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Fear, Where Is Your Sting?

Exploration, it appears, is a family trait. I can recall the feeling of Mama and Daddy's hands holding my tiny ones as they guided me into partially-built houses with for-sale signs poking out of the front lawns. At five years old, I could march confidently into any framed structure, swiftly identify the unfinished rooms, and definitively pronounce my opinion of the floorplan. Over the course of the next seven years, looking for the property of our dreams became as much a hobby as a necessity. Although we'd nearly fallen through floors in fixer-uppers, harmlessly trespassed in neighborhoods of new construction, and once been entirely unnerved by a basement full of peculiar painted people, nothing could have quite prepared us for the fiasco at Jack's Creek Polo Club.

Mama had called the real estate agent in the morning and obtained permission for the two of us to drive out to the forty-acre farm for a quick look. As we passed the bank-owned sign and bumped down the gravel driveway, my equestrienne's eyes grew wide with awe. A brilliant green field stretched before us behind the trees, perfectly smooth and glistening in the summer sun. Far to the left, an enormous stable stood stylishly, sporting white paint and black trim. I spied a dilapidated sign lying near the edge of the forest, the faded letters reading "Jack's Creek Polo Club." That explained the existence of the perfect grass – it had once been a playing field! Once we drew closer, we would likely find the buildings in a state of disrepair – as is often the

case with foreclosures – but from this distance, I gleefully perceived, it looked like a lovely place to investigate.

Having tromped around for quite a while that morning, Mama and I were excited to take Dad on a grand tour of the place once he came home from work. By the time the three of us reached the farm, the early evening sun was beginning its descent. It was an incredible property at an excellent value, and we all seemed to be holding our breath, almost fearing it too good to be true. We peered into windows of the house, marveled at the number of stalls lining the barn aisle, and strolled hand-in-hand to the middle of the flawless field. Every stereotypical summer day quality – from the butterflies to the breeze – seemed to have been lined up especially for our visit. Life, however, sometimes excels in the use of juxtaposition; a moment of intense goodness can be swiftly followed by one of unexpected terribleness, further highlighting the starkness of contrast. This very idea was illustriously represented as we climbed the steps of the carriage house.

Mama and I, a bit ahead of Dad, heedlessly darted up the wooden stairs for at least the third time that day. The unfinished room at the top was stuffy; the only air came through the opened door to the porch, from which we had entered. I heard the sound of Dad's louder steps upon the stairs as he came to join us and, suddenly, completely unmanly shrieking! We ran to the windows, vainly attempting to see through the accumulated dirt.

“Something... something must have gotten him!” Mama's face was a mixture of perplexity and fear as she whispered, “What if it was a snake?”

We glanced at each other in horror. From below, we heard a muffled voice, yelling something, but a low hum had risen and was quickly drowning out all other sound. The two of us started for the door, then froze at the sight ahead. A dark cloud was moving through the door,

blocking out much of the sunlight. Now paralyzed with fear, I could only watch them come forward as quickly as the color was draining out of my face. Thousands of hornets rapidly filled the room! The tiny devils spread out to cover every inch, other than the exact space our two bodies took up. If I dared to move, my life would become extraordinarily painful. If I happened to be allergic, there was a slim possibility I might actually die, here, in this sweltering upper room. My twelve-year-old self was on the verge of a full-fledged panic attack. My muscles tensed; my fists clenched; I was afraid with the true, deadly kind of fear that casts off rationality, and I was prepared to run.

Just then, I felt Mama's soft touch against my shoulder and her gentle voice whispering, "It's okay. Just stay calm. Stay in control."

Control was the last quality this nightmare inspired, yet I turned toward my mother, and suddenly, it seemed we were the only two beings in the room. She pulled me against her chest, rubbing soothing circles on my back. The hornets flew dangerously close, but they never brushed our skin. It was as though a protective bubble surrounded our little huddle. We remained in the same position for what seemed like hours, as my brain became unable to correctly gauge the time. I barely registered Dad declaring his determination to help us, or Mama's brave response that we must handle this on our own; there was absolutely nothing any of us could do. Fifteen to twenty minutes passed in complete silence. We would later learn that Dad was beginning to feel the ill effects of all the stings he had received, and I felt almost at the point of collapse. Slowly, the hornets began slipping back to their nest beneath the steps. Never had I been more relieved to stretch my rigid muscles. We hustled for the door, thrilled to be free of the hornet-room, only to discover upon emergence from our prison that we were still in captivity. Dad was frantically pointing toward the fifth step. The hornets had awakened from their nest beneath; only a slight

disturbance might stir them into a frenzy again. We were one story above the ground with zero viable options for escape. Glancing at my mother, I noticed a look of intense concentration on her face. I watched her eyes dart toward the railing of the porch, mentally calculate the height, and then look back at me with authority.

“I can’t.” I didn’t give further explanation for my rapidly returning fear, because it would have served no purpose.

The situation had reached the point of no debate and no choice – only calm, collected action. Over the railing I went, grasping the wooden spindles until my knuckles turned white. The moment to release my grip arrived. Dad stood beneath to catch me as I fell, but the threat of the unknown is always debilitating. Despite knowing the drop was inevitable, my mind seemed only to be internally screaming, “No!” I met my mother’s eyes one final time. Could I do this? Could I have courage in the midst of this fleeting debacle? If I could not be brave for this now, would I ever be able to face a harsher and less forgiving moment?

“You have to let go.” Mama was nodding at me, believing in me, and pulling me out of my abstraction.

Over the course of that terrifying quarter-hour in the carriage house, she had taught me that circumstances are not the final determiner of outcomes. Our response decides our fate. Hanging there, fifteen feet above the ground, it was time to choose my future. My path to being calmly, confidently brave began with letting go of that railing. I couldn’t have known then that one day, I’d be teaching children to ride horses and handling the frighteningly unexpected on a regular basis. I wouldn’t have thought that I – one who feels great trepidation at the thought of public speaking – would stand before an entire church to articulate the joy of mission work. I did not yet realize that facing severe anxiety with calm authority would one day eliminate many

fears from my life. For these reasons, years later, I can reminisce about this drama and be thankful that I did let go and that I set aside panic for the freedom to choose the right course of action. However, as much as we learned from the experience, neither my parents nor I have quite managed to be grateful for those dreadful insects. Occasionally, I find myself wondering who ever bought the old polo club and if the legion of hornets still resides beneath the carriage house steps.