grasshoppers dropped from the sky, and worst of all, I could *feel* the squish-squash of the insects beneath my bare feet.

For young Laura, there was no getting out of stepping on them, and *shoeless*, if you can believe it? Because 1) all farm kids went barefoot in warm weather to save wearing out their shoes, and 2) the cloud had released millions of grasshoppers, a mass that covered every inch of ground for miles around.

One day, shortly after reading the grasshopper chapters, my imagination was working overtime. Overcome by the horror of it all, I went to the Keeper of All Knowledge—my dad, a North Dakota boy—and told him about Laura's experience. "Have you ever heard of that?" I asked him. "Clouds of grasshoppers?"

Dad pondered it for a moment. "When I was a boy, there was a grasshopper plague in a neighboring county," he finally said matter-of-factly. He'd lived through many tornadoes—I suppose a few too many grasshoppers wouldn't faze him.

"But could it happen here?" I asked anxiously. Our town, St. Cloud, was maybe an hour's drive from where Laura's family had lived.

He shook his head. “Those things don’t happen anymore.” In hindsight, I realize he’d been referring to modern agriculture practices—that the state ag agency would’ve sprayed any cloud of grasshoppers into oblivion. As a kid, though, all I knew was sweet relief.

I could never have foreseen that a modern plague of insects was all too possible.

One

April, 2013. My husband John and I discovered a new—and extremely dismaying—sight in the neighborhood. The alder trees lining our mile-long lane were rife with tent caterpillar nests, all of which were too high in the trees to knock out.

In our region, these nests aren’t an unusual sight. Every few springs, you’ll encounter a few—more nests in some years, fewer in others. But I never paid much attention to the gross-looking nests, just made sure I kept my distance.

I was soon to learn more about tent caterpillars than I ever wanted to know. The caterpillars start their life cycle in small egg sacs attached to twigs in certain tree species, and these sacs comprise a collection of eggs that tent moths laid the previous summer.

Problem #1: you can’t really see the sacs unless you’re looking for them.

Problem #2: from each teeny “dot” encased in the sac, a caterpillar will hatch.

That fateful spring of 2013, the caterpillars themselves were tiny, but the nests, the “tents,” were *disgusting*—dark gray webbing a foot wide or more, entwined on every branch, the leaves around the tent tattered or missing entirely. On my walks I’d look up at the tents anxiously, but really, what could you do about them?

By early May, we had tents in the alder trees surrounding our yard. Our cleared area didn’t contain any alder trees, but our nine wooded acres ringing our place was a riot of wall-to-wall alders, and the other 60 acres along our lane were jam-packed with them too.

On our property, John began patiently cutting out the tents in the trees closest to our garden, and when the nests showed up in our apple trees, same drill: cut off the branch containing the tent, carry it gingerly to a bucket, and when the bucket was full we’d have a little caterpillar burning party.

One of the first tents we cut, full of squirming caterpillars, I carried in great ceremony over to our flock of hens. “I’ve got a treat for *you-oo*,” I sang. The girls loved insects, slugs, and

creepy-crawlies of every kind, and eagerly gathered round. (Just like they always do when you walk in—I'm convinced that's why so many people keep hens. They're great for the ego.)

Anyway, I wafted my cat-laden branch under their beaks. "Look at this!"

The girls not only didn't peck at the "treat." They seemed to pretend not to *see* it. "What's the matter?" I asked them. "You love bugs!"

I wiggled my branch in front of the hens one more time, and the girls actually backed away. Clearly, John and I couldn't count on our hens to help eat the excess. Which in a way, was a good thing to find out early on.

Because soon there were far too many caterpillars to even *try* to get rid of.

By the first of June, tent caterpillars were feeding voraciously on our 20 fruit trees. Soon after, the cats were swarming all over our 17 blueberry plants, then they started in on our strawberry patches. Crawling on the ground, up on the fenceline, and the creepiest of all, slithering up the exterior of the house.

Revolted, I could hardly believe my eyes. I'd always thought our worst enemies were voles. Now I saw the truth. With a screened raised bed, you could keep voles from your crops. But these tent caterpillars were the real devil's spawn, destroying everything in their path. And like facing any other kind of adversary, you had only one choice for fighting this invader: with hand-to-hand combat.

Two

The caterpillars soon defoliated the alder trees outside our fence. Unless stopped, the cats would do the same to the food-producing trees we'd nurtured all these years. They could damage the fruit spurs, setting back the trees' growth a year or two. Or maybe permanently.

The young blueberry shrubs were in danger too. They had finally started to bear the previous season, providing a few precious cupfuls of berries. If defoliated, this year they likely wouldn't produce any crop at all—or the plants could die outright. I couldn't bear even the possibility.

Anxiety and revulsion churning in my stomach, I made a decision. It was the caterpillars, or our Little Farm.

John and I put on our oldest garden duds and gloves, and the war was on. Following his example, I began my attack in our blueberry patch, picking the cats off each shrub. After defending my blueberries, I stepped over to the nearest Honeycrisp tree.

Plucking one of the loathsome creatures, as before, I squished it between my gloved fingers and dropped it to the ground. Grabbing every cat I could see, I moved to the next apple tree. It was an out-of-body experience. *Is this really me? Killing caterpillars by the hundreds? By hand?*

Speaking of hands, it wasn't long before my gloves' rubber coating was drenched with bilious-green caterpillar guts, the moisture seeping through the rubber. Tent caterpillars aren't all that small, you know. True, you'll see newly-hatched, teeny-tiny ones a quarter inch long, but within a week or two they'll mature into fat, three-and-a-half inch specimens.

Those big boys were the most disgusting of all—you had to squish *hard*. Along with my soaked gloves, I was starting to get the sensation of squishing even when I wasn't doing it. I needed a new strategy.

I found an ancient rusted paring knife of John's, then got out a five-gallon bucket and filled it with water. Using the knife to pry cats off our plants, I started tossing the cats into the water. Problem: They were such hardy critters they could actually *swim*. Or at least wiggle in the water, then climb up the sides of the bucket before they got even *close* to drowning.

Conclusion: I needed something more lethal than bathwater. I squeezed a generous dash of Joy dishwashing liquid into the bucket—a vast improvement. The smaller ones would quit wiggling within a few seconds; the big ones took longer. But the detergent was working.

Dumping the creatures in the bucket, I tried not to look at the dying caterpillars. But of course I couldn't help it—like you can't help staring at a car accident on the freeway. Despite myself, I'd watch the cats thrashing around in the soapy water, wishing they'd just get it over with.

Before too long, my bucket got awfully heavy. I dialed down to plastic yogurt containers full of soapy water, and when they were full, I'd throw the whole quart of dying cats into the main catch-all bucket.

Having picked cats off our smaller plants, I fetched John's plastic-topped tool bucket to use for a stepladder, and started in on our most mature apple trees. I would grab every cat I could reach on the lower branches, then clamber onto the bucket and reach for the higher ones. The

highest boughs we had to let go. And it showed: the top third of each tree was already bare of leaves.

Those buckets of soapy water got full really fast too—the liquid turning to a sickly green sludge.

I was killing one cat about every second. That's sixty per minute, say, 3600 per hour. With John working at the same rate, the toll added up to 7200 each hour. We were killing cats from five to eight hours a day. Doing the math, the casualties totaled up to tens of thousands every day.

After I'd completed my rounds on the plants in the yard, I plucked caterpillars off the side of the house, as far up as I could stretch. The death count was so immense John dug a hole next to the shop in which to dump the aforementioned sludge (soap, water, and cat guts). In the heat of summer, you can imagine how this smelled.

After three days of intensive warfare, I went into the woods with my kitchen scraps to my everyday compost pile. Passing the coop, I saw cats crawling all over the walls and roof. Another place I had to hit, I thought, resigned. A few more steps, and I nearly walked right into a line of cats dangling in midair. It was the ultimate eye opener.

The ugly gray webbing was not just a caterpillar dormitory. Those little blighters were rappelling down from the trees, on the tiny filaments from the webs. Then, walking toward our biggest alder, I spied an even more macabre sight. "John!" I yelled. "Come here!"

Caterpillars coated the trunk of the alder tree like a fur coat, from ground level to at least thirty feet up. In the branches, the tree was laden with more cats than you could ever count. John looked bleakly at the squirming mass. It was straight out of a horror movie.

Three

Do you remember that scene from the Alfred Hitchcock film, *The Birds*, when Tippi Hendren creeps down that road lined with hundreds of crows? Birds alongside her, birds hovering above her, their beady eyes watching her every move. There's only the occasional cackle, a twitching of wings, yet her face is pinched with terror, and you can just *feel* her panic, her utter horror...

And you can't quite believe this is happening to you.

This tree wasn't the only one. Looking around, John and I saw more and more trees with the same "fur."

"I've got to take the trees down," he said. It was obvious: he was wasted doing the hand-to-hand fighting. I could do that, while he logged the trees. I helped with the tallest, most infested alders while he wielded his handsaw.

As John felled a particularly laden tree, I stepped away, revolted as he ran his gloved hands up and down the trunk, doing a bulk squishing on the fur coats.

Despite my revulsion, I watched John in admiration. I always gave my husband credit for being pretty much immune to getting grossed out. "You doing okay?" I asked.

"I have to say, *this*," John said as he wiped his gloves, "this is *really* disgusting."

After we felled several more trees, I returned to our orchard for another round. Every so often John and I would meet up to brush the caterpillars off each other's backs. Mostly for my benefit—John didn't mind, but just *thinking* of cats on my person made me shudder.

What you didn't know wouldn't hurt you, of course (meaning, you couldn't see how many cats you had crawling on your back) but once you felt one on your neck—well, that was a different story.

I knew John was getting sickened with the whole thing—I was too. Seeing caterpillars everywhere you turned. Doing nothing but killing, while neglecting our place. Vegetable seeds went unsown. Beds unweeded. Plants unwatered. I no longer heard the birdsong, or the bees humming as they went about their work. No longer felt the soft summer breeze against my skin. I no longer paused to take in the glory of the mountain looming in front of us.

Living in a death zone, my world had narrowed to pick and dunk, pick and dunk. John and I had come this far, though. All we could do was keep going. Not give up.

Tents showed up on three of the birch coppices next to the house—the tree that shaded the hottest part of the yard, that I'd communed with in quiet joy. The tents were up too high to reach by ladder, so there was nothing for it.

John took down the three coppices and we cut out the tents, then dragged the limbs close to the woodsheds for processing. The "tree" that was left looked deformed.

About a week into our caterpillar battle, our closest neighbor Toni came by. By now, we knew this whole part of the county was having a severe infestation. Toni had a big garden too,

only a much larger cleared acreage—hence fewer alders near her yard. Still, she looked as worn as we felt. “How are you coping with the caterpillars?” she asked.

“Just trying to keep them from killing our fruit trees,” John said.

“I’ve been looking at a spray organic farmers use,” she said. “Bt—have you heard of it?”

“It sounds vaguely familiar,” I said, “but I don’t know anything about it.”

“Apparently you can spray your trees and it only kills the caterpillars,” said Toni. “My son said he could do the spraying.”

I thought of how much insecticide it would take just doing the trees along the lane, much less the amount the three of us would need for her property and our orchard stock. “Let us know what you decide,” I said. “Thanks so much.”

As she left, I bit my lip. “I can’t imagine spraying,” I said to him. “No matter how safe it supposedly is.”

“I can’t either,” said John. “And it’s got to be really expensive.”

“I’ll bet the county extension office can tell us about it.” After my next bathroom break, I got on the phone.

Luckily an extension agent was available, and I told him about our extreme infestation. “Yeah—things are really bad this year,” he said.

“I’ve been hearing about Bt,” I told him. “Is it really safe? And how effective is it?”

“Organic farmers are allowed to use it,” he said. “When the caterpillars eat the sprayed leaves, it works like there are razor blades in their stomachs. Their insides get cut to ribbons.”

Sounds like a fitting punishment for these devils, I thought savagely. “Do you recommend it?”

He didn’t answer right away. “Bt does work, but the spray is sensitive to ultraviolet light,” he said. “It’ll break down in about three days.”

“Oh,” was all I could say. In three days, a whole new wave of cats would crawl in from the woods. I thanked the agent and hung up, then went outside and told John what I learned.

“Spray doesn’t seem worth all the money,” he said. “Not if it’s worthless after a few days.”

“If the Bt did hurt our bees I’d never forgive myself,” I said. “Anyway, there’s no way we could spray all that.” I waved my arm toward the woods. Not the nine acres of our woods, or the dozens of additional acres in our neighborhood alone.

In any event, our neighbor ended up not spraying—perhaps she'd reached the same conclusion we had.

So there we were, back to square one. Killing non-stop. The Foothills had a cool spell the third week of June, and I saw far fewer caterpillars in the yard. Yet as soon as the weather warmed, the cats returned with a vengeance. I'd watch the caterpillars crawl along the top of the fence, hatred in my heart.

The alders along the fenceline were absolutely *covered* with them—all the cats had to do was drop right onto our orchard trees and start eating.

One evening, John and I were finishing up another eight hour shift of killing. "We need a buffer," he said, gesturing to the alder trees pressing up against the back fenceline. "Create an open space all around the yard."

I watched another cat drop from a tree onto the top of the fence, then grabbed it. "Let's do it, then," I told him. "As soon as this is over."

Four

After all these weeks, I was used to the revolting chore—although our cat warfare wouldn't have been my personal choice for curing me of squeamishness. And I, who hated even the idea of harming another living creature (okay, I do kill slugs, without remorse—ants too), was inuring myself to murdering critters by the hour. Would this never end?

The first of July arrived—and it seemed like all of a sudden, the number of caterpillars in the yard was way down. Within days, I saw only a few stray cats. It looked like the plague really *was over*.

Despite these encouraging signs, I couldn't shut down my state of high alert—watching for cats, peering in the apple trees for nests, hunching my shoulders when I left the yard to dump compost, ready to duck from a rogue cat-drop from above. John and I toured our food-growing areas, assessing our tattered apple trees. "They're still okay," John said, gazing up at the Akane "And the leaves will grow back."

Apparently, all our cat picking had kept the fruit trees reasonably healthy. The wild trees, though, were a different story—the alders were half-defoliated, leaving the woods looking oddly autumnal for early summer.

So the cats were gone. Instead, we were seeing cocoons everywhere. Under the eaves of our house, curled into leaves, even in strange places like the corners of the recycling bins. Surrounded by cocoons, though, was a piece of cake compared to our caterpillar horror movie.

By now, John and I were worn to the bone, and kind of depressed. I felt I'd lost one precious month of my life, the loveliest month of the year. Still, I was filled with sweet relief that he and I had gotten through this terrible time. And saved our garden.

Speaking of, we had our vegetables to plant, the watering to catch up on. Our normal lives to resume. Although I had to wonder: after all the killing, feeling utterly revolted simply walking into our yard, would I ever feel the same way about Berryridge Farm again?

March, 2014. I was bringing a box of firewood toward the house when John came from the north orchard, a twig in his hand. "You're not going to believe this."

Five

I inspected the small branch he held, then dropped my box on the steps, my blood running cold. "Oh, *no*." The foot-long twig had a half dozen distinctive shiny gray "growths" wrapped around it. Which of course could only be...

Tent caterpillar egg sacs.

"The apple trees are covered with them," John said. "I'm pruning off what I can. The rest, though..." His voice trailed away.

"We'll have to remove them by hand," I said. "We can do that." I tried to sound encouraging, but inside, I felt a familiar sickening sensation. "I'll just get this box inside."

I found a tarp and spread it under our most vigorous apple tree, the Akane. It hadn't bore much fruit last year—a blessing in disguise, given the caterpillar infestation. As John stood on our old wooden stepladder, tossing down four-foot lengths of new growth onto the tarp, I tried not to look at the sacs on them.

Although we never burned brush—we tossed it into the woods on the advice from Garrett, our contractor from way back—we'd burn these prunings, no problem.

While John pruned, I started in on prying the sacs off the tree branches within reach,

carefully placing them into a single-serving plastic yogurt container. Like I said before, if you tossed the sacs on the ground, they'd probably hatch anyway. Pretty soon, I'd filled my carton with egg sacs and had to fetch a quart container. There were *that* many sacs.

John climbed down to move the ladder, and looked past the fence at the dense woods. "As soon as we're done pruning, we've got to start that buffer."

During the worst of the caterpillar plague last summer, we decided that cutting down trees to create an alder-free buffer zone around our yard was absolutely essential. At the time, it hadn't seemed like a big job. Big jobs, in theory, never really do.

Now, I gazed bleakly at the trees and brush surrounding our one-acre clearing, and realized what an immense task this buffer project would be. But we had to start somewhere. And right away.

That is, as soon as we finished pruning and removing egg sacs from our twenty-plus fruit trees. They were so laden with egg sacs, I tried not dwell on what could be in store for us on the other side of the fence.

John and I started this second war on caterpillars by tackling the woods closest to our most mature orchard. The alders were thirty to forty feet high now, and the birch coppices that had been a tangle of saplings when we moved here were now multi-trunked trees, each about six or more inches in diameter.

Our acreage was also covered with younger birch and alders anywhere from six to eight feet high, and in many places, there would be several saplings growing per square foot.

Creating our buffer wasn't simply cutting down trees. You had to whack through brushy, hard-wooded Indian plum and vine maples, upright and trailing wild blackberries, whose uber-sharp thorns posed a hazard everywhere you turned. Add the easy-to-trip-over sword ferns with three-foot fronds covering the ground and you really had your work cut out for you. Even after clearing around the base of the coppice, you couldn't safely work a chainsaw in the mess.

John preferred hand saws anyway. Taking down a birch coppice, he'd start on the most accessible trunk. This kind of birch has soft, fibrous wood that catches easily on saw teeth. I would press on the trunk in the direction John wanted to fall it, so he could wield his saw more efficiently. As the first trunk came down, I rushed to check the tree top.

I wanted to throw up. "I thought tent caterpillars only fed on alder trees," I said stupidly.

The birch's smaller branches were covered with egg sacs. I mean, *wall-to-wall*. John glanced at the sacs, and reached into his pocket. "Apparently not," John said in his calm way.

I dragged the birch out of the way so John could start on the next coppice trunk. "What do we do?"

This coppice had—I counted—fourteen trunks. If each tree had this many sacs...and there were so many, many birches right at the fenceline...Well, it didn't bear thinking about.

"Do?" John pulled out his clippers. "We cut 'em."

And so began our new woods routine. We'd get a tree on the ground and clip off the twigs and branches with egg sacs on them. John and I would do our falling and clipping until it was nearly dark, then John would burn the piles of clippings. You couldn't dispose of these sac-laden prunings in the woods, like we had with all of our other brush. Besides, birches are a breed unto themselves—a little bit mutant, you might say. As I mentioned, you can cut down a birch, only weeks later, the tree will still *sprout leaves*. So a logged tree could still be a food source for the growing caterpillars.

John and I were tree lovers. My husband even confessed that as a kid, he'd *hugged* trees. I contemplated the blessings of even these "junk" trees as I'd called them—their shade, habitat for birds, even the music of rustling leaves was part of why we valued them. Now, instead of forest bathing in our woods, John and I had become tree mass murderers.

As we worked our way down the fenceline, I saw egg sacs not only on the birch and alder trees, but the vine maples, and more shrubs I couldn't identify. Pretty much every deciduous species had them, except the big leaf maples. It was only March. The hatched caterpillars would start migrating from their nests around the end of May—we had only two months or so to avert a disaster.

Some days, John and I would feel we were making progress on our tree-clearing, but in reality, it was only a dent. Still, there was nothing to do but keep going: fall the trees, cut off the branches, burn them. Lather, rinse repeat. Day after day.

Six

As it turned out, cutting out egg sacs was the easy part. Then the caterpillars hatched.

Walking down our lane, I thought again of the film, *The Birds* and poor Tippi Hendren as I saw hundreds, if not thousands, of tents lining the road. Tents alive with caterpillars. In late April, the leaves were beginning to unfurl on the alders and birches. I'd always welcomed the rich, green sheen of the woods this time of year, yet this day, the sight made my heart sink.

The leaves meant the cats would have a ready food source. The insects were tiny at this point, about the size of a fingernail clipping. But you couldn't miss them, crawling by the hundreds down from the top branches.

John and I returned to our tree falling, but this time, we weren't clipping egg sacs. We were lopping off bigger branches, cutting them into pieces to dunk into buckets of soapy water. With every cat-covered branch, John joked, "Here's another bunch, ready for the spa." I laughed. Well, the first few times he said it I laughed.

Until I saw masses of them on the trunks, with the fur coats like last year's plague.

On some level, our tree-falling and cat-killing was pretty ludicrous—each day we were taking down a coppice or two, twenty or thirty trunks in all, and killing thousands of cats. Yet our woods alone contained thousands of trees, containing what had to be millions upon millions of caterpillars. We were either the Don Quixotes of the Foothills, pursuing our noble quest to save our place. Or we were completely nuts, wasting our time on an impossible task, and killing trees for absolutely no reason.

I opted to see us as the former. And our frenzy of tree-cutting, branch-dunking, or full-on mass-cat glove squishing continued apace. Then, despite our buffer, despite the trees we'd killed, in late May, the cats descended on Berryridge Farm.

Again.

As John and I battled caterpillars, my thoughts and my days were filled with nothing but killing.

After only nine months' respite, we were back to the previous June's routine. We would pick caterpillars together, until he'd go into the woods and take down more trees, and I'd go it

alone. No matter what we did, though, it wasn't enough. You could pick an apple or plum tree clean, and in ten minutes, *every leaf* would have three cats on it. Same goes for the caneberries: boysenberries, loganberries and my favorites, the marionberries. The supports John had built for the canes made cat incursions easy. No crawling around the deadly marionberry thorns, No sir! We cats have easy access, up these nice smooth wood posts!

As for the blueberry plants, you'd go around the patch harvesting cats, and by the time you finished cleaning off the last bush, the first one was covered again.

The caterpillars were in the strawberries now, during the fruiting season. The pleasure of picking strawberries turned into a loathsome task—brushing away caterpillars with my bare hands to get the berries. I could feel my face taking on a constant wince of revulsion.

The house siding was dotted with cats too—they seemed to follow an instinct to climb straight up. For a better food source? For a better cocoon site? Who cared? When I finished my rounds on our food-producing plants, I started picking cats off the house. Which is completely, totally ridiculous, right? But all I could think of was, *Every caterpillar on the house I kill is one less I pick off our trees.*

Watching caterpillars crawl up the foundation just as I grabbed their compatriots a few feet higher was beyond discouraging. I stared at the invaders for a minute, then got a brainwave. With a whisk broom, I walked around the house foundation, brushing cats off the concrete until my dustpan was full. I'd dump them in our usual bucket of soapy water, then start back in. Once I'd circled the house, it was time to get back to the orchards.

The one break I took each day was to ride my bike. But my time away wasn't relaxing at all. The infestation was horrible up and down the main road too. I had to be vigilant, watching for the areas with nests above the pavement. Often, I had to swerve, to avoid caterpillars dropping on my head from the treetops.

Within a few days, one—no, make that two, realizations hit me. The cats were eating not only the leaves of the apple trees and blueberry bushes. They were *eating the fruit*. I headed straight into the woods where my stalwart husband was sawing at another coppice. "John," I said, "I swear to God, this is way worse than last year."

He wiped the beads of sweat off his face. "I wouldn't have thought it was possible. But I think you're right."

"I'm seeing three times as many cats. Or even more than that! I don't know how much

longer I can take this!”

“I don’t either,” he said. “All we can do is just keep going.” He began attacking another cat-laden branch. “We don’t have any other choice.”

As I turned to go back to the yard, I stared, arrested, at a young hemlock. The top was stripped of needles. The cats were eating a *fir* tree.

It was like nature had gone completely mad.

Seven

Every day, more cats kept coming. Masses of them. You could look on the ground and see them swarming. You could check a cluster of blueberries and see the browned scars of the blossom end, where the cats were nibbling. It was the insult to my beloved blueberries that got to me. This year, for the first time, the fruit was heavy on the shrubs. And I got *angry*.

I started to take this plague personally. I felt like Scarlett O’Hara, raising her fist to the sky. Only I wasn’t nauseated from a gnarly root vegetable, I was sick to death of caterpillars. As I killed them, hour after hour, I was yelling in my mind, *You will not defeat me!*

Still, there was an appalling new element to this year’s infestation. Last year, we’d mostly seen one type of caterpillar. The markings were darned clever, I have to admit—variegated in brown and gray-green, with dots of pale orange. The cats easily blended in with the vegetation they were attacking.

Now, John and I began to see some with gray and blue markings, and soon more and more of them. I did more research and discovered the orange ones were Western tent caterpillars, and the blue were forest cats. Not that their names mattered one iota, because both species grew larger by the day.

Although we looked far and wide, as far as John and I could tell, these critters had absolutely no predators. No creatures in these woodlands, from raptors to songbirds to rodents ate these horrible things. This year, the forest cats were in ascendance. They were not only bigger, they were—and I’m not putting you on—*wilier*.

You could reach for one on an apple leaf and they would slip off to the ground—nearly impossible to pick out in the grass and weeds. Or you’d try grabbing one off the side of the house, and the cursed thing would throw itself down onto the gravel alongside our foundation.

This year's feistier bunch were undetectable among the gray-blue rocks.

John and I ran into our neighbors Jake and Barb, who had a young orchard they were desperate to protect. When I asked them how their trees were faring, Barb looked almost hopeful. "We found this tape at the farmer's co-op," she said. "You circle the base of the tree, sticky side out, and the cats get stuck on it."

"Wow, that's a great idea!" I said, and we hurried home. We had too much to do to drive thirty miles to the farmer's store, so I got busy winding duct tape around the trunk of our fruit trees. Once our plants were protected, I could *finally* get caught up with the rest of our garden.

But the tape had almost no impact. For every cat that got stuck, there were ten more crawling right past it. And the blueberries were being hit the hardest.

We'd already let some things go—the raspberries had been stripped of leaves, and I'd been too busy to water them. The whole patch was a goner. Our big Japanese plum by now was completely bare of leaves too, the knots of fungus standing out against the defoliated branches. I'd stare at it from the dining room window, and think, *It's turned into a ghost tree.*

But, I thought fiercely, I would be double...um, ding-donged if I would let that happen to my blueberries! I rigged up a crude sort of "fence" around the drip line of each blueberry plant, and using sticks for "posts," I wound the tape all around the sticks to make a barrier.

My wee fences were not the success I'd hoped for. The cats would crawl right up to the tape, and some would stick. But many, many others, especially the bigger ones, seemed impervious to the "stickum." More of them would find a teeny-tiny gap beneath the tape. So I still had caterpillars making a beeline for my shrubs.

I do realize that by now, I'd developed like this very OCD approach to caterpillars. I'd put my current novel on hold to laser-focus on fighting them. Despite the millions of cats surrounding our yard, I was still trying to hold back the tide.

The proverbial Dutch boy with his finger in the hole of a cracking dike.

If it was up to John, at a certain point he would have done his Browne philosophical thing—shrugging his shoulders, he'd conclude, *We can only do so much, and if we lose some trees, or berries, that's life.*

But he was too loyal to stand by while I broke my heart, trying to keep the devastation to a minimum. And he also knew there was a certain, inescapable force at work—the compulsive streak that I share with every member of my family (my FOO, you may recall from *Little Farm*

in the Foothills). And my streak at the moment had completely dropped the germophobe thing—worrying about germs seemed silly now. A waste of energy. Not when I could kill more and more caterpillars and save our place!

I sought out John, once again in the woods taking down trees, to kvetch about my tape problem. Trying not to look at the thousands of cats swarming on the branches he was cutting, I said, “It’s like the tape’s not even there!”

John stopped sawing. “After a few hours outside, the sticky surface probably dries out.”

“I can’t change out the tape every hour!” I was already doing it every day.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “What if you put something on the tape to deter them? Something chemical?”

“Like what?” I asked, feeling despairing. Here I was, taking valuable time away from cat picking, and I wouldn’t use chemicals anyway. “Wait...” I thought for a moment. “I’ve got an idea.” Without telling him what it was, I hurried to the shop.

I found a small container of vegetable oil John kept around for lubricating tools. Then I shucked off my workclothes to go into the house. John kept a supply of hotel sundries from our infrequent stays away from home.

Sensitive to the strong perfumes, I didn’t use them, and John preferred the local goat’s-milk soap he bought in the village. Still, he kept the cheap, stinky soap around because...well, he kept a lot of stuff around.

I cut a half bar of soap into bits, dumped it in a yogurt container and mixed it with a small quantity of vegetable oil, then hurried to show John. “What do you think?”

“It just might work,” he said. “You can apply it with one of the paintbrushes in the shop.”

He actually broke out a brush he’d been saving to stain his new building. I advanced into the yard with my evil-smelling potion, and prepared to do battle.

I began my rounds with the fruit trees, and coated the tape circling each trunk liberally with the perfumy oil. Then I did the same with my little “fences” around the blueberries. I’m sure the oil and soap didn’t do the fruit trees any good, nor the soil near the berries, but I couldn’t worry about that now.

My tactic actually worked.

I watched caterpillars climb up the base of a tree, and as soon as they hit the tape, turn

away. It wasn't foolproof, though. Plenty of cats would get past the stuff. And like the stickum on the tape, my potion lost effectiveness after a few hours. So I "painted" the tape twice a day.

The potion didn't kill the cats. But it was slowing down the tide of destruction.

Eight

Searching for some little ray of positivity, I once again checked the state Ag Extension website. It held a wealth of knowledge about tent caterpillars; still, the experts clung to the fantasy that the cats pretty much feed only on alder trees. What I did discover is the *why* of the plague.

All these caterpillars are simply part of Mother Nature's method.

In the forests of our region, as I mentioned before, the first trees that grow after a clear-cut are alders. They provide shade and protection from weather extremes for the tiny fir saplings. Yet alders, within a few short years, actually shade out the small firs, stunting their growth.

Yup, I thought. I've seen that. Both the firs and alders on our land, after the clear-cut, had re-seeded at the same time. Yet by now, the firs had reached a height of eight feet while the alders were around thirty. The role of a caterpillar infestation is to defoliate the alders (and in our case, the birches as well), allowing more light for the firs.

Additionally, as part of the plan, the cats provide fertilizer to the developing forest—think of all that poo. Another reason for an infestation's astronomical numbers is because, as John and I had already concluded, tent caterpillars have few predators, save for hornets and yellow jackets. We'd seen some spiders attacking the little cats, but there weren't enough spiders or hornets in the *world* to eat all these caterpillars.

Still, a glimmer of hope appeared on the horizon. I discovered that the trees under attack begin to exude a compound—a sort of antibiotic or repellent—that will make the cats sick. Hallelujah! I was ready to run outside and tell John, when I started reading the next section.

My heart plummeted. Apparently these tent caterpillar events occur about every ten years. That was bad enough: John and I would have this horrible experience awaiting us a decade from now? But it got worse: the length of the infestations occur in *three year cycles*. Oh. Dear. God. Did this mean we'd have a *third* plague next summer?

Horrified, I closed the Extension site and clicked on a few media stories. One article was

about some woman who'd been so freaked out by the caterpillars in her yard that she left her home *and* her husband to stay at a hotel out of the area until the infestation subsided. That was funny enough to give me the strength to go find John and tell him what I'd discovered.

He was encouraged to learn about the trees' repellent, and that there are actually benefits of a tent caterpillar plague. But as for the natural cycle...

"Three years?" John said incredulously.

"Yes," I said gloomily. "If last year was terrible, and this year was three times as bad..." I didn't want to say it aloud.

"Next year could be the worst of all," John finished.

I stared out at the trees, beyond the small patch of ground John had recently cleared. If the last caterpillar cycle in the Foothills had been around ten years ago, the trees around here would have been too tiny to attract the pests.

But now, the original 73-acre parcel John, I, and our neighbors lived on was nothing but alders and birches, as far as the eye could see. No doubt the whole area was providing a target-rich environment—i.e., all the elements of a perfect storm of caterpillars.

John and I went about our work the next couple of days without talking much—the thought of next summer hung over us like a giant black storm cloud. Then one late afternoon, John called me over.

"Look at this," he said, pointing to a clutch of cats on a birch trunk.

I didn't want to—I'd seen enough cats these last weeks to haunt my dreams for the rest of my life. Still, I gave the caterpillars the briefest of once-overs.

"Do you see it?" John asked.

"See what?"

"The caterpillars—they're like, shriveling."

Nine

Suddenly, I did see it! "Oh my God." Instead of the thriving, robust cats we'd been fighting, this bunch looked weakened, and yes, shriveled.

"And these guys don't really move much," John added. "They're not leaping away when you grab 'em, like they did before."

“Maybe that natural tree repellent really *is* working!” I said hopefully.

At any rate, these shrunken specimens wouldn't add quite as much bulk to our caterpillar cemetery back in the woods. A square of ground that by now, despite my throwing a bucket of dirt over the decomposing remains, was a stinking, slimy mess.

In the coming days, John and I saw more and more shrivelled cats. As the numbers dropped off, and cocoons began to appear in the yard, something else was happening. John and I began to collect all the cocoons we came across. Upon further examination, instead of a healthy-looking pupa inside, we were finding dried-up, dead material—something that obviously *used* to be a caterpillar.

With even more hope in my heart, I said to John, “Maybe this *is* the third year.”

“Maybe,” he echoed.

I knew he was feeling the same thing I was. If this year wasn't the last cycle of the plague, neither of us knew how we could stand to go through this gruesome experience three summers in a row.

When the next spring rolled around, we found no egg sacs and no tents. And *no* caterpillars. The shriveled cocoons John and I had found really *did* signify the end of the plague. Yet we weren't over it.

As I write this in April 2023, I confess it took years for John and me to step back from that state of high alert, to let go of the extreme stress of all those months. Maybe a little of it will always be with us.

I still automatically check our orchard for egg sacs, and scan our woods for caterpillar tents. When I'm beneath the trees, sometimes I'll catch myself looking up, to ensure a line of caterpillars aren't rappelling down on my head from above.

But now, ten springs after the caterpillars' reign of terror first began, John and I still haven't seen any signs of an infestation.

I have no way of knowing if this terrible plague was due to climate change—the event actually predated the more noticeable weather changes we've noticed around our here. If the infestation we experienced is a harbinger of more, and worse natural imbalances yet to come, I'm going to take the easy way out and not think about it.

After all, we found only one lone egg sac this spring. So. Far.
Fingers crossed.

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