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Dead Man's Hill

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Every night after dinner like a heartbeat, my brother and I created fantasy worlds in the gray basement of our parents' house. On a set of old, threadbare rugs we cobbled together small worlds, motley collections of junk and playsets which formed giant anthill cities that we called "the shambles" or "junktown." Plastic forests were populated with dragons and goblins, merchants and monsters, knights and kings. Sometimes a quest would take a collection of favorite action figures across the cold badlands of the concrete, or even up the mountain ranges of the staircases to my blue bedroom. My favorite character was Zarak, the half-orc assassin, a twisted but powerful antihero, who prefigured the dark companion of my college years, caught between evil and good, the ultimate outsider.

In my bedroom I would read hundreds of books, waiting until my parents had gone downstairs or into their bedroom. I read by the bathroom night-light's dim glow, straining to find the enchantment I knew lived in-between the pages. Sometimes I read a book a day, escaping into those fantasy worlds that I knew held more importance than my own. I read books like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in which children from our world find magic passages to a supernatural world full of giants and dwarves. I understood these curious British children, who had been to another world and had a secret knowledge. And I envied them, because theirs was clear, while my secret was an uncertain, fabricated ghost. I often searched the backs of closets for doorways into Narnia, hoping beyond hope...

The yellow kitchen, the concrete-hued basement, and my sky-blue bedroom bled magic into my world. But always at the back was the specter of something wrong, like the black widow we found one summer in that dream kitchen. Our entire family stared at the spider, identifying it without question, yet questioning why such a deadly beast was this far north, before my father squashed it behind the microwave. There were limitations in the yellow house, limitations of family, of generation, of my own inability to face the outer world. I needed an equal who could also teach me, someone to push my limits. I needed a friend.

When my family first moved to that house in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, I was five years old. Nevertheless, I distinctly remember the dark-green Mayflower moving trucks bustling in our seventies furniture, while I walked along the clean, tree-lined sidewalk of Squire Court. Freshly built suburban houses wound with possibility toward a mysterious cornfield border. Walking up towards me at the edge of our property, the very first person I met, was Clinton Hakonnen. "Did you just move in?" he asked, or something similar, and everything began.

Clinton had a yellow house, too, and that was no accident. Oh no, that was *meant to be* and *fate* in my fragile child's mind. Instead of creating imaginary worlds in his basement, though, we usually chose the backyard, even in the dead Pennsylvania winters. We would clamber on his swing set, verbally creating narratives of adventure and travel, of magic powers and malevolent enemies. His younger brother would join us, but was a bit too young to add much except a third character, a third hero in our forays into fantastic cornfield jungles. My brother would also sometimes enlist in that backyard army, but he had his own friends, and his own quest to follow.

I spent more time at Clinton's split-level than at mine, discounting sleep. We grew up together, playing Dungeons and Dragons, fooling with electronics, and frying Japanese beetles on summer days with a magnifying glass. My friend was overweight with glasses and mussed blond hair. I was skinny as a flute, with greasy hair and a belt pulled near my armpits. Other potential friends came and went, not understanding our wild imaginations, and not wanting to associate with us, refusing to journey out to the edges of Wyomissing where we lived.

We seemed to be on the great frontier of the suburbs and the farmfields and woodlands, what looked to be the last bastion of the wilderness, the last gasp before civilization swallowed it whole. We made

farmer-frustrating cornfield mazes and forts made of stolen plywood. The fields and forests swept in a great circle around our development, with only a long boulevard connecting us to the rest of the town. In some ways it was the perfect place to grow up, isolated but not cut off, in constant contact with the unknowns that make childhood extraordinary. The meteor impact, the primal mutation, came to us there, under the wooded shadow of Dead Man's Hill.

I'm sure everyone has a place like Dead Man's Hill, a mythic space with its own particular magic, a place where symbols are more significant than rules, a place beyond the simple magic of houses. Our hill was a forested area surrounding an abandoned highway, which was a dead spur of the road we dubbed the Wyomissing Autobahn. Along the cusp of our development and the sprawling cornfields beyond it, a low, grassy swamp lived, separated from the cornfield by a few low hills. The source of this water was a pipe, set back in the forest, probably drainage from the houses on the higher, far side of the hill. This stream made a slow, winding way to a larger pipe that dove under the development. Once in a while, we were brave enough to follow the grooved tunnel into the utter darkness beneath suburbia. Later, in high school, a classmate claimed that he had gone into one of the other entrances to the great pipe network underneath Wyomissing and emerged in nearby Wyomissing Hills. A high school friend named RD insisted that upon entering the gated entrance at Stone House Park, he had found a bowl of wine or maybe blood and a note stating imperiously "I'll see you in hell."

The swamp was often the focus of our games, but was too accessible from the aluminum siding houses to be a real challenge. No adventures took place here, only discoveries. We found numerous forts, but never the same one twice, wondering if some strange war of attrition, of razing and rebuilding, was going on in the forest. We buried a bag of pennies along the muddy bank of the stream, Clinton wrote a poetic map, and we promptly forgot about it in the way that children do. I came upon the poem when I was cleaning out my drawers, years later, and we dug up the bag, just in time to save the treasure from encroaching development. The joy in our hearts was nearly unbearable when the bag appeared out of the marsh-mud, a lost treasure from another lifetime.

Beyond the marsh was a bowl of trees. Paths sometimes cut through the brush, but changed from year to year. On a rocky spur that poked from the thick woods, one magic tree with red fruitlike flowers perched. Once, we took home these flowers and experimented with them, using chemistry sets like medieval alchemists. I did not discover the species of this magic tree until twenty years later: a common sumac. The dead end highway was to the northeast of these woods, at the base of a fifty foot cliff, concrete cracked and old. The city had obviously given up the idea of continuing it, and we cheered that decision. The highway rose up from the level of the swamp and lower forest about twenty feet. A strip of forest continued to the west at this height, making a convenient step towards the top of the cliff. All in all, a seventy-foot rise from our neighborhood to the unknown school district on the other side.

From the concrete surface, we small children could see the rest of the highway curving into the distance, and past that northeast to the town of Wyomissing Hills. To the east stretched another forest, which ended in the grassy slopes of Jackrabbit Hill, a sledding paradise. We often journeyed

to this knoll in winter, but generally avoided the forest. Once, we were shot at by BB-gun wielding maniacs there. They stepped out of the forest behind us like ghosts, pumping the gun, and a friend of ours was hit in the buttock and had a bruise for weeks. Jackrabbit Hill also became a concentrate of memory, like a tightly packed snowball, where I sledded not only with Clinton and my brother, but with later, high-school friends. The tall grass sloped in a perfect sledding hyperbola down to a rock-lined stream, which issued from a pipe that was no doubt an exit point of the underground funnel in the swamp, several hundred yards away.

In the other direction, to the west of the main bulk of Dead Man's Hill, beyond a large meadow of tall, thorny bushes, a mysterious wood spread out about five hundred yards from the swamp. We rarely ventured that far, though I'm not sure why. I remember a holy feeling there, even though the trees were sparser and the houses from the adjoining district overlooked it from a much closer vantage. The rolling cornfield pressed up against this area from the south without the buffer of the swamp. Those labyrinthine cornfields are long gone now, victims of the suburban virus.

The cliffside above the highway was covered with brownish grass, rocky paths shooting up to the thick impassable forest on the top, beyond which lay unseen houses. A path ran across the edge, from which we could see the white spire of the high school in the distance and our small, yellow houses a few hundred yards away, and I remember enjoying the strange perspective, the third-person view of my child-life. This bluff extended the length of the hill, from where the bypass swerved in, to the faraway western wood. But right here, above the highway and the swamp forest, was the highest point. At the end of the highway, the cliff made a slight bend south towards the swamp and then continued west. As it did, directly north of where the water came trickling out of the hill, a huge boulder made its august presence known. This was a real cliff, a rock the size of a house rising thirty feet to the top of the hill. This giant rock became a holy object and climbing it required an act of will and courage.

The forest around it was filled with hidden nooks and ledges that we joyfully discovered. The whole area still held a vague fear of older children who could find and hurt us. But this didn't happen until high school, when two knife-wielding bullies threatened me and four friends, while a yard-sweeping neighbor looked on in middle-class fear and indifference. We should have piled on those bullies and beaten them to pulps, knives or no, though perhaps our Christ-like turning of the other cheek was the right thing to do. But that was years away. For now, this place was ours to colonize, ours to explore, at that rock left half buried in the soil by some retreating glacier.

One particular sunny summer day in the eighties, Clinton and I and both our brothers hiked up the hill with a more specific purpose. We had always had a touch of pyromania, playing dangerous games with our chemistry sets, burning Tonka trucks on Clinton's driveway, and setting off homemade rockets with our fathers in a more socially acceptable manner. The habit seemed harmless enough, even though the flame would sometimes travel back up the stream of WD-40, dangerously close to igniting the bottle and taking off an arm. Once Clinton did set his backyard on fire, and the image of him hopping on the brown grass, stomping the nearly invisible flame with his

battered sneakers, is one that will remain with me.

This bright afternoon we headed up to the highway to do our work, since Clinton's parents weren't pleased with our constant melting of the macadam driveway. We carried a random collection of old Matchbox cars, a larger Tonka truck, and an assortment of flammable liquids. On the white concrete we generously spilled hairspray and cleaning fluid, preparing a great conflagration. The tiny vehicles were carefully coated with the clear, sticky stuff. Standing back, Clinton lit matches and tossed them onto the wide pool. As he was attempting this, two smaller children randomly came out of the forest and watched, dumbfounded. Finally, the flame caught and with a tremendous sucking sound, three-foot flames leapt up, engulfing the highway, visible even in the dazzling sunlight. As we watched this scene in amazement, the two children ran off into the forest, screaming for their parents. We panicked and took off in the other direction, leaving the fire blazing. We ran in a long roundabout way back to Squire Court and watched the distant hill, waiting for the stomach-wrenching sound of fire engines or police sirens. But nothing happened. I never found out if someone extinguished the fire or it just died on the concrete before reaching the forest. Perhaps it's better this way. I didn't have to see the pathetic, sputtering end, or feel the anticlimax.

More importantly, though, I learned something that day in the hidden place where I began exploring my world and my self, with the best friend I will ever have, because who can be closer than children? Clinton and I began something monstrous that day. Beyond the bounds of our safe, little, bourgeois environment, we had taken action. Whether the act was beautiful, terrible, or simply useless, doesn't matter, because a skinny kid with a bad haircut and a chubby boy with glasses and pale skin had lit a fire, a terrifying, larger-than-life fire that made me realize that we had the power to create or to destroy. We could not only break away from the herd, we could begin a distinct civilization.

Instead of imagining magical, dragon-filled worlds in our cellars or backyards, we had entered our own.