

A Stop in the Park, by Peggy Strack

Excerpt:

In this scene a confused Jamie Stolis contemplates whether she should flee from her volatile yet secure marriage:

Jamie traipsed into the kitchen and poured coffee into a blue stoneware mug that she bought at a pottery shop when she and Michael went hiking in Wyoming. She circled the rim with her finger. They took that trip eight years ago. She couldn't help but smile as she recalled how Michael imitated an agitated bison they had seen in Yellowstone Park. Thank God they were in the car, because the open mockery could have provoked the beast to charge if they were with it on the prairie. She furrowed her eyebrows. What had happened to her husband's silly side?

Jamie sipped her coffee and swayed. The air felt light. She picked up the salt shaker and sprinkled tiny white crystals onto the counter. No one screamed, "Why'd you do that?" She could leave the salt there for three days, and no one would care. Jamie smiled and spun around. This must be how a duck feels when a snapping turtle leaves the pond. She sat on a stool at the island and clasped the oversized mug. The warmth from the coffee seeped into her palms, and she focused on the calm.

When her mini-meditation was over, she glanced at the kitchen doorway. A madman wouldn't be bursting in blaming her for some felony, like the girls leaving their yogurt containers on the coffee table. She sat a while longer trying to figure out what she could do. Stumped, she roamed to the refrigerator and perused her list.

"First things first: that hornets' nest has to go." She peered out the kitchen window. At least twenty hornets buzzed around the nest attached to the outside casing. How should she handle this dangerous project? She glanced at the can of insect killer sitting on the counter. The safest thing to do was to open the window and screen, spray, and then close them quickly before the disturbed insects attacked.

"Okay, my little pests, I hate to ruin your morning, but you are

about to be history.” She held the can in one hand, raised the window then the screen, and blasted the poison at her target. There was a flurry of insect activity, and Jamie swiftly sealed her house back up for safety. When she looked up, she saw dozens of hornets emerging from the nest to join those already outside. She couldn’t figure out how they could all fit in their dwelling, which was the size of an apple. Some of the hornets sensed the venom and fled. Others circled around the nest as if considering their next move. They sensed the toxic substance but weren’t quite ready to leave home. Then there were those that darted back and forth in a straight line, knowing they should depart but unsure of where to go. A few of the circlers and darters flew away, determining that uncertainty was better than death. The hornets that remained were lifers, and that life was about to be terminated.

“Go on, little hornets,” Jamie said. “You’ll find a new and better home. Just go.”

But they stayed.

“The poison will kill you. Go on.”

The hornets did not respond to her warning. Jamie watched them fall to their death into the alley that separated her home from her neighbor’s.

“What a show,” she whispered.

She contemplated the creature feature she just witnessed. Why did some hornets flee the instant they suspected danger? Why did some cling until it was almost too late? Why did some hang on until annihilation was inevitable?

“Hmm, if I behaved like a hornet and was aware that I lived in a house that had been sprayed with malice, cruelty, and arrogance, what would I do?”

Jamie roamed around the kitchen with her arms folded. She stopped at the window and peered down at the cowardly hornets who had chosen death over adventure.

“You are a darter, Jamie,” she murmured. “You were about to be poisoned, but you had the courage to fly away. The question is, will you return?”

She thought about money. She thought about Megan and Emily

having to travel between houses. She thought about working full time while trying to take care of a home and children. Then she thought about spending another forty or fifty years with Michael.

“God, life is hell.”

She put her face in her hands and tried to will away the confusion.

Her stomach started to ache. She picked up the phone to call Matilda. They could have lunch and joke around. Matilda would be so jealous of Jamie’s possibly single status. She might even persuade Jamie to go away some Saturday night for a wild girl’s night out to celebrate. Jamie punched in three numbers then stopped. If she told Matilda, all of their friends would know before nightfall. In fact, everyone in DC would know. Kids might ask Meg and Emily about the split, and she couldn’t have that. This was a private matter.

She rubbed her belly, hoping the pain would dissipate. It didn’t work. She traipsed to her computer and signed in to Facebook. There was a message from Steve. “What’s up?”

That was it. She could tell him about her troubles. Steve didn’t know any of her friends. It was safe, and venting would make her feel better. Maybe he’d even offer some good advice. In fact, now that she was separated from Michael, she might just meet Steve for that cup of coffee on Friday. It would be nice to meet a new friend.