

# It's a mad, mad (caterpillar) world

By Rodika Tollefson

Upon returning home one sunny mid-May afternoon, I found a large party of uninvited guests. A few dozen of them stretched out leisurely on my porch, most of them opting for the premium spots, in the shade.

The tent caterpillars, as they like to be called, betrayed barely a wriggle at the sight of my temporary disorientation. How bad is a little party, I thought to myself as I walked to the door, careful not to step on anything squishy. Later, I would pay for my ignorance. But not yet.

It took a couple of days to realize that word went down the grapevine about the delicious rose and other accommodations in my front yard, and guests started arriving by the dozen. Trouble was, someone forgot to notify the hostess that the great caterpillar convention was under way. I could have prepared appropriate snacks at least, perhaps some BT.

I don't like confrontations but I figured the least courtesy I could get was to be able to walk to my door undisturbed. So I tried gentle persuasion via the hose. It worked! For about five minutes. The sweeper? Another five. I watched in desperation as my annuals, freshly planted, were terrorized.

I can live through this, I said, I am resilient. I lived through communism, childbirth, in-laws and \$2.35 per gallon of gas. Caterpillar Woodstock can't be worse, can it?

I started storing the outdoor broom inside and took shifts sweeping, five minutes every half-hour. This is not about me anymore, I said. This is about the universe. It works like this: The little pests live far away from my yard. The human dominates. Everybody lives happily ever after.

The caterpillars did not take kindly to my manifesto. Word of mouth got more intense, the sleeping arrangements now extending to all the exterior walls and the lawn, the campsite stretching far into the driveway.

Three of them followed my husband and me into Gig Harbor one day. Great, scouts! Now they can go back and tell everyone the rose bushes and trees are sweeter

there—why else would property values be so much higher—and they could all relocate. But the three failed to catch a hop back. So much for that.

Other spies followed me into my house, attaching themselves to my clothes. But the day one snuck up my pant leg was the day their welcome officially expired.

As I drove down our dirt road, I peeked at my neighbors' yards. Judging by the several naked trees in their driveways, we're all in this together. It is about the universe.

We should call the county and ask if they plan to spray, my husband said. Sure, like the county will use our taxpayers' dollars on something useful like that. I wonder if we should propose a caterpillar tax. Hey, some Oregon county was considering a mosquito tax, why not? But since these caterpillars don't attack everyone equally, you couldn't really pay per square foot or property value. You'd have to pay per pest capita—what sort of census taker would want the job to do that math?

I keep thinking of a song called "Mad World" by Gary Jules, who in the saddest voice says, "All around me are familiar faces/Worn out places, worn out faces/Bright and early for their daily races/Going nowhere, going nowhere." Of course he was referring to humans when saying "it's a very, very mad world" but he might as well be singing about caterpillars—the part about drowning my sorrows sounded especially nice after four of those five-minute sweeping sessions, when every caterpillar swept into the bucket filled with water and soap was replaced by two others in some weird conspiracy. By the time I went for a drive and returned, hundreds of them were shaped like my stairs, the shovel handle, and the edge of the flower barrel.

I only drink about twice a year but this seems like a necessary occasion. I could get out that black cherry Zima, uncaterpillar my lawn chair, find a spot far away from any threat of flying caterpillars, and sing, "it's a mad mad world" aloud.

I am resilient. I can live through this. At least until the moth congregation.

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