

SPIDER SINGS

by Patrick Kendrick

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I dabbed at the cut above the old man's eye and watched the peroxide foam out of the wound like spit on a hot griddle. I wiped the bloody spot and slapped a 4 x 4 gauze pad on it before the swarm of gnats hovering around the man's head could use the laceration for a landing zone. We were standing in the shining shards of a beer bottle purchased at the nearby sundry store and used as a bludgeoning instrument on this man's head in order to rob him.

I was assigned to the rescue truck that day and had already been to a shooting, a stabbing, and a heart attack. This was the second assault for the day and it was not yet noon.

"You should get some stitches in that. It'll heal better. Won't leave as much of a scar."

He looked at me, squinting through one blood-filled eye. "I look like I'm worried about a scar"? His face was as gnarled and lined as an old lizard-skinned boot.

"You want to talk to the cops...when they get here? Might be able to catch the guy that took your wallet."

"Cops can kiss my leg. Nothin' in that wallet anyhow. Dude didn't get no money no how. Didn't know where to look." At this, he pointed to his rather oversized ear in which there was a stash of quarters. Maybe two dollars worth, I guessed. Then, he walked away. *You're welcome.*

I'd grown thirsty after taking care of people who do not want to take care of themselves, and standing in the mid-day Florida heat. I stripped off my latex gloves and ducked into the sundry store.

Inside, the air was cooled slightly by a slow-turning overhead fan, whose blades held about a one-inch layer of greasy dust. There was a solidly built black man behind the cash box, arms like tree trunks bracing him against the counter. His huge head squatted atop his shoulders like a deflated basketball and held half-closed eyes that watched a small boy flit around his shop like a pollinating bee.

“You find what you lookin’ fo’, Spider?” said the man, his voice sounding like a gator’s grunt.

The boy’s fingers ran, delicately, over the surfaces of the various chocolate bars, hard candy and chewing gum like those thin-legged spiders that are so weightless they can walk on water without sinking.

“Yassuh,” the boy answered.

He selected a Bit O’ Honey candy bar and laid it on the counter with several coins. He fingered the surfaces of the coins as if reading braille and it was then that I got a look at his face. There was a splash of shiny, pink skin where the luster of his blue-black skin should have been, like a tattered masquerade mask. His eyes were milky blue orbs with no discernible pupils nor irises. He was blind.

“That’s fo-tee-seben cents,” said the oak behind the counter. “Need fif-tee-two fo’ da candy.”

The boy slapped his pockets optimistically as if by doing so he could magically produce an extra nickel.

I said, “I got it,” and threw another nickel down next to my bottle of iced tea.

The boy turned his sightless face up at me and grinned widely with a mouthful of perfect teeth.

“Thank you, suh.”

“You’re welcome, young man.”

With that, he stretched his grin a little bigger and ran those spider fingers over the counter until he located the candy. Then, he *felt his way* out the door and into the bright blaze of sunlight that could not help him see any better if it was a thousand times brighter.

“Spider?” I inquired.

“Yeah. I call him that ‘cause da way he do his fingers over every-thing. Like a spider, you know?”

I nodded my head, laying a buck next to the tea. “Know what happened to him?”

“Sho do. His daddy was diddlin’ his wife’s sistuh. Well, spider’s mothuh, she found out. She waited ‘til that no account husband come stumblin’ in drunk. She heated up some bacon grease she had on da stove. She gonna po’ it in his ear while he slept, teach him a lesson. Well, that no account, he wake up and slap that fryin’ pan. Da grease go flyin’ ‘cross da room in splash in da baby’s face. That baby was Spider. It blind him and make him look like dat, like a racoon.”

“Jesus,” was all I could say.

“He get a-roun’ though. Uses them fingers like eyes. Like an insect. He in here all da time.”

I took my tea and my change and stepped outside to watch the blind boy make his way home. I felt irresponsible letting a kid go out on his own, knowing he couldn’t see. He kept one hand on the red-brick wall of the store as he moved down the sidewalk as confidently as a sighted person. I wondered what he’d do when he came to the end of the wall. The lot next to the store was an empty sand lot, save for a single tabebuia tree whose bright-yellow flowers glinted sunlight onto the sidewalk like a giant, mirrored, disco-ball.

Spider stepped into that light and looked up at the tree as if he could see and he started to *sing*. He sang a gospel song, of which I’m sorry to say, I was not familiar. The man from the sundry store came over and stood behind me in the doorway of his shop, listening with me. His eyes were moist.

“Boy got a beautiful sound, don’t he?”

“He sure does,” I agreed.

“Lord works in funny ways. Took dat boys eyes but oh what a voice he give him.”

When he stopped singing, the boy turned to me, grinning again. He knew I was there. The song was his thanks to me.

“Thanks again, “ he said, turning and running to the end of the sidewalk, as fearless as a bat, before disappearing around the corner.

I started to yell, “No, thank you!” But, he was already gone, like a fleeting thought you try to hang onto but lose, sometimes, in all the confusion of everyday thoughts. I stood there and finished my tea and realized that was the best nickel I’ll ever spend.