

## Widow's Bite

The old fruit cellar was a place of hiding and dreaming. Filled with cobwebs, dust, and shadows, it swallowed me alive, the trap door falling into place like the jaws of Jonah's whale. I spent my first sixteen years running to this place, slipping into its cool, damp fullness, breathing in an era of hard-packed survival contained within dirt walls. I dreamed of a world far away, where fear was a dirty word, and the need for such a thing unheard of.

Grandma said Black Widows secreted away in places such as this, spinning erratic webs with no real shape or form, their silk stronger than most other arachnids, strong enough to bind their prey, while they waited for a mate to find them. They hung suspended from their silken threads belly up, their red hourglass underside drawing the male spider to a momentary ecstasy. I'd never seen one in this place, but that didn't mean they weren't here, hiding in corners or niches where light could not be found, the darkness so complete it swallowed sound.

A kerosene lamp sat on the second step from the bottom, along with a book of matches, the cover advertising a bar my daddy once frequented, balanced precariously atop the glass chimney. I knew this without sight because I was the one who placed it there. Habit is a sigh you've made so many times you take no note of when your lungs

expand and contract. I reached out in the dark and struck a match to light the wick. I was happy to see the lamp still full of oil, the way I'd left it ten years ago.

Jars of forgotten peaches and cherries sat heavily on warped shelves, a lifetime of dust and grime clouding the glass, rusted lids eroded and permanently affixed to rims. I lifted a quart jar and wiped the side with the edge of my denim shirt, revealing black orbs packed tightly in liquid, a floating memory of hours spent with my Grandmother, working in synchronized motion to put up the harvest before it rotted on the trees.

*Waste not, want not*, was Grandma's favorite saying. Plagued with memories of the Great Depression, she never threw anything away. You used a thing until the usefulness had plumb gone out of it. She said the Black Widow would sometimes turn cannibalistic, eating her mate by making small punctures in his body and sucking out the liquid contents. Grandma liked that about the Widow.

The flame within the lamp flickered as I turned to survey the opposite wall. I raised it high and watched as shadows weaved and bobbed out of sight, running from the light like the devil's minions. A discarded kitchen chair, cobwebs lacing the spindled back, one leg broken off so that it leaned against the wall, reminded me of the night Daddy died.

Grandma met him at the door as he stumbled inside, her soup ladle brandished like a weapon. I sat at the table, fear stiffening my body as I raised my eyes from my dinner to meet his drunken gaze across the room. He lunged past Grandma, throwing her back against the stove, unsettling the pot still simmering there, and sloshing hot beef broth over the sides to sizzle and burn in the gas flame. Grandma instinctively reached

out and burned her hand, a look of pain crossing her face before she stepped smack dab in front of my Daddy once again.

“You leave her alone, Harold!” she said, the menacing tone of her words belying the fact that it came from a woman who stood less than five feet tall, reaching no higher than her son’s shoulders.

He sneered, showing teeth yellowed and rotting from lack of care and hard drink. I could smell him from ten feet away, sweat, booze, and licorice snaps mingling with the acrid scent of burning broth coming from the stove.

Grandma said the male Widow was harmless, with longer legs and colorful bands of yellow and red over his back, he simply looked pretty and did his job.

I stood up quickly, knocking my chair to the floor, and backed away from the table, my hands out in front to fend off an eminent attack. Daddy lunged forward, sidestepping Grandma, yanked the chair up and smashed it back to the floor with a resounding crash. The leg snapped off and slid across the waxed linoleum, coming to rest at my feet.

The Black Widow lays sacks of eggs containing up to 750 each, but due to cannibalism less than a dozen survive each summer. The newly hatched spiderlings are pale and white, completely harmless and helpless. The few that survive are perfect examples of nature over nurture, Grandma said.

“She’s mine,” Daddy spat out, saliva mingled with his words. “And I’ll do whatever I want with her.” His drunken threats were never empty. I had the fractures to prove it. He slammed his fist on the flimsy pine table, nearly cracking it with the force. “Come here, girl!”

“You’re not gonna hurt her any more, Harold. You’ll have to kill me first.”

Grandma stood straight and resolute, her hands in the pocket of her yellow apron. With her long gray hair in two braids, twisted around the sides of her head, and her mouth in a straight line, she looked like one of those long-horned sheep I’d seen pictures of, their horns, sharp and curling, standing their ground on the side of a steep cliff.

“And what are you gonna do about it?” Daddy asked, hatefulness oozing from his pores. He grasped Grandma around the neck, his fingers pressing into her windpipe and choking off any further words. “I’ll do what I damn well please in my own house!” His eyes blazed with fury, bloodshot and watery, a fine image of Satan himself.

Although the Black Widow’s venom is fifteen times as toxic as a prairie rattlesnake, she is habitually shy and nocturnal, not aggressive, unless her web is disturbed or she is accidentally trapped.

I caught the flash of a blade as Grandma drew her hand from her apron pocket. She thrust upward, plunging the knife into the front of her son’s blue, flannel shirt. He released his grip on her neck and stumbled back, his eyes wide with shock as he looked down at the handle of the steak knife protruding from his middle.

The rumbling of trucks and tractors overhead reverberated through the cellar, bringing me back to my purpose in coming here today. I moved slowly past the chair and shelves of jars, the lantern’s flame pushing the darkness back further still. A square space dug out of the wall, two feet deep and six inches wide, held family secrets recorded in my girlhood diary. I couldn’t take the chance that some construction worker would find it here, open it up, and read aloud what had remained hidden for so long.

I bent to shine the lantern inside, and nearly screamed when a shiny black body scuttled back along an elaborate silken web. Spread over my journal and attached to the sides and top of the opening, the web would be pulled loose if I took what belonged to me. I licked my lips and tried to remember what Grandma said about mortality rates due to Black Widow bites.

Although the Black Widow's venom is extremely toxic, the minute amount injected by the spider isn't usually fatal to humans. It can cause abdominal and muscle pain, alternating salivation and dry-mouth, paralysis of the diaphragm, sweating, and swollen eyelids. But not death.

I drew a deep breath and ever so slowly, by increments, reached my hand toward the book. My fingertips touched the edge of the leather cover and I pressed down to slide it toward the opening. Clanging shook the cellar walls; chunks of dirt broke loose and crumbled to the floor.

"Ouch!" I jerked back quickly, a small pinprick of feeling on the knuckle of my forefinger. It wasn't painful, but rather surprising. The demolition equipment above had disturbed the Widow from her nest and I was the enemy at the gate to fend off and destroy.

I shined the lantern over my journal and pulled it the rest of the way from the hole. The Widow had scuttled to the farthest reaches of her lair, watching me pull her home apart with my clumsy extraction. I looked at my hand and could already see the skin begin to swell.

I took my journal, blew out the lamp, set it in its place on the steps, and pushed out through the trap door. Sunlight glared, engines ground out an angry chorus, and the

heat of the desert air almost made me want to scuttle back below into the cool, dark recesses of my hiding place. Instead, I closed the cellar, turned and went to my car.

My childhood home was being torn down and replaced with a new ballpark for the city. They would fill the cellar with dirt, pack it down, and forever bury any trace of my family's arachnid tendencies.