

9 The Caterpillar

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I find a small caterpillar in my bed in the morning. There is no good window to throw him from and I don't crush or kill a living thing if I don't have to. I will go to the trouble of carrying this thin, dark, hairless little caterpillar down the stairs and out to the garden.

He is not an inchworm, though he is the size of an inchworm. He does not hump up into the middle but travels unsteadily along his many pairs of legs. As I leave the bedroom, he is quite speedily walking around the slopes of my hand.

But halfway down the stairs, he is gone – my hand is blank on every side. The caterpillar must have let go and dropped. I can't see him. The stairwell is dim and the stairs are painted dark brown. I could get a flashlight and search for this tiny thing, in order to save his life. But I will not go that far – he will have to do the best he can. Yet how can he make his way down to the back door and out into the garden?

I go on about my business. I think I've forgotten him, but I haven't. Every time I go upstairs or down, I avoid his side of the stairs. I am sure he is there trying to get down.

At last I give in. I get the flashlight. Now the trouble is that the stairs are so dirty. I don't clean them because no one ever sees them here in the dark. And the caterpillar is, or was, so small. Many things under the beam of the flashlight look rather like him – a very slim splinter of wood or a thick piece of thread. But when I poke them, they don't move.

I look on every step on his side of the stairs, and then on both sides. You get somewhat attached to every living thing once you try to help it. But he is nowhere. There is so much dust and dog hair on the steps. The dust must have stuck to his little body and made it hard for him to move or even go down in the direction he wanted to go in. It may have dried him out. But why would he even go down instead of up? I haven't looked on the landing above where he disappeared. I will not go that far.

I go back to my work. Then I begin to forget the caterpillar. I forget for as long as one hour, until I happen to go to the stairs again. This time I see that there is something which is just the right size, shape and color on one of the steps. But it is flat and dry. It can't have started out as him. It must be a short pine needle or some other plant part.

The next time I think of him, I see that I have forgotten him for several hours. I think of him only when I go up or down the stairs. After all, he is really there somewhere, trying to find his way to a green leaf, or dying. But already I don't care as much. Soon, I'm sure, I will forget him entirely.

Later there is an unpleasant animal smell lingering about the stairwell, but it can't be him. He is too small to have any smell. He has probably died by now. He is simply too small, really, for me to go on thinking about him.