

B - F A R v.2

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New Myths of Man and Spider

CB Bernard

The spider crawled onto the platen of my No. 5 Underwood typewriter on the eighth page of a story about a tattooed trucker named Clint and an arborist named Amelia. Amelia was pregnant. Clint had been drinking. I swatted at the spider with my Strunk and White.

My chair collapsed beneath me, dropping me with a clatter to the floor at my desk. It's a folding wooden chair my grandfather stole from the city of Lawrence. The story is that Harry Truman sat in that chair once. It was a time when the country loved its leaders, and yet a time of war. Lawrence was a mill town, cradle of the American Industrial Revolution and a magnet for European immigrants, and my grandfather was one generation removed from the mountains outside Napoli—a product of the American Dream. He worked for the Department of Public Works, and had never laid eyes on a seated president before. He watched Truman closely during introductory remarks by the mayor or the governor, saw that beneath the tailored suit and the pomade the president was just a man, no different from himself or his brother Sully, no different from the Irish or the Italians who came to his father's shop on Park Street looking to buy food on credit for their growing families. There must be something that sets us apart, he thought. Something that allows one man to become the American president while another sweeps streets. When Truman stood to speak he swiped the chair in case he some day had a grandson who appreciated a good story.

Or was it Eisenhower? I can't remember.

What's the matter? Tuesday asked, drawn to my desk by the commotion.

She balanced a cup of coffee in her hand and made no noise when she walked.

Spider, I said, and pointed to my Underwood. Without putting her coffee down, she leaned over the typewriter and looked.

I don't see it, she said.

It wasn't there? Not on the platen or the page, where Amelia was about to shoot Clint with a Mossberg double-barrel she'd found behind the counter of her uncle's package store? Not on the carriage or the keys? I must have knocked the spider into the bowels of the machine, where even now it walked across the type bars spelling out eight-letter words as it went. Tuesday released the latch, popped the top and peered inside the typewriter for a long minute. I hoped she wouldn't see the end of the story in there. I wasn't ready to hear it, and neither were Clint and Amelia.

I know you hate spiders, Tuesday said. But this one's gone.

Gone?

Gone.

From where I sat on the floor I could see up her nightgown. She wore red panties with black trim and her legs were pale with winter. Noticing my silence, she caught me looking and kicked me in the thigh. Coffee splashed onto the desk. It dripped down onto the floor beside me.

Where did the spider go? I asked. I was up on my elbows, legs tangled in the chair. Tangled in history.

Don't worry about it. It's gone.

But where? It has to be somewhere, I tell her. It didn't just vanish. Your grasp of physics is flawed if you think things just disappear. They don't. Things don't just disappear.

Or do they, I wondered? Like my father's theory about weight, and what happens to it when you lose it. How it becomes dust. And how people who have lost a lot of weight recently have the dustiest homes.

Or like my father himself. How he was supposed to pick me up at baseball

practice one night and take me out for pizza with the rest of the team. Three hours passed before my mom arrived in the old Datsun wagon she drove, my screaming and fussing sister on her lap, honking for me to come down from the bleachers and get in the damn car. Another twelve passed before she called the police. How many before she accepted that he was gone? That he would never be back? That one second he'd been there, where we could see him, and the next only the suggestion of his presence, a lingering memory, a supposition that would fade with each compounding moment like the print of a wet hand on a shower door?

I played first base and right field for the Brewers in a Merrimack Valley Little League. We hit part of the game from a tee. I didn't know where my father was, but I was mad about missing out on pizza. On the bus ride to school the next day Billy Riordan, the catcher, told me he'd eaten my slices. Then he punched me in the shoulder.

My father was a library of theories. Like how you could measure the severity of a coming winter by the numbers of road kill you saw on the roads in October. Animals have a sense for that stuff, he said. You see them dead on the road, it's 'cause they were out gathering food for the winter. The more the animals, the more the winter.

Or how you could tell everything you needed to know about a man by his shoes. Pride in shoes is pride in self, he'd say, spitting on his wingtips and seesawing a rag across them. I had no idea that rag was the white flag of surrender.

When I'd lose a tooth he'd tell me the Tooth Fairy would probably show up while I slept and slip a crisp dollar bill under my pillow. But, he'd say, you gotta be careful. Where do you think that money comes from? Each time a tooth grows in, you owe a buck. Try sleeping under those conditions when you're six years old.

Or when you're nine and hungry for pizza, your mother is crying in the

next room and nobody tucks you in at night ever again.

When my father left, did my mother tell her own father, crying into the shoulder of his DPW coveralls? And what did he say to comfort her? Here, Honey? Have a seat? I mean, take the whole chair?

My grandfather left me this Underwood when he died. It's the same kind Faulkner used, he said. Or, It was Faulkner's. I stole it from him between chapters.

I gave Clint alligator boots, high as his knees and sharp as teeth. Amelia wore sensible flats with soles of Honduran rubber. Tuesday's bedroom slippers were a different shade of blue than her wool socks. I was barefoot. My father's shoes were wingtips, polished coal. He wore suits the color of a good cup of coffee. He dropped shiny quarters when he walked. My sister and I followed him around picking them up from the grass like so many fallen stars, buoyed by our good fortune, but didn't he notice his pockets growing lighter? Could he have had a blind spot for emptiness? See the dirt but not the hole?

I'm still mystified by simple kindness.

He was tall and handsome with a prominent chin, a superhero chin, the kind split by a cleft you could hide a gumdrop in. He had arms like steel pilings, a chest of solid rock. Every imagined hero has a creation myth. We were his. When he left it was to save the world from evil, or to cure cancer, or to go undercover.

Or, he's still coming back. Sometimes after Tuesday comes home from work we sit on the porch drinking a pitcher of martinis, listening to the Red Sox and watching traffic. Cars pass slowly in this neighborhood because of the kids who might dart out from behind a parked car. It's just common courtesy. But each car that slows instills me with a vague sense of hope.

That was my father's legacy, I suppose. That all these years later, my mom has moved to Scottsdale with a retired plumber named Tony. Tony speaks in golf scores. My sister runs a Kinko's in Lowell, has four kids, a mortgage, a dog

named Axl, and ovarian cancer. I write stories, stories I sweat and bleed into. I mail them off with a self-addressed-and-stamped return envelope—an invitation to rejection. I'm the weapon of my own self-destruction, soliciting pain, as if there isn't enough pain that finds me on its own. I even buy the stamps.

Or maybe I just want to make sure they return.

And in every car that slows down as it passes the porch I see a man who looks like I imagine my father, thirty years older than the last time I saw him. Like he might pull into our driveway by the rose bushes and coast to a stop behind my cantankerous red Honda. The door to his car would open with a hydraulic shuuush. Maybe there'd be a cloud of smoke, or special effects fog. And one black-shod foot after the other, he'd unfold himself and stand tall and straight and look me in the eye and say, There you are, Son. I've been looking for you. He'd reach into the car and pull out a steaming hot pizza.

That's my father's legacy to me. False hope. That, and spiders. He told me once that spiders were Satan's minions carrying out his evil ways upon the Earth. That sinners who died and went to Hell came back as spiders. That every time you saw a spider it meant you'd sinned, a fact that had not escaped the Devil, who was watching you and waiting patiently, biding his time.

Amelia slid the Mossberg's pump, the weight of the shotgun a comfort to her hands. Had the spider come for her because of what she was about to do? Or for Clint himself, a reminder of the black acts for which the long-suffering tree surgeon before him sought to extract an unromantic vengeance?

Or had the spider come for me? Clint and Amelia were my characters. I was their creator, en route to killing one of them off with a close-range blast of birdshot and damning the other to a lifetime of looking over her shoulder, pursued by guilt. Clint had diabetes and was prone to migraines. I'd given Amelia a cleft palate and an allergy to peanuts. Writing is damn serious business, I thought.

Tuesday woke me from my reverie with a sigh. I checked all over your typewriter and your desk, she said. All I found was a little bit of dust. Don't worry about the spider. I'm sure it's gone.

Gone where? I asked.

Gone.

But where? Where did it go?

Tightening her bathrobe, she fixed me with a look.

Back to Hell, she said. Where it came from.

Damn it, I said. Now you're just being mean.