

Fiction section

Edited by **Joe Gray**

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At a time of great uncertainty about the future conditions that life is going to face on Earth, even in the near term, and when readers of non-fiction are increasingly wearied by facts and growing warier by the day of misinformation, fiction offers a powerful alternative means of conveying messages of deep import, be they ones that will help shift mindsets or those that will directly inspire action.

The opposites

Monika R Martyn

No one appreciates swarms. Swarming bees, swarming hoodlums, swarming locusts, swarming words of hatred.

No one understands swarming except those who do the swarming and bond to accomplish something far greater than self. The exception is hoodlums, of course, who swarm for similar reasons but are motivated by a calling that has little to do with the greater good.

Margo Fister didn't like swarming either. She didn't like the swarm of ants in her garden, the swarm of invasive aphids curling up the leaves of her elm, the swarms of bees that sent her running.

But Margo Fister had a remedy for those swarms. She boiled the ants alive in their underground tunnels. She sprayed the aphid nest with concoctions of this and that.

She suffered through the swarms of bees because, well, everyone loved bees.

And she hated all yellowjackets equally whether they swarmed or not. You could say she was unanimous in her hatred—no favoritism. Distinguishing between wasps and hornets or any other swarming insect had no bearing on her unanimous hatred.

She had just smashed a yellowjacket with her sandal ten times. One to stun it. Two to kill it. Three to ten to release her pent-up hatred.

Margo Fister had another weapon against yellowjackets. She hung bags of wasp traps. She reveled in seeing a wasp trapped inside the clear plastic pouch strung from the gutter and swinging in the evening breeze.

When Margo Fister sat on her outdoor recliner in the evenings, she enjoyed watching the wasps inside the bag struggling to get out. 'Die already,' she'd mumble into her large glass of wine. Dead wasps were an excellent reason to celebrate.

What Margo Fister didn't understand was that her hatred was unfounded. Sure she had stepped on a wasps' nest as a child. Sure she got bitten repeatedly. She ran, arms flailing, and the wasps became entangled in her thick hair. Sure she had a hundred sting marks before her mother could smash all the attacking wasps to smithereens.

What child wouldn't have sobbed uncontrollably, counting all the welts on her head, arms, legs, neck, back, and hands?

Thirty-five stings—we're all shaped by our childhood experiences, and Margo Fister's hatred for wasps was deep-seated.

Margo Fister hated the plastic bag dangling from the gutter nearly as much as she hated the wasps. Just having to protect her garden sanctuary from an invasion of the ghastly stingers fueled her anger.

She'd been watching the body bag dangle for a few weeks. She typically liked to replace them once a month. The more wasps she murdered, the better.

Last year, she watched one after another enter the bag and eventually become wasp soup. There must have been a swarm nearby. If anything, her neighbors should be thanking her for trying to eradicate the nemesis. But she didn't believe in platitudes from people she couldn't abide.

Margo Fister also disliked the girl upstairs. Some weirdo with tats and piercings and big clodhopper boots. At least the girl was reasonably quiet and kept strange hours, so they never had to meet face to face and make uncomfortable small talk.

The girl seldom went out. Her name was something like a season, a day of the week, or a name that made no sense to Margo: Summer, April, Tuesday, Skye, or Holly. Hope, yes, it was Hope. Margo's mind never could make sense of frivolous names. Faith, yes, that was it!

She worked from home and had her groceries delivered. The girl had those pods sticking out from her ears whenever she went out—a sure way to avoid conversation.

Vegan.

She had said this when Margo commented on the first grocery delivery.

Margo Fister swirled her wine. Margo didn't know that the wine in her glass was partly thanks to the contributions of wasps. Wasps and wine shared an intimate balance with grapes and relied on each other—sort of.

Dusk was settling nicely around her. Albeit an evening chill gave her goose pimples, she enjoyed this final hour before daylight vanished completely. Most evenings, Margo couldn't wait for the morning, start anew, and hope for something better.

The last of the insects and birds swooped past her. She'd just watched a wasp's last attempt to find an exit from the plastic death trap. Finishing her drink, she rose and headed for the garden shed. Now was as good a time as any to replace the bag and kill more of those nasty buggers.

While rummaging in the shed, her phone rang. It was her son. Warren could do no wrong. He was the apple in both of Margo's eyes. Warren never came home much. He had a big job in the big city with big and important friends. It hardly mattered that Margo suffered from all kinds of ailments that she spoke

about to everyone and anyone except Warren. Warren was too important and too far away. He did not have time to worry about his mother aging two thousand convenient miles west of him.

“You heard from Jod?” Warren used his sister to shift the conversation and guilt away from him. Jod. Jodster. Jody. Jo. The apple of her father’s eye. Too bad father left by way of a massive heart attack. Too bad Margo and Rob Fister had divorced five years earlier. Too bad that Rob left a young widow with debt to shoulder. Too bad that Jod had taken sides.

“Yes. She came by to mow the lawn. I would have done it myself, but the mower’s been acting up. How she lets the grass get so long when she knows it bothers me so much.”

“Well, you know it is. She’s busy with that brood of hers. Too bad she wasted all that money on education.”

“Didn’t even bother bringing the baby. Says she can’t cut the grass and look after an active toddler. As if I couldn’t manage. Raised you two pretty much on my own. Your father was gone half the time on his business trips.”

“How you did it all amazes me, Mother. Eva and I were just saying that the other day. The smartest thing we ever did was bring that au pair from the Philippines.”

“Well, you do have that loft over the garage that would have gone to waste otherwise.”

“Speaking of loft? How’s the tenant upstairs?”

“Hardly see her. I’m assuming she deposits the rent check on time?”

“Always the day before in fact. Seems a bit odd, though.”

“Looks it. But she’s quiet. Vegan. Or vegetarian. Not sure exactly what the difference is.”

“Actually, one of my business associates knows her. She’s a freelancer. Does some work for him in building his professional portfolio. Says she’s quite good.”

“Well, she’s not one for talking.”

“Oh. Sorry, Mother. I have to take this call. It’s our travel agent.”

“Good. You’ve decided then where you’re spending the summer holiday?”

“Yes. I’ll call you. Bye.”

The phone line went silent, and Margo suddenly found herself standing by the shed, forgetting why she was there. Warren called her weekly. Or at least monthly. Such a good boy. Too bad he had to go through all the hassles of that court hearing about discrimination. How those immigrants teamed up on him and his company was disgusting.

“Ah! The wasps.” Margo suddenly remembered.

Margo Fister rummaged in the plastic tote and pulled out another wasp body bag. She used these bags so frequently that she didn’t even read the instructions anymore.

When she turned the corner and took the steps up to the deck, she saw what looked like the flat heels of black boots vanishing up the stairway that led to the upstairs studio.

Margo Fister glanced up and saw the light turn on in the studio apartment above her ground-floor home. Warren had said signing the house over to his

name was a good idea. He had paid for the conversion and zoning application. The rent for the loft covered the remaining bit of the mortgage.

Without paying rent, Margo Fister lived off the investments Rob bought all those years ago. It was the one thing he got right. Margo Fister wasn't wealthy, but she also didn't have to scrimp and save. She also didn't have to work, something many of her acquaintances had to suffer through, to make ends meet.

To make ends meet. Margo Fister enjoyed that expression. Her ends were met by the caring attitude of her son, Warren Fister, who now managed her investments and sent her a monthly allowance.

Margo Fister pulled the small step-stool towards the wasp body bag. She reached up and steadied herself with a hand on the downspout. Nasty buggers! She grinned while hoping to remove a full bag.

It happened faster than Margo Fister ever expected. The shock sent her tumbling. It wasn't a wasp sting that surprised or infuriated her. It was the empty bag. The impossibility of no dead wasps sent a heaving shockwave of surprise.

While going ass over teakettle—another expression Margo Fister used to enjoy—the sweet liquid substance from the bag emptied onto her face and blouse. Her back made contact with the arm of her chair, but it didn't stop her from dropping the entire distance, all the way until the cedar decking broke her fall.

Winded and stunned, she watched the bungee cord dangling above her. How the hell could it be empty? Did wasps develop some sort of intelligence and escape? She spat the foul taste of the liquid sideways onto the deck and dragged her bare arm across her mouth. While laying on the deck, she did a quick inventory. An excruciating stab on her side surprised her, but she was sure nothing was broken. She also did a sideways scan to make sure nobody saw her fall. It was so embarrassing. She rolled over onto all fours and righted herself. It only hurt when she inhaled.

Her body signaled that despite there being no broken bones, she'd feel the fall in several places in the morning. Using the deck railing to upright herself, she brushed the dust and leaves from her slacks and blouse. She left her glass, the empty body bag, and the replacement bag on the deck and locked the door behind her.

In the bathroom, Margo Fister stripped off her clothing. Her left torso sang with red bruising, and a welt formed where the arm of the chair left an impression. She probed the tender area with her finger, as people do, and tested the pain scale. She slowly realized that the searing pain was perhaps a broken rib.

Upstairs, the vegan tenant blew on the wet wasps, breathing life into the wings that were slowly fluttering. This week she'd rescued ten wet wasps. Not all of them survived. Faith had cut a discreet hole in the bag for those who could find their way out.

Looking out her window, she'd seen the horrific contraption dangling on the bungee. The idea of the cruel death kept her awake at night until she couldn't stand it any longer and had to intervene. Faith had been mortified by the

cruelty and waited one night until the lights went out in the house below. She hated the unnecessary brutality toward these beautiful insects in the complicated landscape of life.

About the author

Monika R Martyn is a two-time Pushcart nominee, minimalist, and ardent wasp defender.