

'The Caterpillar'

The creature stood blinking in the sunlight. Before her was a soft veined leaf still beaded with dew. Above her, clusters of other leaves, up and up as far as she could see. They rustled softly and made the light flicker. She turned to look behind her and could see an empty egg pod peaking out from the underside of the leaf that she was standing on. Not remembering, or maybe not even knowing, how she had come to be there, she quickly worked out that the empty egg pod must have been hers. It was a great thing to be alive and everything seemed as new and as fresh as she was herself. As she moved around she found that her sticky feet made a pleasing ripple of popping sounds as she walked astride the leaf edge. Even though the surface was soft, her large collection of legs was super-grippy. Rearing up her head confidently she looked back over her tiny light green body. She noticed some flashes of the same green shade on the cool side of the leaf where, within the clutch of still sealed eggs, there were hints of movement. It looked as if she would not be on her own for long.

She had no idea what time of day it was, but a hollow feeling inside told her it was time for breakfast. But what to eat? She sucked on a nearby bead of dew and, although refreshing, it didn't satisfy. It was only then that the heavenly aroma of the leaf itself caught her attention. She put her head down and took a bite. Yes, this was the stuff. Her pincer-like mouth sliced cleanly through both the soft surface and the crisp inside. As soon as one mouthful was swallowed she was hungry for the next. Before she knew it she had munched all the way to the other end of the leaf. She paused for breath. She hadn't realised just how hungry she was. And as she turned to look at her chomping trail she saw that several other caterpillars had also hatched and were doing the same as her.

"No slacking there. Eat on," came a voice. There above her was a bright blue dragonfly, hovering noisily. "It's what you sweet green caterpillars do best, isn't it?"

'The Caterpillar'

"It's only breakfast," replied the caterpillar a little defensively.

"I thought all you guys are on a mission, aren't you?" retorted the dragonfly, "before you get picked off by the birds."

This confused the caterpillar because as yet she hadn't seen a bird and didn't have a clue what 'picking off' would involve. But now that the dragonfly had pointed it out she noticed that there were small juicy green caterpillars on all the leaves; and all doing breakfast; an army of caterpillars in fact.

"You'd better get stuck in, little one, you don't want to get left out," and with that the dragonfly flipped out of view.

The caterpillar took heed and started munching with a new vigour. All through the day and all through the next she chewed her way along leaves. The only times she stopped were when she bumped into another caterpillar or when she transferred to a new leaf. No longer did she pause to drink in the beauty of the view. No longer did she savour the taste. She felt pressured to keep up with the others; driven to eat more and more. But more was never enough. And all the while she was getting fatter. Was that the reason that the leaves seemed to be getting smaller, or was it that the food was starting to run out? At that thought, the caterpillar was gripped by panic. She ate even quicker, worried that the others were stealing her leaves. Eating gave her no satisfaction at all any more but she couldn't stop. She felt bloated and fat and struggled now to move about.

"Man, you're ugly!" came the voice of the dragonfly again. "You're not sweet and green any more. You're fat and brown. Gross! You should be ashamed of yourself you fat grub."

The caterpillar looked back over her bulging body. It was true. She sadly took on the shame that had been poured on her and made towards the edge of her leaf to avoid being seen. But just then she heard another

'The Caterpillar'

voice in the distance: "Leave her be! I can see quite clearly that this caterpillar is the stuff of butterflies."

The dragonfly roared with laughter: "This fatso could never get off the ground! The only flying she could manage would be a straight-line plummet."

"Away with you!" persisted the defender. "Don't torment her so. She is made of sterner stuff than you know."

"Sturdier stuff more like. I wouldn't like to be in the splash-zone when that body hits the ground," and with that the dragonfly flicked deftly away, cackling at his own wittiness.

"Don't listen to that accuser," said the creature as it alighted on the caterpillar's leaf.

The caterpillar now dared to look up at the owner of this kind voice. There before her was a wisp of a creature, with fine elegant legs no thicker than hairs, and curling antennae that pointed to the blue sky above. On its back was a black paper-thin crest standing high above the insect's back and bending very slightly in the breeze.

"You are very kind," said the caterpillar politely, "but I think the dragonfly was right. I am dreadfully overweight."

"I see much more in you than what is contained in your skin," said the creature mysteriously.

"But can't you see, there couldn't be anything less like a butterfly than me?"

"Don't you dream of escaping this treadmill life? Wouldn't you like to catch the breeze and sail to the sky? Don't you want to be free of your self-serving existence?" asked the stranger.

For the first time in a long time the caterpillar let herself look beyond the meal in front of her. She stood blinking in the sunlight, just as on the day of her birth. As she looked into the clear blue sky she dreamed of being carried on the wind. It must be wonderful; but something she would never

'The Caterpillar'

know. "What a silly idea," she said. "How could a fatso grub do anything but plummet?"

"Don't deny your dream," countered the creature. "Your Maker knew exactly what He was doing when he made you. He made you to fly! You know it; somewhere inside you know it."

The caterpillar felt a little uncomfortable now. There was an outrageous nub of truth in the creature's words; a wild and unsettling truth. But what did this creature know of the Maker's intentions?

"You must give up your self-serving heart, and your destructive habits. You must throw off the layers that cover who you are. You must die to yourself."

"What do you know?" the caterpillar lashed out. "You know nothing of my addiction, of my shame. It's different for skinny insects like you. You know nothing of my grubby life. Why do you torture me with what I can't ever have?"

But the creature wasn't hurt by the outburst. He only saw the caterpillar's dashed dreams and inner pain.

"I know something," he said, and with that his thin crest split in two and a pair of enormous wings opened flat to the leaf, spreading wide and flat in the sunshine. What colours they were: dark greens, bright yellows, warm oranges and deep blood reds all swirling together in ornate patterns. "For I am a butterfly," he said and paused, "... and I was once like you."

The caterpillar was so dazzled by the butterfly's magnificence that she didn't really take in what the creature had said.

"You are beautiful," she mouthed in a whisper.

"And I was once like you," whispered back the butterfly again.

The caterpillar gawped as if chewing on a leaf that wasn't there. "No," she said slowly, "you could never have been like me!"

"It's true; and one day you will join me in the air, but only after you have died to self and the Maker has raised you up anew," the butterfly

'The Caterpillar'

said mysteriously. "Trust yourself into the Makers hands," he added and then was caught up and away as a light breeze swayed the leaves. The caterpillar watched him flitting into the distance, the colours of his open wings flashing.

"What a strange thing," she said to herself. The butterfly's words had moved something deep within her and for a moment she wanted to believe that life could be different, but then she heard the familiar droning and cackling of the dragonfly. She didn't want him to see that she had, for a second, dreamed of something better, so she quickly put her mouth to the leaf edge to hide her interest. And before long, in the hiding, disinterest became her reality. The words and image of the butterfly dimmed in her mind, but the Maker had heard the cry of the caterpillar's heart and the longing of her soul for her destiny. He had been waiting for it and was now ready to act on the caterpillar's desire. But from the caterpillar's view point things got much, much worse.

Bump! The caterpillar looked up. She had munched head-on into another fat brown grub. They looked at each other, and then down at the bare stalk on which they stood; and then across the face of the now naked bush. There were no more soft green leaves. They had all been eaten. There were now only sticks and other caterpillars rearing up and looking around. The food was gone! The caterpillar felt her insides churning and already an awareness of emptiness. What was she to do now? Was this the end? But there was worse to come. As she watched she saw a flock of large winged creatures, much bigger than the dragonfly or butterfly, alighting on the branches and plucking off the exposed caterpillars with their sharp beaks. These were the birds that she had been warned about. The caterpillar was terrified and fled for her life. She fled in the only way that a fat grub can. She tumbled and plummeted down through the empty branches and into the damp and slimy leaf litter. It was horrible and dank but at least the caterpillar was safe. She found a bramble stem and limped

'The Caterpillar'

onto it even though the sharp thorns hurt her feet. The bramble leaves were tough and bitter. They just left her feeling empty and gave her no comfort. The caterpillar, desolate, clung to the underside of the bramble leaf. "I hate my life," she said to herself. "I wish I could die." She gathered the leaf around her and started to sew it together shutting out the world with its sunshine and green leaves, its shadows and wet leaf litter. She ate no more and her mouth sealed over. She moved no more and her skin turned hard. She tried no more. She gave up on herself. And as she surrendered to death the words returned to her: "You are the stuff of butterflies." The declaration seemed more absurd than ever, but it was a comfort that the butterfly had shown some belief in her.

As she died, she could feel her inner parts separate and break down until she was no more than caterpillar soup. Everything within her just felt disconnected. She couldn't move now even if she wanted to. Her muscles had turned to gel. For days and nights all that she was aware of were her thoughts and the question: "When will the end come?" But then, after a time (how much time, she wasn't sure) it was as if she could feel herself again. Things seemed to be setting within the soup. Her muscles were pulling together again. Her eyes could sense the sunshine through her still hard skin casing. And she could breath. She wriggled and flexed and something ripped. She paused. Had she done herself an injury? No, but she could feel less of a pressure at her rear end. Excitedly she shook and gyrated to get out of her brittle skin. The bramble had grown during the time of her death and she plopped out of her hard old skin onto a new platform below.

The creature stood blinking in the sunlight. Before her was a soft veined leaf, still beaded with dew. Above her she could see clusters of other leaves, up and up as far as she could see. They rustled softly and made the light flicker. She leaned forward and sipped on a ball of dew. It was

'The Caterpillar'

refreshing. But here was fresh leaf for the taking too! She raced to the edge and bowed her head to munch. It was then, to her horror, that she discovered that she now had no teeth! Shocked, she found herself just dabbing at the leaf edge with her now curly tongue.

"It's no good," she sobbed. "What has happened to me?"

Just then the breeze tugged at her and almost lifted her off the leaf. She must have lost some weight. As she clung on nervously, she noticed that her feet were no longer short and sucky but thin and wispy; and lots of them were missing! It was much harder to hold on.

"You are not the caterpillar you once were, are you?" came a familiar voice, and the butterfly touched down gently next to her.

"Oh please can you help me?" wailed the caterpillar. "Something dreadful has happened."

"I spoke the truth. You are the stuff of butterflies." The butterfly looked at her intently. "But when you die to self, it's not a one-off. It's a moment by moment decision."

Then another movement through the leaves bore the butterfly away, flashing in and out of the light and shade. The breeze tugged at the caterpillar too making her cling on for dear life.

"This is terrifying. I was better off as caterpillar soup," she said to herself. "At least I was safe and hidden." And she glanced about, nervously remembering the birds she has fled from. Then another gust; and another. She was rocking out of control and her grip was slipping.

Then just when she could hold on no longer, she surrendered to the wind. Did she give up or just decide to trust it? But instead of plummeting, a great pair of wings snapped open across her back. She was lifted up and carried on the breeze. It was frightening and exhilarating and wonderful all in one. She rode the wind and the sunlight caught her bright dazzling butterfly colours.

'The Caterpillar'

"He was right!" thought the caterpillar. "I was the stuff of butterflies. I know now who I am, who I was always destined to be." And with that she dropped elegantly on her delicate feet onto the fragile petal of a flower. She was amongst other butterflies, each with their head in a different bloom. Her tongue dipped instinctively into the heart of the flower and she drank long and deep of the sweet nectar. It was much more satisfying than even the crispest leaf, and once she had drunk it was enough. Gone was the craving for more.

Just then came a familiar droning. All the other butterflies danced into the air in a flurry of colours and were away. But the caterpillar stood with her legs quivering.

"Hey there gorgeous, fancy a flight down to the pond with me?" offered the dragonfly in a smarmy voice.

This took the caterpillar by surprise. Why did her tormentor want the pleasure of her company? If she hadn't already seen the nasty side of this shallow creature she would have almost certainly been taken in by such a flattering offer. "Shame on you!" she said with a confidence that she wasn't expecting. "Why do you want my company now after you were so nasty before?"

"Who rattled your antennae? You're a right nasty piece of work you are; fluttering your wings at me like you want the attention; and then stabbing me in the thorax. Too good for me, are you? I can't stand you butterflies! You are all so stuck-up and self-absorbed," and with that he flitted away in disgust.

"Oh no!" thought the caterpillar. "Have I escaped being fat and humble only to become arrogant and proud?" She shuddered at the thought and desperately looked around for a leaf to hide under.

"Don't let him shame you." The butterfly she'd first met alighted next to her. "The accuser is full of anger and lies. You are beautiful. It's the way the Maker intended you to be. Just be at peace with yourself. You

'The Caterpillar'

can be pretty without making others feel ugly. The Maker has turned you inside out and the colours of your wings wonderfully show the beauty that has always been inside you."

"You are so wise," breathed the caterpillar relieved, "How did you learn such wisdom?"

"What is wisdom?" laughed the butterfly. "It's only truth lived out. If you want to be wise, stop believing lies."

The wind blew and they were carried together up on the breeze. The caterpillar gasped. Would she ever get used to moving like this? Would she ever fully trust the wind? Yes, flying was exhilarating and landing felt natural. It was the taking off that was the hard part. It was difficult to give up control, even for a second.

But the caterpillar did learn, not only to be lifted by the wind, but gradually trusting enough to leap and let the wind catch her. There were always temptations to go back to old habits and believe in old lies, to hide under leaves or to stay out of the air for too long. But living in the truth was indeed her path to wisdom. And she no longer thinks of herself as a caterpillar.