

My Own Special “Slytherin House”

Back in the early 1980’s, our country’s so-called ‘counter-culture’ movement was in full swing, and in some places, even already waning. For a particular rundown rambler in an older suburb of St. Paul, it had obviously been ‘de rigueur’ for over a decade. The 50-year-old aging hippy home-owner liked to take the casual approach to housekeeping, and she had an eye for the quaint and eccentric in all corners of every room. In *Harry Potter*, Slytherin House had plenty of oddball artifacts with each kid’s important relics on display. This woman followed that trend with her own life’s experiences immortalized in a maze of unique souvenirs. This woman’s yard was packed with organic gardening, unusual herbs and mushrooms, and uncoordinated but lively splashes of color among the flowers (had seeds been thrown to the wind?) which grew everywhere near this modest mid-1900s home. It had seen its better days already. Inside, the clutter was incredible, with tables and desks unrecognizable under their burdens. The main room featured a spike embedded in the door jam’s woodwork draped with long bead and bell necklaces, walls covered with tilted and wilted rock concert posters, various attempts at original psychedelic art by close friends, and, next to the front window, a blue glass hanging vase displaying a single daisy, dead two months. The surfaces everywhere were covered with a year’s collection of junk mail, tattered paperback books, pamphlets on how improve one’s life through meditation, aura adjustment, exotic diets and fringe philosophy, and a myriad of unfinished projects. Even plates with dried food from last week—or longer—punctuated the debris. She was oddly friendly, trying to make me feel at home as much as possible, unabashed and maybe clueless about her surroundings, and confident (oblivious?) in her life style. As usual, I flowed with it, making sure to comment positively on a wall hanging she must have produced herself: a *rug hooking* project with a probably spontaneously-created, visually-explosive, headache-inducing, semi-artful pattern that utilized possibly fifteen shades of yarn. And still the colors were non-coordinated.

Shortly after the initial intake to her living room (the couches looked to be the 1950 originals) she showed me to an adjacent side room nearly as big as the ‘parlor,’ from which emerged a long-haired and bearded (familiar conditions for me) college kid in whose room the sought-out spinet piano lived. The fellow was glad to see me, declaring “This girl sounds horrible, man,” gesturing to the blond instrument with discolored key tops. “Too long! It’s been about five years since...” Since it was tuned last, I assumed he meant. Mary Jane’s familiar fragrance lingered in the room along with a lot of other strange scents. This room was a tangential hybrid of his mom’s living room, upgraded and degraded in very special ways she probably thought of as “rebellious.” Some of the subject matter and dark themes showcased here were disquietingly questionable. Still, it was an interesting and enlightening experience to be there amidst all the stimuli, including his divergent style of wall decoration, strings of colorful Christmas lights (which contrasted brightly with the gothic gloom), large piles of LPs and cassette tapes by the stereo. At least he has an interest in music, I mused. In the room with him was a same-aged, similarly sloppy buddy who thought it was really cool to be a piano tuner (he’s right).

The most dominant feature in this guy's bedroom was hard to miss: a ten-foot by ten by ten home-made cube cage pieced together from slats of wood (many 2-by-4s) and a whole lot of chicken wire. Some of the wood pieces were only lathe-thin, but apparently rigid enough. Inside was a sort of terrarium filled with branches and pieces of trees rigged in place with wire and a pleasant arrangement of colorful rocks, large and small. Little bushes sprouted here and there, and a three-foot wide water dish filled the middle of the cage floor. Lounging along one side in a winding, meandering pose was the thickest, longest snake I had ever seen in my life.

This dramatic creature was the strange son's pet python. He must have been at least fifteen feet long and his body seemed as thick as a honeydew melon. I do not recall his exact name, but it was something elegantly old-school, like *Pythagoras*, which to me was an entirely appropriate name, given what happened next. We talked about the piano for a little while, and I recruited the boys' help in clearing off the piano top, which had a surprising array of items that I could not identify. Soon I was setting up for the tuning, while the guys and the mom of the house started talking about the issue at hand: it was time for Pythagoras' weekly dinner. Why they chose the moment I appeared to take care of this task remains a mystery to me. Perhaps they thought it would break up my day, and it certainly did that. Both the fellows suddenly crowded into the corner of the room, opened a smallish metal box with holes in the top (Pythagoras called it his lunchbox, probably), and removed a rather substantial white rat with pink eyes. He was not afraid of people; likely he had been handled and played with on several previous occasions. Little did he know that today was his day of destiny, the time when his life's purpose comes to its apex.

All three of the other people had been through this many times before and were very casual about it. They chose not even to linger around to watch—*been there, done that*. The snake-owner unhurriedly opened an access door toward the top of cage, thrust the rat in, unceremoniously dangling the hapless victim by his tail, and dropped him about four feet to the cage floor. "In a little while you may hear some noise," he laughed as everyone departed from the room, leaving me to be sole witness to his dramatic tableau of life and death. I tried not to hover and stare at the cage as I got to work on the main reason I was there, tuning the piano.

The rat at first did not notice the huge, slithery animal at the other side of the enclosure, but Pythagoras noticed *him* right away. It was an amazing process to watch, as the gleaming eyes of the python stared mercilessly at his meal. He was the very picture of gradual *super-slo-mo* stealth. He changed his position so slowly that unless someone was watching closely, there appeared to be only stasis. Everything the same. No danger. In Pythagoras' mathematical brain you could see a constant stream of data racing by, calculating vectors, acceleration, free fall parabolas, time and space taking order in this enclosed area, much more easily managed than the great outdoors of the jungle.

I focused my attention on the tuning for a couple of minutes, turning away from the cage behind me. Very suddenly I heard a huge crash, with the cage rattling dramatically and metallicly, punctuated by a loud splashing sound. I apprehensively

glanced around and found the python's head again frozen in mid-air with his neck curled toward the quaking rat, now completely soaked from his escape through the water trough, shivering behind a large rock on the back side of the cage. Big surprise for him: the immobile greenish-brown log suddenly came alive and lunged at him. I can empathize with that. I turned away, knowing that the game was soon up, now that Pythagoras' presence had been revealed. I tuned two more notes, rather distractedly, when more sudden action transpired behind me in rapid succession. After thirty seconds of crashing followed by lulls, then additional cage rattling, I looked behind me one last time to see the back legs and tail of the white rat disappear into the much-expanded mouth of Pythagoras. Soon the rat's presence was obvious within the large bulge behind the snake's head. Mission accomplished, no more need to hunt until next Saturday. For the rat, a very bad day.

For me, a jittery day at this Slithering House, but I survived, finished my work, collected my check and headed out. But first, the guys wanted to know how things had gone down in the cage, and I casually gave them a run-down on the various stages of the snake's dinner. I guess they were a little more interested in my reaction than the deed itself. That's cool with me.

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