

Where Spiders Fear to Spin

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Where Spiders Fear to Spin

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For Abby Cunningham and her family

For their kindness and generosity to the town of Lisbon

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The book you are about to read would never have existed without the benefit of my writers group, the Tuesday Mayhem Society. TMS was formed in September of 2013, and by October I'd suggested to the group that each of us write a ghost story for the week of Halloween. When I made the suggestion, I had absolutely no idea what I was going to write about. Inspiration was with me, though, and I found myself contemplating someone (a random character) on their deathbed, being haunted so badly that they would want to stay alive at all costs. One of the greatest benefits in belonging to a writers group is that the talent of others tends to inspire and motivate, and when I set to writing my story I discovered that it was going to grow much longer than the short stories we're used to sharing. I often think of Percy and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley spending their summer vacationing with Lord Byron in Geneva, the culmination of which bore to the world Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. The culmination of our

belonging to the Tuesday Mayhem Society bore *Where Spiders Fear to Spin* as well as the novella *Abram's Bridge* by Glenn Rolfe (Samhain Publishing) and the wonderful short story "Ghost Baby" by Joline Schnopp, which I believe will be published in the very near future. All of these tales were shared by the authors on a warm but cloudy afternoon just before Halloween. Being there and experiencing that moment was sublime.

The other half of this book belongs to a fundraising event. Sometime in early 2014, my wife Amy asked me if I wanted to contribute something to the Lisbon Community School PTO for their annual fundraising auction. In the past I had donated an autographed copy of my debut novel, and was going to do the same thing this time around. Only, the first year I donated, nobody bid on my novel, and I was left feeling pretty shitty in general. I wanted to offer something tangible, something significant and with a real, desirable prize for the winning bidder. So I offered a chance to be a walk-on character in the novel I've been working on. The novel is titled *The Goat Parade* and the story consists of a devil-worshipping serial killer. What I had not anticipated on was who would actually win. When it was revealed to me that the winning bid went to 10-year-old Abby Cunningham, red flags exploded everywhere in my brain. I'd assumed that the winning bidder was going to be an adult and that they had understood what I'd presented to the auction committee to be an adult-themed novel. I contacted Abby's father, Ross, and explained my situation, and he agreed that this ghost story was a far more suitable option. I rewrote a few scenes and added Abby into the story, and was stunned to discover just how crucial her presence worked out in telling the story. Upon finishing the first draft, I printed a copy for the Cunninghams, and was tremendously pleased (and relieved) to hear that they did, in fact, enjoy the story.

With that relief came a moment of reflection. I was greatly pleased that a decent amount of money had been pledged to win the auction, and I felt that I wanted to match that generosity. With that in mind, I've pledged to the LCS PTO that all of my proceeds from this book will be donated directly to them as well. The PTO is responsible for putting together some wonderful family-oriented programs that benefit and enrich the education of their students, as well as provide support to the faculty and staff of the school. By purchasing this book, you've helped to foster a decent community support network and should feel proud. On behalf of my daughters and all the other children of LCS, thank you!

With this in mind, I need to give props to the very talented artist Morbideus Goodell. Morby is a friend and fellow Mainer, and his work has also graced the cover of my novella *The Angel of Death*. When I approached Morby about doing interior illustrations, I'd offered to pay him out of my own pocket. Morby was aware that the project was now a fundraiser and volunteered to do the illustrations for free. That, my friends, is a class act. If you are local and need an artist for ANY project, he is the first person I would recommend. Thank you, and God bless you, my brother.

The short story at the end, "Peripheral Vision," was written specifically as part of my involvement with authors Peter Giglio and Joe McKinney for our online endeavor "Blogging the Ghost," a blog tour we shared back in September of 2012. The tour was a series of essays and ghost stories we did to promote our then-current releases *Sunfall Manor* (Giglio), *Inheritance* (McKinney), and my own novel, *A Requiem for Dead Flies*. We had discussed the possibility at the conclusion of the blog tour of perhaps collecting our work and publishing it as a Kindle download, with our proceeds being donated to a charity to be named. All of us have been busy with our own careers, with Pete Giglio subsequently publishing my collection *Dolly and Other Stories* through Evil Jester Press, which he runs with Charles Day. Pete also got married since then, to the lovely author Shannon Michaels, and relocated to a different state. Joe, likewise, continues to battle the forces of evil through the *San Antonio P.D.*, as well as craft awesome zombie books. I loved the story too much to not see it placed in a good home, so I added it here for good measure.

As always, I have my inner core of fans and friends to thank for their undying support: my friend

and mentor L.L. Soares; Glenn, Jojo, April, and Sylvia from the Tuesday Mayhem Society; the gang at the Portland Processing and Distribution Center; Jen Libby, Summer Paradis, Gary Hauger, Heather Cronin, Carol LeClair, Kelly Austin, Jen Conley and all the other parents involved with the LCS PTO. Thank you for the sacrifices you make for our children.

A special shout out to Robbie Clark, the USPS Patron Saint of Literature, whose generosity came through in a very dark time for me. Seriously, I can never repay you emotionally for the kindness you showed me. You are a truly remarkable human being, my friend. I hope you enjoy this book.

Lastly, to my beautiful wife, Amy, and my daughters Vivian and Liliana. Daddy is a complicated person, as artists often are. Thank you for loving me anyway.

Now let's turn down the lights and see what happens . . .

“O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice
to deceive!”

Sir Walter Scott

ONE

Happiness was a ghost that had eluded her, floating through the cold corners of her heart and her home until it evaporated, unfulfilled and empty, into thin air. Theresa felt as if she could almost snatch glimpses of it and feel its icy fingerprints all around her. It lingered upon old photographs of herself with her late father, Andrew Mills; the ones she kept in clean, polished silver frames in every room of her house. It was part of her weekly cleaning ritual, when not tending to her dying mother, to spray the delicate glass with orange-scented window cleaner and wipe away the lingering dust, fighting away tears as she gazed at the melancholy smile of her broken-hearted daddy. Photographs and memories were all she really had now, as any semblance of having a life of her own had also evaporated, leaving her home smelling of stale antiseptic air and bitter acceptance. Theresa decided that there were gray areas between love, hatred and resentment; a purgatory that she had somehow fallen victim to in her relationship with her dying mother. And there was never happiness waiting in the gray areas. There was only captivity.

She had this revelation as she once again struggled to get the old woman to lie still long enough to pull the bedpan out from between her legs so she could empty it. The great Sadie Mills, the one-time soap opera queen from her heyday on *Forbidden Steam* back in the late seventies, now lay on the mechanical hospice bed set up in Theresa's living room, a victim of emphysema and COPD after years of chain-puffing those goddamn Salem Lights. The portable commode the hospice company had left for her—what Theresa quietly called “Sadie's Throne” behind her mother's back—sat unceremoniously in the corner of the room, a sad relic and perfect metaphor to her final days. Sadie was still capable of dragging her can out of bed to use the fixture, but generally opted to have her only child wait on her instead. It was Sadie's final strand of control.

“It's demeaning,” Sadie insisted every time Theresa brought up the subject. “If they knew just how neglected I was around here . . . my fans wouldn't stand for it!”

“Your fans haven't given a damn about you in over a decade,” Theresa finally retorted last time the subject was broached. “Your fans haven't thought about you since probably the late '90s. When was the last time anyone bothered to send you fan mail, Mom?”

Today, for the moment, Sadie was quiet. She'd finished her business a while ago, but hadn't even bothered to ask for assistance. Instead, she'd wriggled the bedpan out from under her until the cold tin basin rested between her legs and laid back in her bed. Sadie stared at the ceiling, inhaling in slow, raspy breaths through lungs that were nearly useless. Her raven-black wig crowned her head in luxurious wisps and locks, trickling over the pale skin of her death-mask face and tumbling onto the pillow. The wig was another final strand of the past. It was vainglorious and silly, but without it, Sadie Mills could no longer look in the mirror. It covered her gray, balding pate like a bad lie, and Sadie had told a thousand of those in her lifetime already. To see the fake, near-perfect hair on her dying mother's head looked grotesque. The only thing worse was the smell of her bedpan. The only reason Theresa could tell her mother had gone was the caustic scent of ammonia emanating from the pan of urine between her legs.

Theresa removed the bedpan and walked over to the commode. She lifted the lid and dumped the urine into the basin.

“Theresa Mills,” the old woman groaned, “why didn't you take that into the bathroom and dump it in the toilet? I don't want to lay here and smell my bodily waste.”

“Mom, I'm running late. It didn't bother you to lie in bed with a pan of piss under your keister for

the last hour, so I'm not sure why you're putting up a fuss now." With a dramatic pause for emphasis, she added, "Besides, we both know there's nothing stopping you from getting up out of bed to go. If you could at least bend that much, I'd be happy to do whatever you wanted."

Sadie Mills threw her arms up in the air. "You think I enjoy this? Do you think I like dying here in your living room?" The tears came quickly, but then, for a dramatic actress, it wasn't like she had to work hard to produce them. Tools of the trade, she had commented to some fan or other whenever she was asked about it. "Do you think I like having my body failing me in front of you? I have no privacy. I have no dignity. Everything I had is now gone. Do you have any idea how that feels?"

Oddly enough, Theresa did.

Theresa placed the empty bedpan on the coffee table. She was stifling the argument welling up inside her even though it stung like bile in her esophagus. It was too easy to rattle off all the mistakes and bad decisions her mother had made over the years. Throwing them in her face over and over again was beyond redundant. Hell, it didn't even feel cruel anymore. The old woman deserved it. The truth was, Theresa was tired of hurting inside. All of this would soon be over, and Sadie Mills would be joining her late husband Andrew Mills in the Great Beyond, where she could go back to torturing him with her bullshit all over again, forever and ever, amen.

That was when it hurt the most. Those times when she thought of her father drinking himself to death to stop thinking and caring and being her mother's mental hostage. Christ, why couldn't he have just divorced her and found his happiness elsewhere?

Why couldn't it just have been her that died?

"Mom, I have to go to work. One of us has to pay for all this." She nodded toward the hospice equipment; the mechanical bed, the EKG machine that monitored her mother's heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen level, the canister of liquid O₂ that produced the line of fresh oxygen to Sadie's lungs through the yards and yards of clear plastic tubing (which always made Sadie's nostrils crusty with dried snot that Theresa would have to remove with Kleenex). "The hospice worker should be here around ten. If you have any problems, you can take them up with Becky. That's what I'm paying her for."

Sadie lay back down and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm such a burden on you. But you needn't worry. I'll be dead soon enough. Maybe by then you'll care about me enough to actually miss me." Her chin quivered as if she were about to cry. Her wig barely shifted as she turned her head away. "God, I wish I could have a cigarette."

Theresa looked back at her mother. The starlet of the small screen was now a skeleton laced in death skins and a medic alert bracelet labeled with her myriad maladies and the letters "D.N.R." It was impossible to believe that this woman had once been the feisty, fiery raven-haired goddess (even though she'd been born a redhead, and could never quite fathom why the network insisted on her making the switch) that seduced men by the score on that insipid daytime program while the childhood version of Theresa watched on the living room couch with her dad. During those hot summer afternoons he would come home for his lunch break from whatever construction site he'd be working on, and stay long enough to shovel down the tuna fish sandwich and pickle spear that their maid, Mrs. Libby, had prepared for him as he watched *Forbidden Steam* with his daughter. She could remember being seven or eight years old and asking her father during a commercial for Calgon detergent . . .

Calgon, take me away!

. . . if it ever bothered him to watch Sadie parading around in her bra and panties in front of other men while the whole world watched. "Not really," he said as he lifted another bottle of Budweiser to his mouth to drink, his plate already emptied to nothing but globs of mayonnaise and bread crumbs. "As long as the whole world knows she comes home to me at the end of the day."

Of course, Sadie Mills didn't always come home. Journalists and paparazzi from the tabloids were always there, always following her around to see what Sadie of the Soaps was up to in her private life . . .

Theresa let these thoughts go. "I should be home around five. I'll bring dinner. Is there anything in particular you'd like tonight?"

Sadie remained quiet.

"Fine. I'll see you later this afternoon."

She had almost made it to the door when her mother finally spoke up.

"Would you please kill that spider before you go?"

"What spider?"

Sadie raised her liver-spotted hand and pointed to the corner where the commode sat. Directly in the space above it was a spiderweb. It laced with near-perfect symmetry into a silky spiral with too many sides and angles to count. It made Theresa think of her seventh-grade math teacher, Mr. O'Brien, explaining the intricacies of advanced polygons and polyhedrons. What would he have called this? A dodecagon? A doceptagon? It didn't matter. What mattered was the fat, grayish-brown arachnid working its spinner end to fortify one of the web's sides.

"Right there . . . can't you see it? It's enormous. It must be getting ready to lay eggs. Please kill it before you go. I can't stand the thought of it hatching thousands of babies in here with me."

Theresa marveled at the web. Another teacher of hers, Mrs. Bowdoin (freshman biology), had explained to her class that no matter where you go, you are never further away than six feet from a spider at any given time. It was one lesson that had grossed her out way back when, and forced her to put that bit of information to the test wherever she went. She could recall being at Fenway Park with her dad, watching the Red Sox beating the New York Yankees and seeing the spider crawl out from under her bench. She had let out the obligatory girly-girl scream, and then felt her face flush with embarrassment as her dad lifted his size-13 sneaker and squished the poor thing out of existence. Theresa then felt the regret of realizing that even though Daddy was only being kind and protective of her, she would have let the spider live.

God, she missed her dad.

"She's not hurting anybody, Mom. Besides, it's good for you to have some company."

The spider continued to weave above the commode, and why not? On those times when Sadie did drag her wrinkled, old ass out of bed to use the commode, she'd leave her bowel movements in the basin for Theresa to take away. Those movements (dying person turds, Theresa thought of them) were always messy and smelly and attracted flies. This spider was actually doing her a favor.

"You do this to punish me," Sadie insisted. "You awful little girl. You've always been an ungrateful

bitch.”

“I’ll tell you what, Mom . . . if you want the spider gone, get up and kill it yourself. But you just remember something; I don’t have to take care of you. I’m all you’ve got left. So you just mind who you’re calling an ingrate.”

Theresa left the house in a fury. Secretly, she hoped to come home and find the old woman finally dead. Things couldn’t go on like this much longer.

TWO

Becky Moreau arrived sometime just after nine a.m. She rapped soundly on the door for a good ten seconds. When nobody came to answer, she fished her copy of the key to Theresa’s door out of her canvas tote bag and let herself in, pulling the door closed firmly behind her. If there had been one rule she’d learned in her three years of hospice work, it was to make sure her clients were alert to her presence. She’d heard plenty of horror stories about colleagues reporting to their clients’ homes, only to incidentally cause . . . well, some of the older folks ran that fine line between incontinence and cardiac complications. Some shit themselves and some had heart attacks, only to shit the bed shortly after.

“Good morning, Mrs. Mills,” she said, her voice sounding both authoritative and pleasant. The EKG machine greeted her back with the steady pings of a rhythmic heart rate. The soap opera queen was still alive, for the time being. Perhaps her daughter had offered her a sedative before she went off to her job for the day. That was fine. The old lady could be a pain in the ass when she wanted to be, and on most days, she was. If Sadie was sleeping, it gave Becky time to get the preliminary chores knocked out, and she already had a solid checklist for the day. Mrs. Mills was due for a sponge bath. That would be loads easier with Sadie of the Soaps drugged to the gills. She also needed a manicure/pedicure, a change of bedding, medication, and a reorder on her oxygen supply. And none of this even included the additional housecleaning service the Metropolitan Hospice Corporation had arranged as part of her contract. It hadn’t taken a detective to discover Sadie’s daughter wasn’t much of a domestic goddess.

Becky pushed aside the myriad bottles of prescription medications and set her tote bag down on the dining room table when the old woman called out to her.

“Did you bring my book today?”

She fished the book out of her tote bag and entered the living room. The old woman was fumbling with the bed’s automatic remote to elevate herself. Becky held the book out in front of her so that Sadie could see the cover.

Anne of Green Gables.

“My mother used to read that to me when I was a little girl,” Sadie said. Becky had heard this recitation at least a dozen times; how she and Anne Shirley were both fiery redheads and how trouble always seemed to find them rather than the other way around. “I’d always hoped it would be something I could share with my Theresa, but she never cared for the book. In fact, she always preferred her father reading to her instead of me.”

“Now, now, Mrs. Mills,” Becky soothed. “Let’s not get all worked up again. I promise I’ll read to you a bit later on, but for now I have work to do. I want to start with your sponge bath, and once you’re all clean and cared for, we can discuss Anne and Diana and that nasty old boy, Gilbert Blythe.”

Sadie sighed. “Don’t you talk about my Gilbert that way! I used to have a crush on him, you know. All those years ago, when I was young and innocent and full of girlish idealism. I used to imagine myself finding a young man named Gilbert to fall in love with. He’d be kind and caring and would have a way about him that saw through all my silly capers. And he would love me for me.” She paused for a moment, as if contemplating something tragic and disappointing. “They don’t write characters like Gilbert Blythe anymore. Such a pity. The only perfect men in this world exist in books.”

“Very sad,” Becky said. She’d stopped paying attention; had, in fact, zoned out. Instead, she was already thinking about her boyfriend, Nick, and how she had left him sleeping back in his apartment that morning. She had to drive back to her own apartment on Oak Street to shower and get changed for work. When she left, she was still feeling that thrum of hot romance and great sex from the evening before. But when she started her Volkswagen Beetle (the one Nick always referred to as her ugly “punch buggy”), that song by Pink came on; the one about making the “walk of shame” in the morning. Somehow, it had made her feel like a slut, and that had soured her day. That walk of shame was something college girls did. Here she was at twenty-five, and after two whole years of dating Nick he was still nowhere near ready to cohabit, much less finally pop the question to her. She couldn’t care less about Soap Opera Sadie or her stupid Anne of Green Gables. The very thought of reading that book about the virginal orphan up on Prince Edward Island rankled her.

Becky had gone into the bathroom to fill a bucket with hot, soapy water. She turned on the spigot and waited for the cascading water to heat up. She’d just placed her fingers under the faucet to test it when Sadie bellowed, “Oh, my God!” Becky reached up and gave the tap a hard crank counter-clockwise. The flow ceased, and now she could hear the beep of the EKG machine as it began to rise in response to the old woman’s heart rate. She didn’t need to glance at her watch to make the estimate that her heart rate had nearly doubled. And then Sadie was screaming.

She broke into a sprint, careening around the bathroom door and into the hallway, flying past the door to Theresa’s bedroom and the entrance to the kitchen. She was almost out of breath when she made the final dash through the dining room and back into the living room. Sadie was sitting bolt upright in her bed, gasping for breath and pointing her finger into the corner of the room. Seeing her that way reminded Becky of Redd Foxx on the show Sanford and Son. In her mind she could hear the comedian bellowing, “I’m coming, Elizabeth,” as he pantomimed a heart attack. “This is the big one . . .”

“What is it, Mrs. Mills?”

Her eyes followed Sadie’s hand up into the corner of the room, just above the commode. There was an enormous spiderweb woven up around the ceiling. The sunlight filtering in through the venetian blinds cast a hazy light on it, exposing the delicate, perfectly measured strands of silk. Becky felt her eyes swirling around and around the pattern, starting from the center, until they finally came to rest on the plump little bundle toward the bottom. Some careless housefly had somehow landed in the deadly trap, and had already been prepared for dinner.

“The spider’s gone,” Sadie hissed from her bed. “I can’t see it anywhere!” She’d managed to retreat behind her blankets, pulling them up around her so that only her eyes and the warm, vibrant locks of her wig were in view. “I told Theresa to kill it before she left this morning, but she wouldn’t. I swear to God my daughter is punishing me.”

The beeping of the EKG machine was finally beginning to slow down again. It looked like it wasn’t the “big one” after all. Becky sighed and knelt down beside her client. *

From the twisted mind of Bram Stoker Award Finalist Peter N. Dudar comes a ghost story of vengeance, death, and stark terror.

WHAT IF THE PERSON YOU WRONGED IN LIFE WAS WAITING ON THE OTHER SIDE, JUST BEYOND THE COBWEBBED VEIL OF DEATH, TO DRAG YOU TO HELL?

Sadie Mills, the one-time soap opera star of *Forbidden Steam*, is terminal and waiting to die. Her private life has been haunted by the tragic death of her husband, Andrew, and the subsequent dogging by tabloid reporters over her lascivious past. Her daughter Theresa is now her full-time caregiver and health proxy; a curse of indentured servitude that has driven their damaged relationship to the razor’s edge. Theresa has never forgiven Sadie for driving her father to an early grave, and is praying that her mother’s death will finally undo the web of deceit that Sadie has created. And now, at the hour of her death, Andrew’s angry ghost has returned for Sadie, longing to introduce her soul to unspeakable horrors.

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