



Old Habits Die Hard

Alone for the first time in my life, I learned to let go of the past and to face my fears—starting with the wasp in my kitchen. / BY CATHERINE DOWNES

THE WASP was huge. I hadn't noticed him enter my home, but there he was, hovering above my kitchen counter like a UFO. A shadow, which slid across a glistening mound of freshly diced Roma tomatoes, tipped me off to his presence. A sharp *buzzzzzzz* solidified it.

I flung my head back and observed as he levitated up, and up, and up, before crawling into an overhead recessed light fixture. His abdomen, thick and covered in black-and-yellow stripes, twitched. His gangly legs stretched in front of his head. His wings dropped behind his body like a tiny backpack. I froze, tomato knife in hand, and stared at him. He stared back. We watched each other watching each other with the kind of intensity that could perforate steel.

I had no idea what was running through his bug brain. How could I? But his vibe, if wasps have *vibes*, was chill. An earlier version of myself



would have booked it toward the nearest exit, then down the street in pursuit of a defender. But not today. I didn't flinch.

It took me 33 years to get to this place. That's three decades plus the amount of time that Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake dated. It's a long time to take to get somewhere. Even if that location isn't a physical destination but a mindset. In this case, it was a place where I was able to fearlessly exist in the same room as a wasp.

Now, before you start shouting things like *Small fry!* and *Wimp!* from the comfort of your peanut gallery, hear me out.

Until this moment, I'd been guarded from clicking cicadas searching for a windowpane to in-

Until this moment, I'd been guarded from clicking cicadas searching for a windowpane to infiltrate.

filtrate. And shielded from leathery millipedes who slithered under doorways in the dead of night, unaware that they were not, in fact, invited to the party. I had parents, and then roommates, and then later, a husband to thank for this.

But we grow up.

And by "we," I mean "I," but also maybe "you."

And we leave home. And our friends move in with us. And then we grow up some more. And we fall in love. And our friends move out. And our significant other moves in. And then sometimes we fall out of

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love. Or maybe we realize that we were never truly in love to begin with. And we move out. And then, for the first time, we're living on our own.

That was me at 30. An inexperienced, squirmy army of one who hadn't so much as slayed a beast more menacing than a housefly. OK, it's not like I didn't know *how* to kill bugs. In theory, it's simple. You step on them. Or spray them with poison. Everybody knows this. But the act seemed daunting. Impossible, even.

I was faced, for the first time, with this seemingly hopeless task a mere 48 hours after moving into my new single-person pad. I stood in my living room with a failed marriage under my belt. A mountain of unopened cardboard boxes by my side. And a big, red, *wasp!* trapped between my balcony screen and sliding glass door.

I was also surrounded by friends who were equally inept in this field. How pathetic. Four grown adults with moderately quick reflexes who had undergone far worse than a run-in with a bug with a stinger attached to its rear. Yet, there we were, powerless.

I'll spare you the details, but just know that after some frantic knocking on neighbors' doors, a tsunami's worth of Windex, some drenched wings, and one of those electric bug zappers that resembles a tennis racket, the insect was sent to its grave.

Sayonara, sucker! Arrivederci, dude! R.I.P., my guy!

We popped two, maybe three, bottles of reasonably priced champagne. We sipped from acrylic margarita glasses that I'd picked up from a resale shop since all of my coupes and snifters and chipped vintage mugs were buried in a box somewhere. We drank to the fallen insect and his (hopefully) fulfilling insect life. We toasted to singleness. Not the sad kind, but the kind filled with boundless freedom and opportunities. We raised a glass to my new bedroom with

floor-to-ceiling mirrors. And we knocked brims to bravery.

Once the bottles were empty, and the sun had set behind the massive catalpa tree on my street, my friends went home.

Here, in the quiet of my kitchen, as I rinsed the sticky from my fingers and lapped water from the faucet like a Saint Bernard, I was confronted with the fact that there were so many things that I didn't know how to do. I didn't feel brave.

I felt disheartened and, frankly, a little dumb.

Now, I'm not talking about things like contorting your limbs during Ashtanga yoga or mastering falconry. I'm talking about the tasks you may automatically hand off to someone else. It's part of the balance. The yin and yang. The "I'll make the cheesy cornbread from scratch because you can't follow a recipe to save your life" to the "You make the chili because every time I

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dice an onion my eyeballs turn into Niagara Falls.”

My gut instinct was to send a distress signal and attract a savior who could fulfill these shortcomings. But I didn’t. I stood in my kitchen, wiped the water from my chin, and made a list. I would face this head-on.

Things I would learn how to do: Kill bugs. Make an over-easy egg without breaking the yolk. Drive

I would train. I would become the bug-slaying equivalent to Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*.



my car through the car wash at the gas station. Sew on a button. File my taxes.

Squashing bugs landed at the top of my list because, for starters, it wasn’t tax season. But also, this skill seemed imperative to my mental *and* physical well-being in the way a perfectly runny yolk wasn’t. (Plus, scrambled eggs are subjectively just as good.) Insects can harm you. They can bite and pinch and sting you. Some can even burrow in your ears. And I was not about to offer up an auditory canal to a family of creepy-crawlies.

I would train.

I would become the bug-slaying equivalent to Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*. No, Bruce Willis in *The Fifth Element*. No! *The Last Boy Scout*. Oh, heck, Bruce Willis in basically any one of his movies except *Look Who’s Talking* because he plays a baby in that movie and the only

thing babies are capable of slaying are their parents' sleep cycles. And diapers.

Just as predicted, intruders came. One by one, they infiltrated my fortress. They slinked and scurried and fluttered. Sometimes they invited their buddies along.

There was a cockroach the size of a small child's foot, a few hairy spiders, a beetle (who was actually very cute, so I scooped her up and placed her outside). There were moths and mosquitoes. Fortunately, no bees. And really, anybody who kills a bee should be sent to a high security prison. (Don't squash bees. We need them. They help plants grow.)

I was getting stronger. Braver. More efficient. And by the time the black-and-yellow wasp appeared in my kitchen, I had a laundry list of bug encounters in my back pocket and a new sense of self-confidence to show for it.

The insect didn't rattle me the way it would have a few years prior. I remained collected, considered my options, and took action. While the bug's fate was a dismal one, and I was momentarily struck by a pang of guilt, I believed, sincerely, that I'd made the right decision. And in this moment, I felt grateful. Grateful for everything that had brought me here. I'd not only conquered my fear but also realized that I was capable of more than I'd ever imagined.

Now, instead of listing my inadequacies, if I'm faced with something daunting, I inhale super deep, exhale with the force of leaf blower, and try.

Eventually, the trying will lead to doing, and before you know it, you're sliding a perfectly cooked over-easy egg onto a crispy slice of toast. (I haven't mastered this yet. But I have faith that one day I will.)

Catherine Downes is an editor at this magazine. Share all of your scariest bug stories and big little victories with her at catherine.downes@paceco.com

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