

The Hive

In the early 90s I lived in North Carolina at an unremarkable apartment complex called Tyson's Court, within walking distance of Rex Hospital. At the time, my flat mate Paul and I occupied a rather ordinary second floor apartment with two bedrooms and a large kitchen, but we made it our mission to make our time there anything but ordinary.

Perhaps the best part of the flat was the large, covered deck which included a utility closet, a little beer table and an old leather recliner (courtesy of the previous tenant) which stayed outside. Many 'Indian summer' nights were spent out on the deck, enjoying all the vices college life could offer with classmates, girlfriends, party pals and perhaps hundreds of dangerous insects.

Wasps, in fact – Paper Wasps



Late one cool night in October I was sitting on our big chair with a big spliff when I felt my big ass tingle in a big way. It was a warm, buzzing vibration that seemed to come from *inside* the chair. There wasn't enough light to tell what was going on, even with the porch light blazing, so I called out to Paul to bring me a flashlight. Once he found one, I had him come out and tilt up the chair high enough so I could see what was happening underneath.

With the chair reclined, my light fell on a gray, football sized wasp nest that was pulsating with activity. I was shocked how large and active the hive was, and I recoiled at the sight of hundreds of angry insects suddenly agitated by my flashlight. Paul saw my horrified expression and reacted, foolishly dropping the recliner as he sprang inside, slamming the screen door in fear. This impact dislodged the nest from the chair and to my absolute horror it started rolling towards me, teaming with pure, buzzing evil.

Frantically, I tried to escape the from the second floor balcony. Instinctively, I used the flashlight to bat the nest away and scrambled to my feet. The railings kept me from knocking the hive off the deck, so I kicked it towards the utility room in a frenzy. I got stung while trying to open the closet, but I was finally able to punt the football inside and jump back inside the apartment without further injury.



Paul was freaking out because a few dozen stragglers were now trapped in the flat, but I was totally distracted by pain. I made a beeline to the sink to cool the stings on my arms and neck while he screamed like a child, smashing at flying things with a big book.

After a few minutes I found that ice cubes reduced the stings impact, so I tried wrapping several bags of ice on my wounds with electrical tape, which was ridiculous. Meanwhile, my roommate was chasing down the last of the buzzing traitors with a (now) gooey copy of the Guinness Book of World Records. Surrounded by horrible smears of a bug guts and insect parts

on almost every flat surface, we agreed to deal with the rest of it in the morning and we collapsed in our bedrooms for the night.

In the morning, we got up tardy for class and left without a second thought. That evening, we had concert tickets and didn't get home until late. Stupidly, we simply avoided the problem until the following weekend when we hatched a master plan. In hindsight, it was a pretty unlikely scheme that cost us money, friends and a place to live.

At the time we thought ourselves clever, combining Paul's football helmet with my old-fashion Bonnet hair dryer (the one with the cap and a corrugated tube). Using our old friend duct tape, we attached the dryer tube to the helmet and wrapped the whole thing in an airtight plastic bag. The assembly was then inflated with the COOL setting on the hairdryer so suffocation was unlikely. Add a couple stretch bandages and sunglasses and I looked like a Tusken Raider from Star Wars.

It sound idiotic but I was very concerned about stings, so I basically wanted a spacesuit - complete with helmet and air supply. After adding a raincoat and several more layers of clothes, I was ready to conquer the invaders of Tatooine - and kill all those flying fishhooks still living in my utility closet.



Paul had a class about the time I finished suiting up, but he stayed to watch while I cracked the door and stepped onto the porch like an astronaut.

With death spray at the ready, I waddled over to the utility room. There was a steady stream of wasps going in and coming out, squeezing under the door frame – and the numbers were alarming. I cracked open the door and Wasp Central was now twice as big, at least a meter long and half as tall. A bag of clothes and some tools, including a shovel and rake, had become absorbed by the nest and were now part of the hive. Even with protection, I felt shivers at this discovery and I starred at these busy insects for a long time.

Then I noticed the neighbors across the way who were watching all this. My outfit had them cracking beers and making jokes, but I had bigger things to worry about.

My hair dryer suddenly went silent, the airflow stopped and my plastic bag was sagging and limp. Panicked, I looked up and found Paul was screwing with me. He plugged it back in with a sheepish grin and then motioned he was late for class but was anxious to see the big spray down I promised. I gave him a nod and unleashed the full bottle of bug spray onto the potato sack hive.

Predictably the minions went a bit crazy, but also started dying in increasing numbers. While I was satisfied my assailants were provided with swift justice, the hive remained strangely active, even doused with poison. The nest dried out after a while and it seemed almost business as usual - aside from the twisting pile of dying insects at my feet.

Confused, I went back inside and Paul left for school. But for now, the closet door was still wide open, and that gave me an idea. Simply plug up the cracks and starve them out.

I gathered some old towels and did just that, not bothering to use our makeshift space helmet assembly again – which has since been sent to the Smithsonian space museum – not.

After a few hours I became impatient and went to check on the mission. Somehow, Wasp Central was as busy as ever, and it seemed like the nest had even grown a little. I decided to take my friend Matt's advice and burn them out (insert evil laugh here).

Matt had demonstrated the power of the redneck flamethrower with a bottle of hairspray at a summer party a few weeks ago. We didn't have hairspray, but our oven cleaner seemed promising with huge DANGER FLAMMABLE warnings all over the can. After a quick test, my inner arsonist was inspired and I decide to open the door and light 'em up.

I pulled the patio door behind me to prevent anymore flying thumbtacks getting inside and went over the utility room to sweep away the pile of crunchy corpses. But that was a mistake, I had closed the patio door completely, locking me out and trapping me on the second-floor terrace. The neighbors had long since grown weary of my antics and darkness was falling, so my options for help were limited. Annoyed, I decided to wait for Paul to come home from school and planted myself in the old leather chair.

After a while I got really bored. Night had fallen and it was getting chilly, so I blasted some fire to amuse myself and warm up. I finally decided just to go for it and I got up, opened the closet, ignited my lighter and created a horrible home-made flamethrower.



The hive made a creepy high-pitched squeak as the flames consumed it. The wasps scattered, hating the heat and many dropped at my feet. But within seconds it all got out of control as other nearby items caught fire.

I stupidly closed the closet door, maybe to smother it, and ran to call for help. Except no, I totally forgot I was still trapped on the deck, and suddenly I was at Defcon 5! I started yelling 'fire!'

Our cute downstairs neighbor stepped outside and she immediately became alarmed. After a quick explanation, she called the fire department and then tried to get into our apartment to set me free. The door was locked, so she had to get help to break it down.

Meanwhile, I was back to stuffing towels under the closet door to try and smother the flames. To a certain extent this seemed to work, but now thick plumes of smoke were pouring out and filled up the wooden deck with choking fumes - forcing me to the floor. I heard a siren in the distance between coughs and prayed it was for me. A moment later I heard the front door burst open and before I knew it I was pulled inside, doubled over, gagging up gray spit and wiping

my burning eyes. I made it out front where a fire truck, a police car *and* an ambulance were in attendance, as well as several locals rubber necking for a thrill.

Without going into detail, suffice it to say I was in big trouble. The firemen put out the fire quickly but their high-pressure hoses destroyed the nest, my clothes and everything else in the toolshed. (I saw none of this as I was still in the ambulance with an oxygen mask from smoke inhalation.) Just as I hoped it was over, the local TV news van showed up.

With the television floorlights, it looked like the last shot of a disaster movie except without the helicopters. Of course, Paul arrives home in the middle of all this, looking dumbstruck as he walked zombie-like towards the house. Once he saw me tempers flared and we got into a screaming match so severe some firemen had to separate us. In hindsight, this began the end of our friendship.

Our downstairs neighbors were also fuming because gallons of firehose water had seeped behind the drywall in our apartment and now flooded the downstairs of their flat. Later, these same folks would take me to court to pay for nearly two thousand dollars of damage - which was fine. Thank god they were poor students with cheap stuff, it could've been much worse.

Also predictably, my parents showed up just as the police and ambulance left, leaving my mother to infer the worst. She was relieved and angry to see me but reduced to tears when we finally embraced. I stayed with my folks for a few weeks until I was officially kicked out of the flat by the management, with a bill of over five thousand dollars in damages to pay. This did not include the six-hundred-dollar City of Raleigh Emergency Services Invoice or the Rex Hospital ambulance bill for about \$200.

All together the misadventure cost me three friends and just under ten thousand dollars*, in addition to ruining my credit and local reputation among landlords. All over a bunch of insects. Truly, they will one day rule the world.



*Thankfully, I had a cheap renter's insurance policy that helped pay some of it, but I was never able to rent in that town again. Candidly I'm just glad to have survived the ordeal and I'm thankful now I can laugh about it even if nobody else does!

