

Along Came A Spider

The Tuffet Diner's bell rings hello, and Walter decides that tonight's victim is a waitress. Because she is blonde, because she smokes weed, because she keeps a pack of condoms in the glove box of her car. Nice and classic. He hates to be the guy seen writing alone in a restaurant, but the idea is too good, too urgent. A half-eaten plate of chicken fried steak is pushed aside. Walter uses his jeans to wipe the grease from his hands before reaching for the messenger bag under the table. His mutuals on Bookstagram are going to love seeing the waitress murdered because Walter is going to subvert all the tropes of a classic blonde girl death. Blonde woman death? 'Girl' might be too infantilizing. Anyways, despite all expectations, his waitress will look her killer in the eyes. She'll be brave. And Walter certainly won't eroticize her dead body, even a little bit. He pulls out a silver pen. The clasp of his premium A5 refillable leather journal opens with a satisfying *clack*.

Eight aluminum cans of pop, twenty cigarette butts, two needles, and five plastic bags: tonight's back alley trash. The waitress can't stand to look at garbage while taking her smoke, so the first five of her fifteen minute break is spent cleaning up the shithole behind the diner. She props the push broom next to the door before crouching in the shadow of the dumpster. It's cold. Her stiff fingers struggle with her joint, struggle with her lighter. Curds&Whey. The dispensary had been out of Blue Dream, out of Sour Diesel—this shit was what was on sale, and it'd have to be enough to get her through a night shift of serving long-haul truckers and assholes stinking of beer. It'd be nice to go back home to her sewing needle and the pair of cotton socks she's been darning. Tck, tck, tck. The lighter sparks, then dies.

Walter has always disliked how stories seem to linger on images of women who are afraid. He remembers the horror aisle at Blockbuster, walking through racks of wide eyes dripping blood and mascara. Opening a Harlequin at the airport, the maiden in love trembles and shudders beneath the shadow of her suitor. In a nursery rhyme, a little girl eating milk curds on a hill sees something dark creeping towards her, and she springs up. She screams. She runs. The end. What's the point? Was the fear the punchline?

Outside, the sun sets. Walter shakes his head and takes a sip of his Lipton ice tea. His waitress will be different. She'll be brave, even when confronting her worst nightmares. He wonders what frightens women most. Sexual assault?

Tonight, a simple spider tries his best to bring dinner back home. He creeps along the city's web of back alleys and broken down convenience stores, avoiding the few puddles of light that pool out on the pavement. He tries to creep silently, as spiders do, but struggles on account of all the trash left everywhere. Grocery bags stick to his shoes. Something metal, caught on the mass of his dinner, quietly scrapes behind him. The spider stops. Crouches. Gutter grime smears the underbelly of the white silk cocoon, and it dirties the hand he slides beneath its weight. He clicks his tongue. A crushed can of Pepsi, freed, clatters out onto the asphalt. It collides with several other cans littering the tight alleyway. Clink clank clunk. The spider can't concentrate when there is so much noise. It makes him forget what he is doing, where he is supposed to go.

The spider peers through the dark. He notices a path through the dim, stretching beyond the dumpster of a late night diner. No trash. The way is clear.

If the killer is an animal or a monster, the waitress' lack of fear might be mistaken as a noble acceptance of her role in the circle of life. Or empathy, maybe, for a wholly alien set of moral axioms. No, the killer should be a person. A man, Walter decides, tapping the back of the silver pen against the white laminate table. He could torture her. Threaten her chastity. Since the waitress' courage should well up from some pre-established character trait, perhaps the box of condoms will come back into play. She could try to seduce the man. Subvert expectations. The very whorishness that led her to be targeted by the narrative would be what allows the waitress to be unafraid in the final, critical moment. Genius! The sunset casts bars of red light across Walter's cursive collection of notes. He snaps a picture and uploads it to Instagram.

The spider follows the path. Drawn by a flame blinking in the dark, he leaves his dinner in a pocket of shadow and peers around the edge of the dumpster. A woman sits with her back against the brick wall. Eyes closed, she sighs out a mouthful of smoke. One look at her spotless apron—clean-pressed, embroidered with the diner's pink Tuffet logo—and it's clear she's the one responsible for the sole alleyway swept clear of trash. Her broom rests by a door. The spider likes how the woman appears to be a conscientious person. Clean. Something about their meeting feels predestined, like the world has invited him to come witness her, to come linger by her side.

The waitress deposits a receipt on the table, and Walter smiles up at her. Exhaustion drags at the corners of her eyes, but a strange rosiness warms her features, like she's stepped out from the page of a vintage Mother Goose illustration. Wisps of blonde hair frame her face. Walter finds them charming.

“Getting home soon?” he asks.

“No,” the waitress says.

She doesn’t explain any further, and Walter wonders if that means she’s on graveyard shift, or if she’s going to someone else’s home after she clocks out. Could be both. He’s smelled weed on her before, but it would be interesting to see whether or not she really does keep a box of condoms in her glove compartment. Walter tips 20% and leaves his number on the back of the receipt.

A pair of eyes gleam out of the dark, and the waitress chokes mid-drag.

“Shit!” she says, fumbling with her joint. Its ember of light is swallowed by the puddle at her feet. The silhouette of a face says nothing. She’s got no money till the tips are pooled, but she senses that this thing isn’t looking for cash. Smoke congeals in her lungs. The waitress’ mind freezes on her hopes for the end of her shift. The cotton socks. The darning. When you are a person who is learning to mend, the sock that’s most fucked up becomes a joy. A new tear means a new opportunity to try out the cool mending patterns on Instagram. Twill. Honeycomb. Chevron. Neat, colorful stitches. What seems to be full of holes is not actually ruined. The waitress coughs once.

“Hi, how are we doing tonight?” she greets the silhouette, in a voice she recognizes from customer service.

The door to the Tuffet Diner swings shut behind him, and the bell rings out its goodbye. Walter steals one last look at the waitress—bent over, pouring coffee for trucker missing most his teeth—before heading back to his parking spot. Cold air sweeps away the scent of stale maple

syrup. He turns into an alley littered with trash. As he walks, Walter considers how the waitress should die. Obviously, the method of killing should enhance her moment of defiance. Perhaps the killer, taken by the calm in her eyes, scoops them from their sockets and preserves them in formaldehyde. Perhaps her indifference provokes the killer into dragging the waitress' body under the back wheel of his car and he reverses over it, exploding her brain matter across the dirty pavement. Walter squints through the twilight. Where is his Subaru, anyways?

Nights spent spying through windows and crawling above ceilings have familiarized the spider with the ritual of small talk. Hi, hello, let me get to know you. It is the first time he has been tempted to pick the words up and put them into his own mouth. The spider reaches out with a long, strange hand. He imagines a reality where the things he has to say are considered pleasant and wonderful. The woman leads him to her home. Her door is opened to him. He is allowed to dwell in her corners, to pace the inner perimeters of her life.

"We're doing good, miss," the spider says, rescuing the joint from the puddle. He holds it up. Water drips from its paper wrapping. Is this thing still wanted?

The woman nods. He leans in. The strange hand slides it, slow, into the opening of her apron's breast pocket.

Night has fallen. Walter's shoe strikes the side of a Pepsi can, and it ping-pongs out to the aperture of the alley where the parking lot should be, but isn't. He takes out his cell phone. His brown eyes stare back at him, distorted out of their unworried shape by the black slate of glass. Out of battery. Just his luck.

There are few working streetlights in the city's web of back alleys and broken down convenience stores, but if Walter keeps walking, surely he will round a corner and find one. If not a light, then a person. Surely someone else is out here, trying to make their way home in the dark.

In another version of the story, the waitress is not a waitress. She isn't thirty, living in a shared apartment, and bone-tired from working a series of unforgiving night shifts. She is a young girl. The girl doesn't know that energy isn't a boundless resource. The girl believes that she can escape if she runs, that someone will come help her if she screams. But tonight's story happens years too late; the girl no longer exists. She is a waitress. The waitress knows that when shit happens, you are mostly just too worn out to do anything about it.

A click, and her lighter flares to life.

"Hey, man," the waitress says. She takes the joint out and shakes it, water droplets flicking across both of their faces. "Want a hit?"

Walter, who is lost, finds someone who is not a person. But even though he has no way of knowing that this non-person will proceed to wrap him up into a very delicious spider-takeout, or that this non-person, an hour from now, will also get lost and find himself sitting down beside the waitress, or that the both of them, who will try to get high together but will be left coughing and crying from the thick, noxious smoke rolling off of the wet leaves, will run into each other a few more times by coincidence before agreeing to meet up another night, or that the waitress' roommate, after initially mistaking the non-person for her sleep paralysis demon, will watch from the safety of the kitchen as the two sprawl out together on the living room rug, murmuring

stoner-talk into each other's ears, or that the stoner-talk will dissect the philosophical similarities and differences between someone who prefers to weave silk into something practical and someone who prefers to darn beauty into something seemingly ruined—he somehow senses that the evening will not be going as he planned, and that asking the dark figure for directions might not be the best idea. Walter's premonition never manifests into fear. The ringing of the Tuffet Diner's bell makes him look over his shoulder. It turns Walter around, calls him to return the start, to lead the narrative back to its beginning, but before the skin on his neck can tell his brain that it has been pierced, before his mouth can open up to scream, he is caught by the figure and is gone.