

The Water Spider

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It was foggy that morning. Until the sun came out and burnt the fog to tatters over the harbor, brought the peal of children from the nearby schoolyard (either a coincidence, or it really was true that fog deadened sound), dried the dew on Laurie's lawn, and heated her cedar door until it gave scent—until all that, for an hour or two in the morning, Laurie entertained the possibility of a fully foggy day.

It would never happen. The fog always broke by noon. But even if it didn't—what was the use? A day like that would be all morning. She would fall apart in the freedom of it. When was one supposed to go to bed, draped in the day's failures? (The image had Laurie in real drapes, torn from the curtain rods, like the survivor of a house fire. The house was a century old and stuffed with her papers; it would go up in minutes.) What of the checklist on the fridge? Laurie no longer wrote, but in her writing days fog, or a morning rain-storm, had been a rare gift. She was a morning worker.

That morning she cleaned a little, and made coffee in the press that was a gift from her niece, and fried some eggs and bread. She sat at her kitchen table, in the light by the patio doors, and looked out at the fog. Down the hill, beyond the street, the fog was devouring the harbor. It had laid its long wide body on the harbor, had stilled the harbor to a perfect paralyzed surface, the better to devour it. She watched this silent predation until her eggs had cooled to jelly, and then, feeling full, she ate.

The display was so obviously like something Laurie had seen before that she opened her mouth, expecting the answer to come tumbling out. Nothing happened. The way a certain predator, she thought, but the thought went nowhere. The way it what? An insect, maybe, that paralyzed its victims before eating them. Was that right? With a beak like a straw. And then lay in repose, eating. Which of them did that?

Check the computer, she thought, and remembered what she had done to it.

Around which time, having tidied and made her coffee before going back to prepare breakfast, the fog began to lift.

It had been Laurie, not some insect, who had decapitated her mate after successful copulation, in a ceremony involving an expensive Chinese restaurant, ten years of each of their lives, and a back room in the town courthouse. Mr. Stern remained among the living, but barely. He liked to carry his head around with him, in a false show of gratitude for her having spat it out. When she ran into him, he would gesture with it. Look, he seemed to say—for he could no longer make noise out of his mouth—look at what my life is like now.

“You have the money to have that sewn back on,” Laurie told him once—it was the third or fourth time they’d run into each other. They were in the freezer section of the grocery store. The words astonished him; his mouth grew wide. But he had always been astonished by money. *Spider woman*, he mouthed, out of his severed head, in front of a wall of ice cream sandwiches.

Spider, Laurie thought, getting into her car: it was the spider who paralyzed its victims with a bite to the neck. Not a *beak*, then, but *bite* and *neck*. That was the confusion. And not the neck, anyway, but the other thing, whose name she could not recall.

It seemed daily, now, that there was some new thing Laurie could not recall.

But the fog was lifting, and she had to run errands. The paper, for one thing, had run out. And cleaning supplies. Garbage bags she thought she had, but something to disinfect the floors, sheets of plastic, disposable gloves. . . .

Laurie pulled her car onto the road and drove along the lake-shore, until she saw a small person on the shoulder, back-packed and waving excitedly.

She passed him, slowing, and pulled over. It was that Skinner boy, at the foot of what must have been his own driveway, which

wound back uphill into the trees. He ran up to the passenger door, tugged on the handle, and leaned down to look at her, breathing heavy on the window. “Hey, it’s locked!”

She unlocked the door, and he hopped in. “Hi,” he said. “I know you. You’re—Ms. Stern.”

He was out of breath, and said it in one exhalation, like *cistern*. “I am indeed,” she said. “And you are Mr. Skinner.”

“Yeah. Hey so would you mind taking me the rest of the way to school? I missed the bus.”

“Not a problem,” Laurie said.

They pulled back onto the road.

Laurie had the radio on, but the song irritated her, she didn’t know why, so she turned it off. Skinner patted his thighs, looking out the passenger window at the trees.

“Could I ask you a question?”

“You are driving me to school otherwise I’d be late,” Skinner said. “That gives you basically unlimited question privileges.”

Laurie glanced at him, all eleven or so years of him tucked into a chubby rosy-faced body, a lot of body tucked behind his rosy face. He had dried cereal on one corner of his mouth. His hair was gelled but only over the front third of his scalp. The rest he must have forgot about in his hurry, or else it was beyond what he could see in the mirror.

“You’re in what grade. Six?”

He confirmed he was.

“Okay. Sixth grade. So you’ve probably done some animal biology maybe, by this point.”

“Animal biology? I aced that. It’s my best subject. Ask me literally anything.”

She wanted to know if there was a specific kind of spider that paralyzed its prey.

“Well, first of all,” Skinner said, “that’s not just spiders. That’s basically a lot of insects.”

“Really!”

“Yeah that’s, that’s one of the most common mechanisms for hunting in the insect world.”

“I didn’t know that,” Laurie said.

“Insects,” Skinner continued, “evolved to have many different hunting techniques for killing their prey. Spiders especially.”

“They *do* seem like rather effective hunters,” she said.

“They are,” he said. “They definitely are. Nobody even sees all of what they can do. Scientists are still discovering them.”

They came to the end of their road and turned out onto the semi-highway that would merge with the Trans-Canada. “Well,” Laurie said, “thank you for sorting that out for me.”

“No problem.”

“What are you focusing on now in your classes?”

Skinner said, “Cellular reproduction. Mitosis and meiosis.”

She had no questions about these things, and let him be.

The boy had, Laurie thought, lots he might have wanted to say.

But the presence of an adult, even one as old as herself, had quieted him. He responded to questions but would pursue nothing on his own. That was fine. Laurie had all day to do errands but had taken the morning fog as a signal: today ought to be spent, if she could afford it, for the most part alone. It was making more and more sense to her that this conversation be a little one-sided, that it could drop off into a comfortable silence.

“So you said you have a test next week?”

“Yeah,” Skinner said. “In grammar.”

“When I was young, I hated grammar.”

“I’m young now, and *I* hate grammar,” Skinner said. “I’ll probably keep hating it until I’m as old as you are.”

When she glanced at him, he blushed.

“You’ll have to let me know,” she said.

“Oh—yeah.”

"I'll probably be half cyborg by then," she said, but Skinner was looking up the road.

A kilometer or so away she could make out the rearmost of a line of vehicles. Yellow men with signs milled about beside the road. "Oh, uh-oh," Skinner said.

"That is not ideal," Laurie said.

They slowed to a stop behind a silver pick-up truck. The truck had a bumper sticker which said, HOW DOES IT SMELL FROM BACK THERE?

"Wise guys," Laurie said, and immediately decided she ought not to have said anything. She didn't understand the sticker, and it could have been some well-known reference. More likely it was filth. But she looked over at Skinner to see what he made of it, thinking, If he thinks it's funny, I'll laugh, too. But Skinner's face was red, his eyes wet.

"Hey," she said. "It's Monday morning. This shouldn't take long."

"Could you call?"

"The school you mean."

"Yeah."

"I don't have a cell phone," she told him.

"You don't have a *cell phone*?"

"No," she said. And then added, "Not anymore."

"Not anymore? What happened to it?"

"To be honest," she said, "I dropped it in the bath."

"You dropped what? Oh. Oh, holy cow. That's genius. That's really smart."

"One of my better moments," she agreed.

"And you like paid for it and everything?"

"I paid for it and everything."

"Oh my God," Skinner said.

"Do you have a cell phone?"

"I'm not allowed," he said.

“I’m sure they’ll let us through in a couple minutes,” Laurie said.

“No, based on this lineup I bet it will probably take at least an hour and a half.” The boy checked his watch and sighed. “Maybe ninety minutes.”

A quarter of an hour passed, without movement. Skinner had begun rocking gently back and forth in the seat.

“It’s just that if I’m late they’ll call home,” he said when she asked him if he wanted to stretch his legs on the shoulder. Then silence, and rocking.

Laurie was thinking of Toby, an old neighbor, much younger than herself, of whom this boy reminded her. He’d written Laurie letters. That was how she knew Toby. A precocious young man. She couldn’t tell if Skinner was very like him or very unlike him.

“Hey, Mr. Skinner,” she said.

He said nothing, only turned and brought his eyes no higher than her hands, tapping the wheel.

“Hmm?”

“I was just thinking,” she said. “About something that might distract you. Want me to tell you?”

“You can hardly expect to *tell* someone you want to distract them and then *actually* distract them.” He wiped his nose with the heel of his hand. “I’ve been primed. I’m basically un-distractable now, on account of you saying that.”

Then he said, “You can tell me if you want.”

“One time,” Laurie began, “I was in a bit of a car chase on this same stretch of highway.”

Skinner exhaled. “No.”

“It’s true. It wasn’t that exciting. Not like it sounds, anyway. Somebody wanted to speak to me, and they came to my house, but I was gone. Except I hadn’t left soon enough, so I guess they could see my car some ways down the road. They trailed me, and I started going faster. By the time we got here I was going somewhere around one-sixty.”

“Oh wow,” Skinner said.

“Thankfully no one was hurt,” Laurie said.

“Why did they want to talk to you?”

The men on the roadside stood idly in small groups. One was slowly spinning his sign, SLOW/STOP, STOP/SLOW, while he spoke to a parked vehicle. Phones, Laurie supposed, were forbidden. In the bed of a pickup truck another sat eating lunch from a pair of plastic containers balanced on his knees.

“I used to write letters,” Laurie said to the boy, “to a young man. Who, actually, reminds me a lot of you. Gosh, he must be in his thirties now. But his parents didn’t like that we wrote letters to each other. They came to confront me about it, and that was when I took off.”

“Why?”

“No specific reason, I guess. But letters are personal, you know, almost by definition personal. Anyone who read ours would immediately see that I did not say anything I shouldn’t have. I was the young man’s tutor for a while, and we started the letters as an exercise in writing. Later on, they were more just for themselves. Mostly I asked about his own life. I was curious about the life of a young person less than half my age. How he thought about things. Just—to know.”

“Just to know,” Skinner repeated.

“But the young man’s parents, they found out about the letters, I guess he had been holding on to them. They asked me to stop, and I did. But, after a little break, I got a letter from him—he’d dropped it on my back porch. He was so lonely. I couldn’t help but answer. His parents discovered it and went wild. I was told never to contact him again.”

“That’s really sad,” Skinner said.

It *had* been really sad: like a lesson in the feeling. “I thought,” she said, “it might make the young man feel ashamed of what he had been doing. That was the saddest part of it. But then right around that time, I got sick.”

“Oh. What kind of sick?”

She realized now that she’d prevented herself from seeing sooner the reasons why telling the boy any part of this would be inappropriate. “Sick,” she repeated. “Not physically, but...I suppose just more unstable. It’s something you’ll understand when you’re older.” Stop now, she thought, and didn’t: there was a momentum she recognized, already at work.

“I guess—I felt not quite like myself. And the medicine I was taking sometimes played little tricks on my memory. And one time, what the medicine told me was, Hey, Laurie, when’s the last time you wrote to Toby? I wrote another letter, but it was while I was sick.”

“Oh,” Skinner said.

“But the thing was,” she said. Thinking *stop now stop it*. “The *thing* was, I did not remember any of what I wrote in that letter.”

He heard that with silence, as she’d thought he would.

“Not a single word,” she went on. “Now, I suppose I look forgetful, as many old people do. But I was a vigilant young person once, and even when I was no longer very young I wrote a lot, and writing actively is great for the memory. But that letter—I didn’t even know I *sent* it until I got a reply, not by a letter, but a knock on my door from Toby’s parents, and the police.”

“What did they say?”

What didn’t they say, she thought. But then, they had a point. And here she had to filter the thing for Skinner’s ears a little.

“They said if I tried to contact their son again, they would have me arrested. They would make sure I went away to jail for good, books or not. They were sorry to have read the things I put in that letter. Well, it scared me straight, you can be sure of that.”

End with a lie, then, she thought. And find a goddamn lesson to it quick.

Up ahead, the line of cars began inching forward.

“Well look,” she said. “Not even half an hour. We’re in luck.”

“I’m sorry I was crying,” Skinner said as they pulled off the highway and headed into town.

“What? You don’t have to apologize for that.”

“No,” he said, “I think I should. I’m sorry. I’m worried about being late.”

“Everybody is late now and then.”

“I don’t want to make anyone upset,” was all he said.

A moment later, he said, “Misstern?”

“Uh huh?”

“You said something about books. You said they’d throw you in jail, books or not. What did you mean, books or not?”

They were driving down King Street, past the grocery store and their little mall, the Tim Horton’s and the gas station and the auto maintenance store and several buildings whose use was a mystery to Laurie now, obscure government offices maybe, the esoteric dwellings of insurance agents.

“Oh. That’s nothing. I used to write children’s books. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Skinner said.

“Mhm.”

“That’s crazy about the letters,” Skinner said.

“It is crazy,” she agreed.

And did not add: that they continued, angry mercurial mis-sives, things she never could have told anyone, things so hidden that before she wrote them they could hardly have been said to be true at all. Reading them, in a lucid interval, had been like reading a correspondence between her own major organs. She kept cycling between recognition and betrayal. She sought help, and the mercurial thing reacted. And began to throw its firm small weight around in the chemical pipework of her personality.

What was the straightforward way to say that a self had come loose inside her, and wanted free?

But she said only, “Yes, it’s amazing how sometimes we do things without having control over them. Not everything, I mean, is someone’s fault. A lot of what we do is really accidental, only we

don't know it. I could not have helped myself. *That* is why I always practice a level of kindness toward others. Like picking you up today. I might have left you on the side of the road, you know that?"

They had stopped at the only lighted intersection in town. Skinner wasn't saying anything. How long until the call from his parents? They can email me, she thought. I bet the computer will still receive it. The phone had still worked, at least the first time she'd dunked it. Its notification bubble had shimmered in the screen, beneath six inches of bathwater.

"But a strange experience, definitely," she told Skinner; and that was when the fog returned.

It came with no warning, no transition: immediately the two had sunk to the bottom of a vast and heaving whiteness. The displays on Laurie's dashboard flickered and went off. Her headlights died. The sounds of the town, to which she'd paid no attention before, had muted, leaving a ponderous silence like the hush before an opera.

"Misstern?" Skinner said. "It's green. Why aren't you moving?"

What green? she wondered. There was no green. Out the windows she could make out the abstract whisper of moving things. The car's engine shut off by itself. "I don't see green anywhere."

"Right in front of you!" Skinner said. And at the same time, not before or after, added, "Hold on why did you shut off the car?"

She turned to ask him what he meant.

But there were two Skinners now, both sitting in the passenger seat. One was the chubby bad-haired boy Laurie had picked up on the side of the road. He seemed not to alternate, not to merge, but simply to coexist in the same space with another Skinner. This one was not especially chubby. His hair was flat and sandy brown. In fact, he was not especially anything. He seemed a beacon of inertness, a clone manufactured in a world of grey stone expanses. And as Laurie sat remarking on the geometry of the thing she was suddenly convinced that this alternate could not be connected, could in no way be related, to the boy she had picked up. There was no trick to it,

no doubling of vision. He had come, she was sure, from outside the vehicle. Had winnowed his way in.

As the other-Skinner looked at her, his eyes changed. Tendrils in the hazel mix spread, leaving bright green markings. “Ms. Stern,” the other-Skinner said. “You’re frightening me.” But his voice was solemn, his tone unremarkable.

The other-Skinner’s hair caught fire, and burned fiercely, like the combustion of an element.

And if she could only reach him, just—to hold him, she knew she could put it out. To hold him firmly enough would be easy. But the primary Skinner, still present, was in the way. And to move him she would need to be careful, not to jostle the other, not frighten him, but to adjust, with firmness, for a single second—

“Miss Stern,” Skinner said slowly.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Please let go of me.”

But by that time a little crowd had gathered in their fall coats around the car, and the fog had all but lifted, and the other-Skinner had vanished in some crack in the upholstery, by whichever way he had come in.

Laurie would not expect it, but she was never fully surprised

at the thought that she might be a danger to somebody. And as they brought her to the hospital that morning, the woman caught sight of a spider, finally—a water spider, it must have been, for it skated across a puddle near the parked taxis—and remembered. The morning returned in a series of flashes. She resisted lightly the arms of the men holding her shoulders for another look back. The thing skated—but not *skated*, not exactly. Really it slid with its feet in some chemical exactitude across the surface of the puddle, leaving no mark, in pursuit of prey too small to see. She had the name in her mind: *Gerridae*. She said it.

“Who’s this?” one of the EMTs asked.

“The Eurasian water spider,” Laurie said.

“Those are *striders*,” the EMT said simply. He did not even look! “Not spiders. They come over from the drain gulley into the puddles when it rains. And this isn’t Eurasia.”

She accepted this in silence.

“Did I do something terrible?” she asked the EMTs.

“Terrible is thankfully a broad umbrella,” one of them said. “You could cover a minivan with most people’s definitions of terrible.”

Meanwhile a siren was blaring. In an act of pure inertia an ambulance burst into the parking lot and screamed to a halt. People came running.

“I was driving a young man to school,” Laurie said. “We write letters to each other. I’m afraid something awful has happened to him. Did someone take him the rest of the way? Was he on time?”

“He’s fine,” one of the EMTs said.

“But the sirens—”

They had flitted, by some magic, from the front doors to an elevator. A poster with a large many-legged cartoon monster claimed BEWARE OF SUPERBUGS—WASH YOUR HANDS!

“Someone lost control on the 125,” said one of the EMTs. “Ran through a construction site. You probably missed it by a couple minutes.”

The elevator opened, and Laurie was compelled into a clean hallway. Grimly, she called back to the poster: “Goodbye, superbug!” And then to the EMTs: “I used to know quite a lot about insects, actually.” She already knew what they were going to tell her in one of their rooms, for she’d taken proficient notes the last time. The EMTs brought her into a room and a nurse took some quick tests and called for a doctor. The nurse said, “Did you know your blood pressure is remarkably level for a person your age?” And then left in the middle of Laurie’s response. But they were simply busy, as they had been the last time.

But here Laurie was, at last, surprised. For no sooner did the nurse return to Laurie’s bedside than a man in a reflective vest came in, carrying her bedside table. “You put that back!” Laurie cried; it

was an old table and a dowel was free somewhere inside it. Laurie was struck with a keen embarrassment, but there was hardly any time to react—for the man in the vest was pursued by a trio of men struggling with her sofa. In no time, each piece of Laurie's furniture had been brought into the room where Laurie sat fretting on the electronic bed. Who knew how it all fit. Finally a nurse returned, and Laurie waved her over.

“Am I to understand that the contents of my entire house have been placed in this room?”

“It's a temporary measure,” the nurse responded.

“And just what use do you have, cluttering a sick-room and emptying a house of an old woman's things?” Laurie asked.

“Fumigation,” the nurse responded.