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### Spider Eradicating Apples

"Alan, wake up," Marian says, her eyes wild with fear. The sun was barely up. I hadn't gotten much rest on the couch trying to sleep through the storm and unsettling thoughts. "They're coming tonight," she announced.

"No, Ma. There are no aliens. How many times do we have to go through this?"

"Oh, yes there is. And tonight, they're coming with knives and meat cleavers."

My imagination suddenly racked focused with visions of a Helter Skelter blood bath scene right there in the old farmhouse. I pictured a gaggle of little gray beings with enormous bulbous eel-skin heads and long slender switchblade fingers dishing out the horror as they wield meat cleavers. I didn't really want to know, but had to ask. "Why are they coming with knives?"

"Because they're going to cut the spider out of me. That's why I need a laxative, so I can pass the spider before they come and slice it out."

“What? You need a laxative?” I asked. My bewilderment had no bounds.

“Yes. The spider has attached itself to my bowels, so I’m going to visit Dr. St. John and see if he can prescribe me a laxative to pass the spider. I don’t want them cutting me open with knives.”

This Dr. St. John was a physician Marian only rarely mentioned. Apparently, he delivered me at the hospital in Southampton, and that was twenty years ago and three hundred miles away. Why she was bringing him up, I had no idea. “But what if Dr. St. John can’t see you today?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?” Marian fires back, angrily.

“I’m just asking — what if he doesn’t have any appointments on such short notice and he can’t see you for a day or two?”

Marian looked at me with steely cold suspension, “Are you one of them?”

“Who?”

“Are you an alien, too?”

“No, Ma,” I replied, exhausted, “I’m just trying to help.”

“I know you’re the one that put me in the hospital. And that you and your brothers fly around in spaceships.” There was a long pause while Marian looked at me suspiciously. “I hear that spiders don’t like apples. We need apples so I can get rid of the spiders.”

“Apples?”

“Yes. We’re out of apples.”

Why apples repelled man-eating spiders – I had no idea, and where Marian heard it didn't matter. What mattered is that she believed it, and that was enough. Getting apples seemed simple enough, and if it kept the gray eel-skinned marauders with their razor blade fingers brandishing meat cleavers from paying a visit for a disembowelment, I was all for it. So I said, "Okay. I'll get some apples."

Getting dressed, I began planning out my day. First I would get Marian apples. Then on the way home I'd stop by the car wash and exchange some dollar bills for quarters so I could use a pay phone to make calls. I needed privacy and didn't want to use the phone in the house (this was in the day of rotary dial phones that hung on wall). I didn't want Marian overhearing my conversations with Dr. Qadeer. Marian was suspicious about my every move and kept constant tabs. I had to be discreet. She suspected that I was working behind her back to get her committed and didn't trust me.

I began pulling out of the driveway to buy some spider eradicating apples, when Marian bolted out of the house yelling, "Stop! Wait a minute! I'm going with you. Stop!" She had gotten all dressed up. Completely overdressed for a simple ride to the little country grocery store, but that was her style. She never left the house without making the effort to look her best – even suffering a psychotic meltdown. I should have pretended I didn't see her and kept driving, but I didn't – a mistake.

"You don't need to go with me. I can handle it," I said, annoyed. "I'm just getting apples, for crying out loud – let's not make a big deal out of this."

“Oh, yes, I’m going with you,” she declared, grabbing the door handle. She wasn’t letting go.

“But why? I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

She threw the door open and slammed it shut, “Because I don’t trust you,” she replied, eyeing me as if I was a stranger.

So what should have been a simple trip to the Big-M turned into a nerve-rattling showdown – a test of nerves. It was akin to the gunfight at the OK Corral, with both Marian and I suspicious of each other’s motives. Each locked and loaded, just waiting for the other to draw first – I knew it would be Marian.

At the store, I asked her to choose the apples she thought looked superior for their spider slaying properties. After carefully scrutinizing the meager selection, she picked out a few. As soon as I headed for the checkout cashier, she got the draw and beat me to the trigger. Before I knew what was happening, Marian was storming off, headed in the opposite direction toward the meat aisle. *Oh shit, here we go*, I thought. *This is going to get ugly*.

Marian was suddenly radiating a frantic intensity, as if she’d just been jolted by the high-energy electronics she always talks about. “Where are you going, Ma?” I asked, catching up to her.

“None of your business. Now, go away.”

“We got the apples. Let’s go, Ma,” I said, trying to throw myself in front of her.

“Get out of my way, Alan!” she says, trying to push past me. “It’s none of your business.”

"No," I say, getting in her face. "What's not my business?" I grabbed her arm.

"Let me go! Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I want to know what you're doing!"

"Why are they butchering children here?"

"What?" I asked, stunned. It was if the air was sucked out of me.

"They have no right to be murdering my sons. You don't even realize you've been murdered over and over. You're an alienation, aren't you?"

I was dumfounded. The horror of Marian's delusions were unimaginable. She believed that a parasitic spider had attached itself to her bowels and was devouring her from the inside out. The source for nurturing the spider were the medications she was given at the psych center to stop the delusions. She also believed that if she weren't able to eradicate the spider by ingesting the apples, aliens would appear that night to gut her like a white tailed deer. If that wasn't enough, she was convinced her sons were being brutally murdered over and over, and then sliced up for sale in the meat department. And standing before her was not her real son, but an alienation taking his place.

With this ghastly stew of horrors cooking in her head, I couldn't understand how she could function. The schizophrenia had concocted a nightmare that was beyond anything I could fathom. The courage to live in this horrifying reality day after day — was beyond comprehension. She should be receiving a medal for valor — what she got was a straitjacket.

What could I say? There were no magic words to make it better — to fix it. So I resorted to the only thing I could

think of – cold, brutal logic. “Do you want to end up in the hospital again, is that what you want?” I asked, bluntly.

“No, I just want them to stop,” she said, angrily.

“Don’t you understand, Ma? No one knows what the hell you’re talking about. That’s the problem. No one sees what you see. No one knows what the hell you think you know. Why can’t you understand that?”

Marian paused. Tears begin welling up. “Why do you hate me?”

“I don’t hate you, Ma. But they’ll call the cops if you don’t stop. You’ll end up in the hospital again, and I don’t want to see that. Is that what you want – to end up in the hospital again?”

Marian got quiet as she thought. Her bottom lip was quivering from fear and from the adrenaline that was pumping through her system like nitro. I could see she was imagining what it was going to be like when the cops showed up and hauled her off. “They did it once before, I’m sure they’ll be happy to do it again. Is that what you want, to go to the hospital?” I repeated, calmly.

“No,” she said, defeated by the inescapable outcome.

“Then let’s pay for these apples and get out of here, okay?”

I felt miserable for Marian; she was incapable of helping herself. The truly sad part – there wasn’t anything the mental health system was willing to do, either. This delusional theater of the mind would have to play itself out. How it concluded, I had no idea. Confronting Marian and reminding her the cops were lurking somewhere off stage for their cue managed to deflect the focus of her

delusions for the moment. Funny, how recognizing the prospect of being thrown in the back of a police cruiser and hauled off to a psych center refocuses the mind.

For the moment, Marian had backed down, but I knew it wouldn't be for long — I had to act fast. That happens when you're with schizophrenics; you must strike while the iron is hot — make your move while their guard is down. Delays in action will only allow them to recalculate and circumvent your plan. I rushed Marian off to the checkout aisle and then threw the four Red Delicious Apples at the unsuspecting checkout clerk.

That's when I hear, "Oh, hey, Alan! Hello, Mrs. O'Connor," the checkout girl says nonchalantly, with cheery surprise. This was not half as surprised as I suddenly became — I knew her. My bubble of mental anguish and urgency to escape was suddenly popped like a festering boil. I had to put on a good face, fast. Delaying our escape could mean that Marian might wrestle back the advantage and bolt back into the store. *Oh hell!* I thought. *This could turn bad quick. I must act calm as not to reveal the desperation of the situation. Panic was useful to no one.*

"Oh hey, Denise! How are you?" I said, as normally as I could. As normally as anyone with a schizophrenic mother by his side in the midst of psychotic meltdown. Children of Schizophrenics are incredibly good actors — Uta Hagen would have been proud.

The checkout clerk was Denise, a high school classmate and friend. When you come from a small country school with a graduating class of eighty-four, everyone in your class is a friend. For some reason, Denise was perpetually in a good mood, the source of which was always a marvel.

I suppose some people are just lucky that way. “Oh my God, good. I’m good,” Denise said, excitedly. “Can you believe we’ve been out of High School two years already?”

“Hard to believe, I know, isn’t it? How time flies,” I replied. Having no idea what the hell that actually meant, because time didn’t actually fly at all, but was more like a ball and chain wrapped around my neck. What I really wanted to tell Denise was, *“I gotta go, so hurry the hell up! Do you realize those apples you’re handling so carelessly have supernatural properties not yet discovered by science in our dimension? The powers of which have only been recently revealed to my Mom who stands before you.”* But I knew Denise wasn’t ready for this revelation and wouldn’t understand, so I said, “How do you like working here at the Big-M?”

“Oh, it’s okay,” she says. “They’re going to put me in the bakery soon and train me on baked goods. The Big-M is really growing. Bob, the owner, has big plans.”

“Wow, that’s great,” I said, keeping Marian pegged in my peripheral vision.

“How about you?” she asked. “I haven’t seen you around for so long. Where you been?”

“Ohhh...” I paused, beginning to panic. I had to play these next few words carefully, least I set off any alarms. But there wasn’t much time. I couldn’t explain what was actually going on. No one in their right mind would understand – I hardly did. So in order to make my role of “ol’ classmate taking routine trip to store” more believable, I grabbed a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup and a pack of Juicy Fruit and add it to the apples, “...I’ve been doing a little traveling,” I said, indifferently.

"Oh really," she says, enviously. "That sounds fun."

"Ah, it's okay."

"Anywhere exciting?"

"Not really. Spent a little time out west," I said. I didn't want to tell her about being a missionary for the Mormon Church, since most people believe dedicating yourself to something more than following your favorite sports team brands you a cult member about to mix a batch of grape cool-aid and head off to the jungles of Guyana.

"Wish I could do a little traveling," Denise said longingly as she began ringing up my items. "Me and my cousin were thinking of going to see *Def Leppard* in Syracuse at the War Memorial. They have a new album out. But it's on a Wednesday – wouldn't get back till two or three in the morning. Not sure it's going to work out. And tickets are twelve fifty – can you believe it? That will be three dollars and thirty-eight cents, Al," she says, finishing ringing up the items.

"Wow, twelve fifty," I say with faux surprise, trying to hold it together. "I remember going to Ted Nugent and Rush for seven-fifty – general admission." Handing Denise the money, I could feel myself breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Hey, we're getting together out at the lake Saturday," Denise said. "Terry is back from basic training. So if you're not doing anything – we'll start barbecuing around noon."

"Thanks Denise, maybe," I told her, knowing full well it wasn't in the cards. With Marian in the midst of a psychotic collapse, I had no idea from one moment to the next what was going to happen. Besides, I was still

officially a Mormon missionary and parties were not allowed.

“It was great to see you again, Alan,” Denise said, without a care.

“Thanks, you too, Denise.” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. It looked like Marian and I were in the clear.

Denise had no idea of the shit storm she just avoided. “Maybe I’ll see you Saturday,” I said, grabbing the bag.

With the screams of innocent children being butchered echoing in her head, I quickly ushered Marian out the door and toward the car.

I looked at my watch: it was nine in the morning. The day had just begun.