

Pancreas & Syrup

By
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Angie Condono knew it was silly, but she felt safe driving her Jeep Cherokee. Countless cars, she knew, drove just fine on the dusty roads of Arizona, but after what her husband had done, she felt better having it around her.

This trip was every bit as much about escaping as it was about sight-seeing. She had justified it to her friends and parents by challenging them if they had ever seen the Grand Canyon, ancient redwoods, or Mt. Rushmore. They knew the truth of why she was going, but in the end they could only counsel and console her. She listened to their concern, but left anyway and refused to tell them where she was going.

Pulling into the dusty town of Vespina, she had to remind herself to let go and start anew. With a deep breath and the mantra of courage being played in her head, she swung her Jeep onto the exit ramp and headed for what looked like a modern-day old west town. It was hard for her not to be aware of her New York plates or her thick accent. From her travels before her husband's actions, Angie had learned that most Americans hate the accents and attitudes of New Yorkers.

It was hard not to think of My Cousin Vinny whenever she pulled into small towns for a bite and some gas. It was silly, she knew. This was the 21st century. The internet had made America, even the world so small. There just couldn't be any more backward corners left in America. Not once in her long, meandering road trip had she seen overalls or even an unfriendly face. Her long dark hair, pulled in a ponytail helped her blend in. Her Italian skin tanned enough to blend in the southwest United States.

Like so many towns, the only gas pumps were found outside of the general store. "Cash Only" they boasted. Where she came from, they were called convenience stores. But, a good amount of America, she found, still relied upon a general store. This one must have doubled as a used car lot. Behind the store, she saw several late model cars.

Looking up and down, the main street, she saw a few dust covered open signs. No people were visible, but she couldn't blame them. The windblown dust stuck to her sweaty neck. As she suffered in the sun, holding the handle of the gas pump, Angie wondered two things, why wasn't there a little catch so she didn't have to hold the pump, and why the hell did they not have an awning over the pumps. God it was hot.

As she clunked the nozzle out of her SUV, she heard and felt a deep buzzing. When she paused, with the nozzle in her hand, she didn't hear it again. Maybe a helicopter or some trick of the desert wind.

As she walked towards the crooked wooden door, a little boy burst out. He ran and smiled with the inexhaustible enthusiasm that kids with just purchased candy all enjoy. His black hair and brown skin seemed to match the heat and dust of the desert. Not two seconds after, the mother exploded out of the door.

"Pedro Alonzo Esca! Get back here. NOW!" There was more than anger in her voice. Angie had heard it often enough in her own voice to recognize it. Fear.

Having been a mother in Manhattan, Angie was well aware of the countless dangers to kids. The thought of reckless drivers, friendly drug dealers, and insane fathers would make any mother scream like that. But, the vacant street seemed about as benign as an old-fashioned park.

The boy stopped and considered, as if to consider his options. He surely knew his overweight mother could not outrun him. Angie could almost see the gears turning in his head. She wished he would run. He'd probably catch hell, but maybe some time away from her would be worth it.

The buzzing came again. It was loud and close. Angie whipped her head around trying to see what could make such an ominous noise. The mother screamed a scream that sickened Angie to her soul. Angie had howled that same cry of despair when she watched what her husband had done to their son.

Before she could turn back to the woman, she was knocked flat by a flying black blur. The impact was such that she could barely breathe in the hot dry air. She rolled over gingerly, mindful of possibly broken ribs when she saw a nightmare in daylight.

Standing over the boy was a huge wasp. There was just no other way for her mind to grasp it. The gigantic black shiny insect was easily the size of any full-grown man.

With precise and staccato movements, it easily unrolled the boy from his frozen fetal position. It tucked its hind end between two of its legs and jabbed the clearly visible stinger into the boy's abdomen. The little body convulsed once, and then went slack.

Angie didn't know if the boy made a sound. Her mind was so overloaded with the vision of hell, it could not process anymore input. With the same precise and whip like movements, it picked him up and flew off. In seconds, it disappeared.

All at once, her mind let sounds rush in. The mother's anguished cries penetrated Angie's stunned mind. Two men who must have been in the store were doing their best to gently usher her back into the worn building. The mother halfheartedly fought.

After the woman let herself be dragged back into the store, Angie realized she was standing unprotected in a deserted parking lot where a giant wasp had just flown off with a young boy. Forgetting her customary dignity and her mantra of courage, she sprinted to the store.

The store was dim compared to the bright, sun-lit desert. Immediately, she could see the two men comforting the mother as she sat in a worn rocking chair.

"Welcome to Vespina, Miss..." She was surprised by the old man who stood behind the cash register. His eyes held a mix of sympathy and something else.

"Conono. Angie Conono." If her face showed any less of blood, she would surely faint.

"Here, sit down and let me get you some coffee. Black I think, no cream or sugar." He didn't wait for her response. She wasn't sure she could speak. Her mind was choking on too much information. "Well, now you know our little secret."

"What...what...?" She knew she didn't finish the sentence. It was just that she couldn't make any words.

As the kindly clerk guided her to an unoccupied rocking chair, he spoke in soothing tones. "No sense in beating around the bush. So I'll just say everything. You see, our town has a wasp problem." He smirked as he said it.

Angie tried to smile. It wasn't that he was funny, she just appreciated his gesture.

"It's been about 5 years now. One day, a few of them came and snatched up some of our townfolk. It happened at an outdoor wedding. Just about everyone was there. We heard

buzzing, but you know how weddings are. Most of us were too drunk to notice or care. Out of nowhere they came. Quick as that, they took five guests with them.”

He paused as he relived the nightmare. Angie said nothing, just sought comfort in the horribly stale coffee.

“The next morning, most of the town showed up here in this very parking lot. Sort of a town meeting, with shotguns. Right in the middle of everyone swearing to kill them all, the buzzing came again. About a hundred yards down the road two of ‘em landed. Only this time, they brought back two of the people they took.”

He paused, as if Angie should recognize the significance of that.

“The two of them staggered down the road to the rest of us. Those buzzing bastards just watched. We didn’t know what to do, so we did nothing. Then one of the bugs took off, grabbed one of the just released children and flew off again.”

Angie could see ripples in the surface of her coffee. She rested the cup on her knee so the old man wouldn’t notice her shaking.

“Of course, that made us mad as hell. It was lucky we didn’t shoot each other. Many in the crowd almost shot me when I told them to calm down. See, I realized that the bugs still had four. Maybe alive. If we found their nest and went in shooting, we might not get any back. As it was, we got one out of five.”

“So... that boy, in the parking lot?”

“Might be returned tomorrow, or might not.” He said the last quietly with an eye to the distraught mother.

“See, it’s kind of like a trading game. They take some people, usually kids and give some back. As long as they have hostages, we don’t do anything.”

“But, what about the kids. Aren’t they scared and suffering?” The horror of it all allowed Angie to recover from her shock.

“Not that we know. You see in five years, enough kids have come back for us to know they don’t remember anything and aren’t the worse for it.”

“How many don’t come back?”

“It’s about one out of four. See this particular wasp uses poisoned, immobilized live prey to feed their larvae.”

“And you let that happen?” She was outraged by the cowardice.

“We don’t let anything happen. They let us live.” His tone became defensive when he realized her implication.

“Can’t you fight them? Use some bug spray or something?”

“It’s been tried, a few times. But, you saw one of them. You saw how fast it was. They say an ant can lift ten times its weight. I believe it. I also believe wasps can too. The one you saw was about a hundred pounds. What you think a person can do against that?”

“But you have guns, trucks, Hell call the National Guard.”

“Yeah, we have guns. You ever try to shoot anything flying that fast? As for anything else, you ever stepped on a bee? It crunches don’t it? You see where we have bones, they have a shell on the outside of them. Now imagine how thick and tough that shell is on a hundred pounder.”

That gave Angie pause. She remembered how effortlessly the thing slammed her to the ground.

“We simply don’t have the tools here to fight them. Even if we were ready to risk the number of kids they are currently holding. Right now they have ten. None of the involved

families will leave, and the rest of us. Well... we've been in this for too long to run out on each other now."

"So that's it, you just sit and wait for your turn?"

"I guess it's hard for you to understand, but these aren't dumb animals. Have you ever wondered how a bee can find honey or find its way back to the nest? I'm not saying they're smart like us, but we're their prey and they watch us."

"What do you mean they watch you? This is crazy." Her eyes and tone did not conceal the hatred she felt for his cowardice.

"They know more about us than we do? Tell me. Were you scared when you saw it? Angry? Are you wearing perfume? Is your time of the month coming soon? They know all of that. Their sense of smell is more than you can comprehend. Pheromones or something. Whenever a few men would get together to talk about doing something, the bugs would swarm down on them. You see, they can smell adrenaline of people about to act and they can smell the lack of it. They know when we get together. And they know you're here."

He said the last quietly and did not meet her eyes.

Like tentacles of cold, the dread realization crept upon her. She could be next. Without a second thought, she shot out of the rocking chair clutching her keys.

"I wouldn't." He warned sadly.

She ignored him as she reached the door. Her body went rigid as she saw through the dust streaked door window. There were two of them crawling on her Cherokee. She could hear the faint thuds when their armored feet impacted the hood and the roof. Around and around they crawled. From what she had already heard, she knew they were smelling her car.

"Don't make them mad." He warned. "They're not ready for you. They might be in a few hours or a few days."

"What do I do?" She shrieked. She was not embarrassed to be this afraid. "Can't you help me? Isn't there something in this store?"

"We've tried that. Best not to make them mad. See if they want you, they might sting you a little bit. If they're mad, they'll sting you a lot. A few mothers or fathers have tried to intervene. I've been in war, I've even seen the inside of a POW's cell. I have never seen pain like I've seen for those who get really stung. Weeks of agony. If you get stung in the leg, you'll surely lose it. If you get stung in the chest or head you'll die. But it'll be a long time of screaming."

To cut off her next questions he sped up. "We tried to take those who were stung to a hospital. You should see what a few of them can do to a car if they don't want you to go anywhere."

"No, I hate to say it to you, I hate to know it about myself, but I won't risk that for you. I'm ashamed, but I'm honest, I'm weak and scared. We all are. Well, mostly scared for the kids still down in their hole."

"So what am I supposed to do? Just wait to be taken?"

His silence made her look at the others in the store. None of them would meet her eyes.

After a moment, she swallowed the lump of fear and helpless rage. "Why don't they come after you?"

"You're small enough to be interesting to them. We're either too big or too old or don't smell right or something."

Angie frantically dug into her purse. The big expensive bag had too many damn things in it. After a minute she pulled out her small silver phone. She knew before she tried to call. No

service. For the last hundred miles she never saw a cell tower. With hopeful eyes she looked up at the old store keep.

“Sorry. We haven’t had phone service in five years. Ever since they came. I don’t know how they know not to chew through the power lines, but every time the phone company sends someone out, the bastards chew it up. After a while, they stopped sending people to fix it.”

“What if I don’t go out there? I could just stay in here.” She said hopefully.

“Ma’am, do you really think these walls, doors or windows will stop them if they want in? You’re welcome to stay here. Almost anyone in the town will put you up for a night or as long as you need.”

The implication was not lost on Angie. As long as you need really meant until they take you.

He tried to cheer her when he said, “No one who has ever come back said it hurts much. They can’t remember. Some have been taken a few times. It’s like the wasps take a brother when they return a sister so the family will stay nearby. You might come back with nothing but a good story to tell.” He offered a weak smile.

Angie didn’t respond to that. Her mind was scrambling. Images of bug spray, lighter fluid, ammonia, streaked across her mind. Anything she could fight with. Adrenaline fueled her thoughts and they came like lightning crashes. The wasps traded siblings. One out of five never came back. The cars in the back. Thunder accompanied the latest flash of thought. The wasps only ate the newcomers and visitors.

“You knew. When I pulled in the parking lot, you knew.” Hate laced her accusation as she sprayed it across the store.

“Yeah. I suppose we did. Forgive us. I don’t know if God will, but we can’t let our children be eaten from the inside out.”

“You bastards! You...evil twisted sons of bitches. You let people drive in here and trade them for the lives of your kids.”

“Would you do different?” The mother came out of her funk and challenged quietly.

The question hit her like a sledgehammer. Instantly, she was transported back to that night. Her insane husband has demanded that she meet him at a New Jersey rest stop.

For days the police had looked for him and her son, Joseph. The police had monitored her phones but no one but her looked at the mail. He had mailed his instructions right after he had taken Joseph. She believed the note when it said to come alone or she’d never see Joseph again.

During a tear streaked shouting match in a seedy parking lot, her husband raced back to his car. He gunned the motor and sped through the parking lot. The second to last thing she saw was her husband’s murderous stare as she ricocheted off the windshield in an attempt to stop him. The last thing she saw was her son’s face through the back window as his father crashed into the gas pumps.

“No,” Angie replied. “I’d do the same thing.”

When she closed her eyes to bathe in her hopelessness, she could still see her husband’s car being swallowed by the inferno, and he son’s face in the rear window. She remember the image as clearly s she recalled the limp boy being carried away in the wasp’s grasp. She had lost everything that mattered to her. She had nothing left to lose.

How long they sat in the general store Angie couldn’t say. The men tried awkwardly to make her more comfortable. A coke, cigarettes, anything? She refused it all. She was busy with her thoughts. Fear, regret sadness all swirled in her head. After hours of sitting on the ancient

rocking chair, a new emotion filled her. Rage. Indignant, righteous rage. She saw the boy in the parking lot hanging limp from the wasp's grasp. What did she have to go back to in New York? Her job?

"OK, I'll go. And I'll go willingly. You say they know if people are getting ready to fight." She dug into her purse and pulled out a prescription bottle. With a flash in her eyes, she undid the top and swallowed five pills. "Estrogen replacement. Let's see if they can smell my anger through my hormones."

The three men and the woman looked at her with a glimmer of hope.

"We have had an idea for some time. We never could predict who they're gonna take and when. This takes a volunteer. If you're saying what I think you're saying, it might work."

Angie nodded solemnly. She'd do it. Maybe it'll save a bunch of people, even kids. She listened intently while they explained how a hiker's water-filled backpack could be filled with anything. It was airtight. They tested it with gravy and dogs. A few packs sewn together might hold enough poison to do the job.

A pack turned out to be four. She could barely walk with three, three gallon bladders strapped to her body. It was anticlimactic to agree to spend the night at the house of one of the men who helped strap on the bags of poison. As the hours outlasted her adrenaline rush, fear and weariness crept in.

Like a condemned person being escorted to the gallows, she walked with the store clerk and the others out of the door and through the parking lot. It wouldn't be so bad waiting, she told herself. Maybe she'd get a real meal instead of fast food for a change.

Adrenaline hit her system before she even heard the thrum of the wings. The three men escorting her abandoned her in a flash.

The adrenaline fueled only panic. She could find no vestige of courage or anger as the huge monsters descended on her. Her vision narrowed to concentrate on the bulbous eyes and serrated pincers that loomed ever closer. She barely had time for a silent prayer as they knocked her to the ground. She felt the stinger go in, though there was no pain.

She could feel her consciousness evaporating as she looked up at the evil hinged sections of its black body. *Eat me and go back to hell you bastards*, she thought defiantly as her eyes closed and she slipped off.

The three townsmen and the mother watched with sadness as the pretty, courageous young woman was taken off to her death.

"Do you think the wasps appreciate the syrup we pack with 'em?" The man in the oil stained cap said.

"We haven't failed to get a kid back yet." The shopkeeper replied grimly.

"This one was harder than the others. She really did volunteer." He almost shed tears, but like the desert, his soul was too dry to spare a drop.