

My Finest Hour

... a short story of incredible bravery in the face of sheer terror! I've only been as terrified as I was in this incident, twice before in my life. Once, when crossing Williston Lake in a small motorboat with a friend during a storm, with three-foot waves and a propeller that had already been damaged by hitting a submerged log. Another time, when crossing a clearing in the bush during a lightning storm, and finding myself wading through ankle-deep water and realizing that I was the tallest thing around for a hundred yards in every direction.

Maybe the events in this story won't sound so terrifying to you. But it's a day and a half I won't ever forget.

There aren't a lot of things I'm afraid of. I don't mind spiders ... some of them are kind of cute, especially the big fuzzy ones. I've always wanted a tarantula, but I've heard they're picky eaters.

Mice? I know people who will jump up on a chair and scream if someone mentions that they once saw a mouse in a room. But mice don't bother me.

Snakes can be fun. I once had one for a pet; I skinned it and made a hat band when it died. They're not slimy at all.

I love lightning storms (when I'm not out in them), and driving on a twelve lane expressway doesn't faze me. I do that every summer. I'm not afraid of the dark, or enclosed spaces.

I even teach Jr. High. What could be scarier than that?

But I do have one fear. I know it's irrational. Phobias usually are.

My fear is wasps. Bumblebees generally stay out of my way, and honeybees are easy to ignore. But if there's a single wasp anywhere in the house, I have to kill it. I just have to.

I'm not sure where my fear of wasps came from. I've been stung on more than one occasion. I do know that when there is a wasp nest anywhere near the house, the wasps attack me relentlessly whenever I'm outside. Maybe they can smell my fear. I've been chased around the yard more than once.

So you might understand my consternation when I discovered, one summer, that there was a huge nest of wasps in the ceiling above my kitchen!

I was alone in the house at the time, having just returned from Ontario, and of course being alone made it somehow scarier. I first realized that something was unusual when, from the comfort of my reading chair, I could hear a low thrumming noise. It seemed to be coming from the ceiling directly above the microwave. A quick check outside confirmed my worst fear; wasps were entering and leaving from a small crack in the wall just under the roof edge. Somehow they had found a way into the roof and the ceiling space over the kitchen.

I don't know if I can convey the fear I felt at knowing there were hundreds ... perhaps thousands ... of wasps living just a few feet over my head, as I stood in the kitchen and listened to their malevolent buzzing. I wasn't sure what to do.

I poked the ceiling. That was a mistake. The low thrumming rose to a crescendo of angry buzzing. I backed away in horror.

Could they get through the ceiling and into the house itself?

In a panic, I tried to imagine how they might do that. Cracks around light fixtures and wall sockets? The place where the wall board had separated a little from the floor? Could they migrate down inside the walls and up through holes where pipes came through the floor?

I spent the next hour with a roll of white duct tape and a caulking gun, and sealed every hole I could find. Including a few nail holes in the walls where pictures had once hung.

After that, I sat down and worried about what to do next. The throbbing hum from the ceiling across the room sent shivers up my spine. I'm terrified when a single wasp is in the room with me ... here were thousands of them separated from me by no more than the thickness of the ceiling tile. What could I do to get rid of them?

I knew I would never get to sleep, so I didn't even try. I sat in my chair and thought about ways I could get the wasps out of my ceiling. At various points during the night I managed to doze for a few minutes. But mostly I was too worried to sleep.

In the morning I tried making a few phone calls to exterminators in the region. Remarkably, there were very few of them. Every one of them quoted a price that would include mileage, and none of them would do the job for under five hundred dollars ... a price I would have been quite willing to pay ... except that none of them could do the job for at least a week. I couldn't wait that long.

So I devised my own plan. I would make some tiny (very tiny!) holes in the ceiling tiles, and empty as many cans of wasp spray into the ceiling space as I could.

This plan required that I have a large supply of cans of spray. A quick search of the porch revealed a single can, half empty. All right, I would just have to go to town to buy some more. The kind with the long plastic tubes on them, meant for injecting the spray directly into a nest. (I could never picture a person being brave enough to ever get close enough to a nest to do that!)

An hour later, I discovered that there were no cans of wasp spray to be had in Fairview. According to one clerk I talked to, this had been a particularly bad year for wasps, and everyone was buying the stuff. I wished I'd known that sooner.

OK, another hour to Grande Prairie, and then two hours home. But I really wasn't in any hurry. The wasps wouldn't return to their nest until late evening, and I wanted them all in there when I made my move. I took my time. I wasn't looking forward to what I had to do.

On my return, loaded down with seven cans of wasp spray and several more rolls of duct tape, I placed everything on the counter under the nest in the ceiling, and waited.

I waited until 3 am. Just to be sure they were all back in the nest.

How to do this efficiently and quietly? I planned my strategy as carefully as any general had ever planned a battle. I determined that I would poke three or four holes in the ceiling with the end of a coat hanger, and then stick the tube from each spray can up the hole and empty the

can. I had to think about that for a moment. Were the holes I would be making large enough for the wasps to get through? What would happen after I poked the first hole?

The buzzing was almost too low to be heard as I approached a spot directly below where I thought the centre of the nest must be. Do wasps sleep? It sounded like it.

I wish there was some way I could describe how terrified I was of something going wrong. What would I do if a cloud of wasps descended into the house? I made sure there was nothing between me and the front door if it looked like I'd have to run for it. The cats would have to fend for themselves.

I have a friend who is a farmer, and one summer he'd discovered a large wasp nest in the ceiling of one of his wooden granaries, directly above the grain that was stored there. He told me later that he knew he couldn't use spray, which would contaminate the grain, so he had to physically destroy the nest. He described how he had donned three layers of clothing, topped by a winter parka and snowmobile pants, and taped all the openings closed. He'd then donned a beekeeper's headpiece and hockey gloves, taped those too, and made his way up the ladder with a hockey stick. He then proceeded to batter the nest into little pieces, as the wasps swarmed all around him. He only got stung a few times.

I figured that was the bravest thing I'd ever heard of anyone ever doing. I certainly couldn't have done it. But something he'd said gave me pause now. He'd told me that when wasps lose their nest, they all migrate somewhere else, usually somewhere nearby, and immediately begin establishing a new one. He told me that the wasps he'd chased out of his granary had started a new nest in an abandoned car at the edge of his property.

I knew I had to kill most of the wasps, and certainly the queen. There was no telling where their nest would move to if I didn't. I wanted them all dead.

When it comes to wasps, I'm vindictive.

So I gathered my courage and, with shaking hands, poked the first hole.

The end of the coat hanger must have gone directly into the centre of the nest. The buzzing noise rose dramatically. They were angry. I was petrified.

I wasted no time in inserting the end of the tube up into the hole, and emptying the first can into the nest. Then I sealed the hole with duct tape ... no sense in taking any chances.

Trying hard to ignore the maelstrom of activity I could hear above my head, I punched through five more holes and emptied five more cans into the ceiling all around the nest.

What I hadn't considered was that, by starting at the centre of the nest and disturbing the wasps there, many of them had started to fly up and away from the disturbance, seeking to escape the danger they couldn't see. Despite my attempt to poison the entire nest, many wasps escaped the spray completely. In their confusion, they didn't head for the hole in the roof.

They headed for other parts of the house.

Within half an hour, there wasn't much activity in or near where the nest had been. But there were wasps buzzing above the ceilings in all the rooms of the house!

I was really panicking now. There were probably hundreds of places where a wasp could make its way from the ceiling space down into the house. I'd have to seal them all.

I spent the next four hours or so moving from room to room, caulking and taping every conceivable orifice that a wasp could squeeze through. Buzzing noises above my head followed me everywhere. After securing each room, I closed the door, hoping to contain any wasps that managed to get through my defenses.

I didn't sleep that night either. I sat in my chair with a can of spray, waiting for the first intruder to show itself. Periodically I would stick my head into every room, looking for wasps flying around. I didn't find any.

After 48 hours of being awake, the last 36 of which had been fairly stressful, to say the least, I at last fell asleep, still in my chair, and still clutching a can of wasp spray.

Over the next week, the buzzing from the ceiling in all the rooms continued. Eventually it began diminish, and then it seemed that there were just one or two wasps up there. They too finally disappeared.

I hadn't got them all, although I was pretty sure I'd killed the queen. Quite a few of them probably managed to escape through the hole in the roof. But there couldn't have been enough of them left to start a new nest. There were no wasps anywhere near the house for the rest of that summer.

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I've had other nasty encounters with wasps. One summer we had a problem with them in the driveway in front of our house ... but only at certain times. Eventually we discovered that there was a small nest in the engine compartment of our van, and every time anyone went somewhere, the problem disappeared! Jesse solved the problem by running it through the car wash in town.

This story is entirely true. I didn't leave anything out. So if you happen to drive by my place and you see me running in circles out on the lawn, waving my arms around, I'm not inebriated. I'm probably being chased by a wasp. Don't laugh, OK?

For the past few years I've had Michelle check for nests when she cuts our grass. She hasn't had any problems. I also wrote her into one of my stories, slightly disguised as a college student with a chemical arsenal, helping to kill a carnivorous plant, in my story (unimaginatively) called 'The Plant'.