

Hello, Everyone, and welcome back to an old guy who knows shit. Stluhdog here with another Story from Life. This is

Episode 12

Hyattsville

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There's a town inside of the famous Beltway around Washington, DC, in Maryland, named Hyattsville. Nobody's heard of it because it is upstaged by College Park, home of the Terps, which touches the Beltway, and the District of Columbia on the other side. Hyattsville was carved out of virgin Maryland forest in the early 20th century. In 1993, there was one block, a very long block, that still had a piece of that forest right in the middle of it. And I moved onto that block that year.

It was defined by being at the apex of a curve in East-West Highway, a major thoroughfare with few crossings. The nearest cross street was a quarter mile from East West Highway. I know this because I ran around that block hundreds of times, and measured it. It was one-tenth mile wide and a quarter mile long. One lap was seven-tenths of a mile. When they laid it out, individual house plots were much larger than they are today, and there were seven houses down the quarter mile of our block. The houses were built at the ends of the plots, so all the houses had huge front yards and postage-stamp back yards. When they built the houses, they only cut down the trees they had to cut to build the houses, so all of these huge front yards were shaded by ancient, gigantic trees.

And right in the middle, somebody had bought four of these big lots, back to back, and built their house on just one. So there was, in the south half of this block, probably two acres of street to street, ancient, virgin Maryland forest. The big trees were poplars and pin oaks and they were six to eight feet in diameter, plus or minus. All of them majestically tall. An actual canopy.

It was the most beautiful suburban block I've ever seen. And I resisted admitting it, but it sure felt like there was more there than just beauty.

Well. It turns out there was.

There were many big old stumps in the yards, and thick patches of growth between the houses, and the longer I lived there, the more I felt that we were actually living in the ancient forest. The old roots were still underneath of us. The energy of nature was intense. Everything was exaggerated. Enhanced. Nature with the volume turned up to ten.

Our house had two ancient stumps. One was covered with a blackberry bramble and vines. It was thick, and forbidding, and later on I found that it guarded a burrow with an opening that was big enough for a small bear. It was a clean burrow, maintained, well

hidden. Certainly appeared to be in active use. The blackberries were bitter and nasty off the bush, but they exploded with flavor if you put enough sugar on them.

The other stump was covered with some kind of fungus that looked prehistoric. It was hard, and a sort of vomit-color, and had no shape, but was blobular. If you tried to cut it, it sort of acted like a mushroom, but one made out of crumbling glue. It grew on the sides of the stump, and great lumps of it grew up from the roots as far as 12 feet away from it. It looked utterly alien.

And in the open yard next to the stumps was the most beautiful Dogwood tree I have ever seen.

Somebody had planted bamboo to make a barrier between the back yards and it was voracious. This bamboo came out of the ground two inches in diameter, and grew a foot in 24 hours. One morning there two dozen missiles rising from the grass. But then, after I chopped them out, I grew three pound tomatoes there.

We had seven inch long praying mantises on our screen. Friendly. Not afraid. A couple of them just walked onto my finger when I offered it to them, and I swear we had a conversation. My son – then 8 – called to me that first spring to ask what was the brown carpet spreading out from our porch in the grass. It was praying mantises. They were maybe a quarter of an inch long, mottled and brown, thousands of them, literally, spreading like a Weaveworld carpet from under the porch.

There were Cicada Killers. Giant wasps that were the inspiration for the creatures in the Alien movie series. They catch a Cicada – which fights valiantly for half an hour – and sting it repeatedly until it is paralyzed. Then they drag it into a burrow, and lay an egg in its body, which hatches and begins eating the cicada from the inside while it is still alive.

We watched two squirrels chasing each other across our yard, the bigger one repeatedly catching the smaller one and attacking it fiercely. The smaller one leaps up onto the trunk of the neighbor's gigantic pin oak. They spiral up about thirty feet and the small one suddenly disappears into a hole. The big one is right behind it, reaches in, grabs the small squirrel and hurls it out of the hole – and that little squirrel arched up and out from that 30 foot high hole, and it actually spread itself out, as if it were a flying squirrel, and then landed splat on the street, another thirty feet away. It lay there a second, then got up, shook itself off, and walked away in the other direction.

Then there was running. When I started to run around this block, I found that I always felt good running there. Light and fleet of foot. But then one day I realized that I was always running around the block in a clockwise direction, so I thought well I have to change that and I set out counter-clockwise. And I could not do it. It felt like I was running underwater. Every step took a huge effort. I got about a hundred yards and stopped, gasping for breath. I turned around the other way, and the very first step was lighter than air and I took off effortlessly. I stopped. I tried to run the other way.

Underwater. First step. Turned around. Flew. Unbelievable as this may sound, I had to accept that I could only run around this block in one direction.

But these were all things I discovered over the next couple of years. The first night, my introduction to this extraordinary place out of JRR Tolkein, was much more frightening. It's always the Orcs who come out first.

The day we moved in was a beautiful August day. It was hot, but we like the heat, and the sun in the trees was so beautiful. It seemed idyllic.

Our predecessors had left one of those big, wheeled plastic garbage cans under the porch, and as we accumulated boxes, packing paper and tape and the usual trash of a move, it got stuffed into this can.

The neighbor told us the next day was trash day, so at some point, well after dark, I went to put the garbage out. I had been wearing work gloves all day, and still had them on. There was almost no light under the porch. The porchlight didn't reach there, and the street light was shaded by trees until you got to the street. So I reached into the dark and grabbed the handle on this can, rocked it back on its wheels, and pulled it behind me to the street. I had the thought that the handle felt slimy, but my brain dismissed that thought as not possible, so I didn't look at it until I got to the street and set it down.

When I first looked at it, I knew something wasn't right because it was white. The surface looked like it was moving under the light. Sort of shiny and gently rippling. I bent down and looked at it more closely, and realized that it was covered with maggots. Literally, covered. There was no plastic visible. It was a solid mass of pulsating, seething maggots. I looked at my glove – it was covered in globs of white goo.

Something happened in the pit of my stomach.

I stepped back. That can was wrapped in maggots like fabric. And no maggot ever fed on a piece of plastic. Something was holding them together. And I could feel it. A distinct, dark, and very scary presence. Something that filled me with fear and loathing. And for several minutes I was mesmerized by it.

Then I had a sense of waking up with the sudden knowledge of what I had to do. I had to see what was IN the can. I needed to know the scope of what I was dealing with here. So I picked up a stick, and I used that to pop the lid and push it to one side. Maggots boiled over the edge. I heard maggots dropping to the ground out of the lid on the other side. I took the end of the stick and stuck it in. It had the texture of a pot of macaroni. Then I kicked into gear, and moved very quickly: I went in and got a piece of cardboard and a marker and I wrote on it "Take the can" in big letters, and I stuck a piece of one-by-two through it and went out and stuck that in the can where the lid was partially off. And then I washed my hands about twenty times and took a shower, and still felt too dirty to sleep. I couldn't find a natural explanation. I knew there was no food

in that garbage. And I couldn't shake the feeling of that presence, that nasty vibe that clung like the aftertaste of spoiled milk.

The garbage truck woke me up the next morning, and I watched to see if the garbage men would notice that it was a can full of maggots – I mean, how could they miss it? But it didn't look white to me from the window, and they didn't notice at all. It was as if the maggots weren't there. And I had the thought that maybe I had hallucinated them. Then I went and found my gloves, and the goo remnants were unmistakable. I knew I wasn't crazy.

So that day I go to the hardware store and buy a brand new garbage can, with a tight lid, and put it under the porch. The next morning I take out the first bag to put in the can. I pull it out from under the porch and pop the lid so I can put the bag in, and my eye is caught by movement in the bottom and all of a sudden my stomach turns over again – and I taste spoiled milk. And again, I'm mesmerized for an unknown period of time. But this time, awareness has to fight and struggle to the surface. Half-paralyzed, I lean over to see what it is. It looks like a softball in the bottom of the can. A pulsating softball. Yes. It's a blob of maggots. Still in a fog, I tip the can up and it rolls out onto the grass, just like a softball. And then my brain kicks in, and I think this is ridiculous. There's got to be something holding them together. Maggots don't cling to each other. They cling to food. Somebody must have put some food in there, and that's why it's a solid mass. So I take comfort in having found a natural explanation this time, ignore my stomach, get another stick, and the instant that my stick touches the ball, like a magic wand – the ball disappears and it falls into a seething pile of maggots. Nothing but maggots.

At that point, something just exploded out of me and the next thing I know I'm cursing and screaming and stomping like a maniac. And the next thing I remember is looking up from leaning over on my knees, catching my breath, and realizing that I had just obliterated every trace of what was at that time certainly one of the most extraordinary events of my life. But that was immediately followed by a feeling of well being and satisfaction. Something had showed itself to me, something very nasty, and had somehow tried to get into my head. And I stomped the crap out of it.

I didn't care that nobody was going to see it. It was too ugly. I didn't want anybody else to see it.

We found out later that our predecessor had been a cop who went bad. He just disappeared, and his wife and kid had to move away. When they cleaned out the house they found a hole in the wall filled with kiddie porn [evidence of illegal activity].

About five years later, that house in the middle of the block was sold, and all of those beautiful trees became somebody's expensive furniture. When the trees were gone, I found I could run around the block counter-clockwise. And that was when I put it all together: a vortex of energy had been focused in those trees. And I understood that the power on that block that I had witnessed and questioned had been real, and it had come from something very old in that tiny bit of ancient forest. As if it had held

concentrations of both good and evil, a tiny little piece of the ancient battleground, the eternal war in its most primitive form. As if loss of habitat had created a tiny island of the ancients surrounded by a sea of modern metropolitan urbanity, forcing the headquarters of Good and the headquarters of Evil to be right on top of each other, fecundity and putrefaction, the dogwood and the alien fungus, the praying mantises and the cicada killers, whatever it was in those maggots and the cop. That thing and me.

I never saw a creature big enough for that burrow under our stump, but I felt like I had met it.

After that, it left us alone. It was as if I had won a battle my predecessor had lost. And what I won was a few years of undisturbed joyful life in the glow of those trees in the heart of Hyattsville. And that was a lot.

One last word on this story, because I know that many of you are like me and want to know EXACTLY where this block is, and now that the story is over I can tell you it is the block defined by East West Highway (410) on the north side, the east and west borders provided by 43rd st and 43rd ave (yes, honest to god, they are one block apart), and on the south is Queensbury. If you look at a satellite image, you will see five identical duplexes on the left that stand out because no other two buildings are alike. Those buildings, and the structures opposite, on 43rd St., occupy what used to be what was very likely the last piece of virgin forest inside the Beltway.

This is an old guy who knows shit, signing off till next time.