

Once Bitten

Finalist

By Benjamin Marcus

I have never been an especially zoophobic person. Even as a child, I would feel compelled to take a closer look at almost any arachnid or reptile that I encountered. I would often entertain the idea of keeping five-foot snakes instead of more traditional house pets. On rarer occasions, I entertained the fantasy of keeping a giant tarantula for a pet. I have never actually owned any such creatures and so have yet to achieve that stereotype of the teenaged entomologist with entire rooms of his parents' house devoted to keeping his insects and arachnids. Nor is that something I find desirable now — if I ever did. I have, mostly, shed these interests with age. When looking back on my childhood fascination — in arachnids specifically — I find myself perplexed that it took me so long to get over it those interests when I really should have learned some amount of arachnophobia when I was much younger.

When I was three, my parents were still outsourcing my education (I was homeschooled for most of my life) to the International School of Charlottesville. My most vivid recollections of the school are of the playground out back where we would have recess. My activities there varied, from trying to eat the lawn to hiding inside of a large plastic flower pot to digging around in the mulch under the play structures. I was doing the last of these that I found the spider who by all rights should have given me several years of arachnophobia.

I was sitting alone underneath one of the play structures, pretending to be a chef and using the mulch to represent some condiment or other. No other children were around to be make-believe restaurant-goers, but I liked to give some story to my actions no matter what. After a little time, I grabbed a handful of mulch and revealed a small, black spider.

My parents had always been quite accommodating toward my love of snatching any tiny creature that caught my fancy and bringing it over to show them. The only real concern they ever seemed to have about it was the effect I was having on the unfortunate

victim of my interest. It felt only natural to me on that day to catch the black spider and bring it to the nearest equivalent of a parent: the teacher responsible for keeping an eye on the children during recess.

I scooped the spider up in one hand and waddled off to show the teacher, whom I could see standing some distance from the playground. I wanted to show her the interesting-looking spider I had found so as to receive the standard forced enthusiasm and pat on the head. I thought the spider looked interesting simply because of how uniformly dark it appeared; I did not see the telltale red hourglass on the underside of its abdomen. It took the black widow until just after I managed to get over the concrete border of the playground to have enough and bite me. I had felt pain before as a child several times at that point. Nor was it the first time another living creature had attacked me. My parents' cats, while sweet most of the time, were not creatures of infinite patience. Still, that was the first time a spider had ever attacked me, and it was agonizing. I cannot describe the feeling brought on by the venom; my memory of events becomes rather broken after that point. The clearest thought I can remember is my panicked attempt to figure out what to do. I am not sure why dropping the spider wasn't my immediate reaction, but I did not let go. I realized I was in serious need of an adult, and so my journey across the grass toward the supervisor continued — no longer hoping to show her something I had found, but in the desperate need of help.

When I reached her, I opened my hand to show her the spider, much as I had been planning to before being bitten. "I found this," I said. "I think it bit me."

I do not remember how she reacted to my showing her an extremely venomous spider and saying I had been bitten. I, in fact, remember little between then and being taken into an ambulance. I was taken to the hospital and treated for the bite. I remember being in great pain during that time and still aching when I spent the night in a hospital bedroom. I do not remember much else after that except for what happened when I asked after the spider's fate. I was informed that my teacher had trapped it in a zip lock bag and crushed it under her foot. I felt overcome with guilt that I had brought about the execution of a creature whose only crime was fearing me.

The agony and fear that I felt because I had picked up that spider were not enough to make me repent, nor was the guilt I felt that my curiosity had killed it. I still grabbed interesting-looking spiders almost every time I found one, although I was more careful to choose defenseless targets.

I have only seen one black widow since that day when I was around seven years old. It was living in a cracked concrete wall that I passed, and I stopped to look at it. Unlike that first black widow, this one was displaying its hourglass in full view, so I knew immediately that it was the same sort of spider that likely almost killed my three-year-old self. It looked small. I watched it for a while feeling nothing but a detached interest. It occurred to me I should be scared of this creature. Even if I wasn't scared of all spiders, its dead predecessor should have at least taught me some respect. I did my best to pretend to be frightened as I repositioned myself to get a closer look.