

# Stir it Up

hornet n. a large kind of wasp of the stinging insect superfamily *Vespoidea*.

stir up a hornet's nest, to cause an angry outburst

Summer was a great time in the village. You ran out the back door in the morning and didn't have to come back until your stomach started screaming for food about three hours later. This particular day my friend Luke and I had agreed to bring lunches and meet at our fort in the woods behind our place. We had work to do on the fort. Like soldiers in trenches we had dug a huge square hole to begin, for walls and roof we had woven and tied willow branches, then covered it over with moss and leaves. Last night's heavy rain had filled our fox hole with six inches of water. We spent a hard-working 20 minutes bailing with plastic ice cream tubs, until we got bored.

'Let's go check out the cabins.'

'What cabins?'

'Don't you know about those two cabins?'

I have to admit I don't. So, for once Luke gets to lead me into an adventure. After all, I was the one who first showed him the sand dunes where you could jump down and roll at least sixty feet. I was the one who crawled into the big hollow tree before he did. Now it's his turn to lead.

'C'mon! They're way back in the woods.'

Off we go through the thickest part of these dense woods. I'm nervous, this is where I contacted poison ivy last summer, and the summer before. I haven't dared to venture too far into the woods this year for fear of the poison plant. You may scoff at my squeamishness, but you wouldn't if you were one of those who has been unwillingly initiated into the ORDER OF THE DEADLY ITCH. It's a hot august day but I am wearing long pants and thick socks and a buttoned up long-sleeved shirt. I've buried my hands in the sleeves. I am moving slowly through the woods, on the lookout for that oily, three-leaved, red berry plant.

'Hurry up or we'll never get there!'  
'What's that? I can see something.'  
'Here we are. We found them. Here's the cabins!'

Sure enough, we come upon two rather ramshackle, crumbledown buildings that had once been someone's modest vision of getting away from it all. Why here, in this place? Well, the lake is probably only a hundred yards away, and maybe there had been some kind of pleasant trail to the water. But that was obviously years before, and what we had in the here and now were two buildings, one leaning, both with broken windows, doors falling off the hinges, paint peeled. There is a sadness, an emptiness to old abandoned dwellings, to time past, to lives lived. But to two young boys, off on an adventure, NOT!

'Let's check this out' says I.  
'Cool or what? Look at the hole in the floor.'  
'Yeh, there's probably a skunk down there.'  
'Or treasure, maybe!'

It was this whole idea of treasure that really got us going, poking around. After all, I had found a five dollar bill in an old jacket in the middle of the road on my early morning paper route last summer. Treasure for us was any shiny unusual object. It didn't have to be money. My treasure box at home had a can opener, various strings and ropes, a yoyo, buttons, medals, an old map of Canada, used tennis balls, rusty tools, broken toys and such. We were determined, eager, and not particularly selective about treasure. We were the great appreciators.

There wasn't much to be found in the leaning cabin, it had already been ransacked by humans and squirrels and beaten down by the elements. So we stormed into the second cabin, ready to explore. The walls had already been stripped, as had the old wood stove. There was a broken picture frame, a few old boards, some curled-up tar paper, a twisted oven grate, not much really. Then we both see it at once, a HORNET'S NEST!

In the blind of an eye we both run outdoors and each find ourselves a stick to poke and pry with. I look for a good long one, at least seven feet long. Same for Luke. We enter now, warriors with spears at the ready. The nest is quite large, that grey papery kind of cone-shaped nest with a perfectly round opening at the bottom. It's sitting on the stud wall,

sheltered by the roof and rafters, a cozy little place. We start poking around, trying to knock it down.

(You're probably wondering why we would do this? Good question. It has to do with boyhood, childhood. The same impetus that makes a kid walk along and beat off the heads of flowers, or squish bugs. A devil-may-care not knowing how these actions are affecting this sentient being. Not being aware that this flower or bug has a sensitivity we haven't imagined yet. In this case, we are not even considering that this nest is the hornets' HOME.)

One more thrust and the nest begins to tear away from the building. Part of it breaks off and down they come! To stir up a hornet's nest. Dozens of irate, stingers-at-the-ready, we-take-no-prisoners, screaming hornets fighting for their home, children, God, country, for the survival of the Vespoidean Race.

Luke and I are yelling and running and trying to beat them off, but we have no defences. We are being stung, and badly. The biggest ones are stinging and working themselves free and stinging again. Each sting burns, like some sadist putting out his cigarette on your arm. Not just your arm, they go for the back of the neck, the top of your head, the ear, the armpit, and horribly, for the back of the knee. They're stinging through my clothes. I get a real zinger in the buttocks. The speed of adrenalin is one thing, an angry hornet inside your shirt is another.

And they're big. There's one that's flying backwards and it hovers before my eyes as I'm running full tilt, yelling and crying and trying to swat it away, and it looks six inches wide to me.

Finally, I run out of the woods and onto the gravel road that runs from out house to the beach. Ten seconds later, out come Luke. The hornets hover over us, then with a speed equal to their lightning attack, they are gone.

Luke looks terrible, he's all red and scratched, his hair dishevelled, his clothes in disarray, a look of terror in his swollen eyes. Come to think of it, I probably look worse.

Now comes the pain. I've got bites where bites shouldn't be, and each one is screaming for attention. My fingers, arms, legs, my nose is swelling. I start rubbing the back of my Quasimodo neck. Luke is running in circles yelling 'Owww!'

'C'mon, let's go see Mrs. Snider' blubbers I.  
'Why? WHY?' moans Luke.  
'She's a nurse. She can help us.'

We limp down the road, determined. I'm getting light in the head. I want my body to go away. 'Knock, knock, knock' on the back screen door.

'Thank God, I hear footsteps Luke. She's home.'

One look at us and Mrs. Snider knew we were in trouble.

'Hornets, Mrs. Snider, I'm stung all over.'  
'Me too!'

The next ten minutes are magical. Mrs. Snider leads us to lie down on the cots in the screened porch. She goes to the flowerbed and gets a big bowl of black dirt and takes it to the kitchen sink. I hear water running. She comes out with a big bowl of mud. We each have a couple dozen bites, to which she applies the mud. We are both subdued now, probably in shock. She sits and talks to us.

'This mud should pull out the stingers. You really stirred them up I'd say. Now just close your eyes and rest for awhile.'

I hear her on the phone with my mother as I drift off to sleep.

Mrs. Snider wakes us up an hour later. 'Have a nice cup of mint tea. It'll make you feel a whole lot better.'

I do feel better. Still sore, but somehow at peace. They say bee stings are good for arthritis, maybe hornet stings provide relief for the mind. A new discovery, our sacrifice for modern medical science.

I get to tell my story three times, to my mother, my sisters, and later to my father.

Next morning is a new day. I'm still sore and somewhat swollen, but in my heart I am contrite and determined to change my reckless behaviour. I'm sitting on our front porch breathing in the lovely air, communing with the big chestnut tree, when something catches my eye. It's Luke walking real fast, coming out the woods, head down, trying not to be noticed. Like a fox on the rocks, a sly guy. What's up? I almost shout to him, but something tells me not to.

My dad said that they were too late to save the cabins. The local Volunteer Fire Department responded, but by the time the call came in it was already too late. Helen Brunner had been out walking her little poodle Harold, and it was Harold who first smelled the fire, then Helen who saw the smoke and ran home to make the call.

Fire Chief Ernie Biggs said they couldn't get the water truck down to the old cabins anyway. They found an empty can of kerosene at the sight. Luckily, the woods didn't catch fire. He figures it was arson. They must of gone up fast. Bound to happen someday, cabins abandoned like that. Owners from away. In any case, the investigation is ongoing.

Nobody asked, and I never said a word. Once bitten, twice shy.