

This autobiographical essay - 100% true - made me a finalist in PEN's 2009 prisoner essay contest & inspired two committee members to write me & express their admiration.

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When I Was a Spider's God

by Nate A. Lindell ©

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In the morning of May 28th, 2008, I was hands-on escorted by two Correctional Officers (C.O.s) to my prison's outdoor exercise kennels. My hands were cuffed behind my back and my feet were shackled. I shuffled down the hallway, trying to tear as little skin from around my already-scarred ankles as possible. Once we were outside, the C.O.s cuffed me to the exercise cage's door, as is required. I kneeled down, as is required, so they could undo my shackles without seeming to bow to me. Then I stepped inside the cage, bent forward, while sticking my hands out of the hole in the cage's door so they could uncut me.

When the cuffs came off I paced around in my new and slightly larger cage for a few minutes, stretching my mind more than exercising my body.

In order to do knuckle pushups without shredding my skin on the cage's brushed concrete floor, I pulled off my blaze-orange uniform shirt, folded it up, and laid it on the ground — it's a prison ritual I perform as intensively as a samurai dressing for battle. To get my blood flowing, I did a few sets of pushups and was in the middle of my third set when I noticed a friend called Cracker being brought out and put in the cage next to mine. After the C.O.s uncuffed him, we worked out, paced, chatted about common interests, and admired the awesome view we had of the bluffs bordering our über-max prison.

Despite the stink of the dumpsters next to our cages, the view we had of the bluffs was so... criminal that I feared the C.O.s would find some way to take it away, to correct it, put an end to my brief, bi-weekly escape-ades. Their memo justifying doing so would likely say, "You are in prison, and the view being afforded you is all that's required by the administrative code," the usual justification given for denying us something. This fear

was why I was and often am nervous when going to and from outside rec. I look down and frown when the guards are around, not wanting them to realize how much fun I have breathing in the pine-and-earth-scented air that rolls from the tree-covered bluffs — when the wind blows towards and not from the dumpsters — that fill the horizon, while I basked in the low-lying, brassy sun that warmed my skin those spring mornings.

For a while, despite the fences surrounding me (one of which we were assured would electrocute to death anyone who touched it), I was free. In winter it's harder, yet even then I can temporarily escape this madhouse.

That day out there with Cracker it was so warm that I took off my brown prison-issued socks, folded each a couple times, then set them on top of my already-folded uniform top. The socks were about two feet apart and would give my knuckles some extra cushioning while bestowing on my fish-belly pale, flipper-like feet a rare opportunity to feel the sun. Both my knuckles and sideshow Bob-sized feet would be happy.

I did another set of pushups, paced for a minute, chatted with Cracker, then went to do some more pushups.

No!

No pushups did I do mes amies. Instead I watched as a fat-rumped brown spider scurried up and onto my sock.

"Hey, Cracker!" I hollered. "Check out this big-assed spider sittin' on my sock!"

"That's a fat one alright. What're you gonna do to it?"

"Keep it, of course. Can't think of a better pet for a supercriminal to have than a spider!"

We then had a long conversation about the various pets we knew other prisoners had or tried to get ahold of while in prison. For example, Cracker told me about when he was in the Racine Correctional Institution (R.C.I.) and tried to buy another

prisoner's pet frog. At first, the guy was willing to sell it; but, at the last minute, he reneged, claiming that the frog had escaped. Can't blame the guy — prison's a lonely place, where the wise hoard what love they find.

It wouldn't be the first pet spider I'd owned. Back in '02, when I was at Ye Olde Nutte House, I had a pet spider too. I kept her in a cup and fed her all the mayflies she could suck dry — I knew she was a she because she ate a lot and had a fat butt, which females of spider species need more than smaller males, to create their eggs. I figured it'd give the Freudian F's there something to analyze. The ironic euphemism Big Brother gave to that place was the Wisconsin Resource Center (W.R.C., ironic given that one person hung himself to death (they make it easier there (of all places!)) than any prison I've ever been in, having vents in the ceiling, right above where the edge of the bed drops off); another guy pulled his fingers off until he ran out of fingers to grip with (according to a psych nurse there, the repair wasn't neat, might've mismatched some fingers) and died after they were reattached; the last casualty that occurred while I was at W.R.C. was a released prisoner/patient who was found on the bus taking him home with all of his morphine patches plastered to his body. Many more prisoner/patients sliced themselves open, tried to hang themselves, +/or attacked other prisoner/patients +/or staff while I was there. The resources put into that place were so lacking that, after it was deemed necessary for me to be there, I had to wait several months for a bed to be open; those there were prematurely rushed out, psychoses intact, to make room for the long list of other crazies waiting to see the Wizard.

Let it suffice to say that my stay at W.R.C. did not end well, which was and is a bummer, because it meant coming back here to the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility (W.S.P.F.). Here at W.S.P.F., I was and am only allowed outside rec. twice a week, for 75

minutes at a time. At W.R.C., I could spend ten hours a day outside, in a rec. yard with thick grass, populated by all the normal bugs and other critters. Here at W.S.P.F., an exterminator hoses down the entire joint with some chemical that snuffs every bug that comes close to the place. Feeding the much bigger spider that I intended to capture would be a problem.

But my curiosity decided the matter. I wanted to examine its fangs, see how big they were. So, I took the sock that the silver-dollar-sized brown spider wasn't hunched on (I'd like to think that the spider was on my sock because the sock came from my foot - I'm desperate to be wanted, and have been to the nut house!), made it into a kinda cup, then dropped that cup over Lil' Brownie (yep, already named her). I used the arm of my spectacles to nudge her up inside the sock cup and folded its opening closed. Lil' Brownie was secured (I hate using that word! It's a cop word!) behind two layers of sock material.

When rec. ended and the C.O.s came to bring me back to my bunker, they asked me where my missing sock was.

"It's wet, so I got it in my waistband," I told them, though it was a sunny day and the 'crete was bone dry. That wasn't the first lame line I'd ran by a guard.

They saw the top of the sock sticking from my waistband and knew I was a little off (a strangeness familiar at W.S.P.F.), so they smiled at each in their play-along-with-the-crazy way and didn't inquire further. Once cuffed and shackled, they escorted me back to my crypt... while a large spider bounced against... I'm ballsy like that!

Once they had me inside, the guards told me that I was scheduled to use the law computer immediately. First, I told them, I needed to use the bathroom. They agreed to let me do so.

For my spider smuggling to succeed, I had to act quickly. I grabbed a piece of the tissue paper that covers the rolls of toilet paper

we were given and made it into a funnel. Then I shook Lil' Brownie into the funnel and crumpled/folded it closed. There was no way out of my hastily improvised yet ingenious cage.

I should let you know, I am a prisoner with a formidable mind and have always been known for my intelligence.

I dropped the crumpled wad of tissue paper on the floor next to my toilet and called for the guards to escort me to the law library.

75 minutes later, having completed my legal research, I was brought back to my box. The first thing I did was pick up the wad of tissue paper and peek inside to see the spider. But she was gone!

I ain't gonna lie to ya, my maniacal self was nervous. I thought that the thing was a poisonous brown recluse spider, a spider whose bite caused the skin to rot away.

Although I'm no arachniphobe, the situation was no minor matter. I was locked in a 6'-by-11' cell with a big-assed (her abdomen was as big as the tip of my pinkie), poisonous spider! And she was quick, liked to jump around too!

I felt like I was in a really bad horror movie, or that karma was fixin' to get me for all the wrong I'd done.

At the time I was on Alpha unit, where we're not allowed to have a T.V., photos, or personal publications. Understandably, guys get bored there. So I became a celebrity when I told my neighbors that the spider I'd hoped to train to bite guards and tote contraband done broke out.

Life's been like that for me — despite my good intentions, things never work out like I plan them.

Oh, they thought the situation was hee-haw-larious, giving me wise advice like,

"You better find it before you go to sleep, or it'll bite your face!" and,

"It's probably hiding under your toilet rim, waiting to bite your unholiest of holes!"

I thanked those jerks for their advice and promptly began to fan the flames of paranoia that smoldered in me into a nice, healthy bonfire. The thought of a brown recluse biting any part of me, particularly the parts mentioned, chilled my blood. I nervously searched my cell, every square inch, but didn't find Lili Brownie.

She does have six eyes. Surely she saw the open doorway and scurried as fast as her eight legs could carry her out of my cage and off to Freedomland," I thought, out loud. Yes, I talk to myself. I'd scurry off to Freedomland if my captors left the door open, and I only have two eyes and two legs!

For the rest of the day and through the evening, I jumped at the slightest touch upon my skin; but never was a spider seen. So, that night, I slept peacefully, certain that the spider'd fled.

When I woke up the next morning, I ate my breakfast, then hollered down to Cracker for a few minutes of socializing. He listened with the patience of a psychoanalyst while I rambled on with my twisted notions and conspiracy theories. When our conversation ended, I went back to sleep 'til lunch.

There's also a ritual I go through before talking with another prisoner through the vents connecting our cells. I fold up a blanket and lay it on the floor in front of the vent, a vent which is eight inches above the floor and the same distance from my toilet. Then I rest my arthritic bones on the blanket and rest my head on a stack of legal papers held inside some tyvek envelopes piled in front of the vent.

When lunch came, I got up and ate my beans (I was on a Vegan diet) while sitting on my folded blankets and reading a book, making the most of the meager life I was allowed.

As usual, my neighbor pounded on my wall and asked me what was on my tray. He was an amicable Cherokee Indian who claimed to be in for killing someone with a crowbar. As I had a skeleton in my closet, I chucked no stones at him.

"Beans, ya crank! Let me eat 'em!" I replied.

He only asked so he only asked so he could decide whether or not to feel gypped or better off than me.

With my food being digested, I went back to my vent, lay on my folded blanket, and began to chat with Chief Swings Big Crowbar. As always, I put my left elbow on the floor, by my stack of Tyvek envelopes, while I described in embellished details the tasty, meatless treats I'd chowed on.

By chance, I looked down... and saw Lil' Brownie about a centimeter from my left elbow!

Two of her eyes were looking at my elbow, while the other two eyes on top of her head were looking up at my face. Apparently her wee spider brain was debating which to bite. Before she made up her mind, I jumped away and informed (another word I hate to use) Chief Crowbar that I found my spider.

Lil' Brownie was looking up at me, extending her two front legs, as if she wanted to embrace me with them.

Well, I'd heard about spider women, and I wasn't that lonely. Oh, I was and am lonely, but not that lonely.*

At the very least it was too early in our relationship for physical intimacy. So, I grabbed a large plastic medicine cup and put it over her.

Of course I told Chief Crowbar and Cracker the good news: Lil' Brownie did love me and had never left. She was just hiding so she could pop out and give me a hug when I was least expecting it.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder and prison drives ya insane. Both applied to me.

I transported Lil' Brownie in that medicine cup, with an envelope on top, over to my concrete mattress slab. Then I replaced the envelope with clear plastic wrap, which gave me a

* Since writing this, things've changed. I am now that lonely!

good view of her. She looked up at me with her six sad little eyes, pointing at me with her two front legs, as if saying, "Please let me touch you! I need a friend."

It was then that I realized I was that spider's god. Its fate was in my mighty hands. I could mush it or give it freedom.

According to what televangelists have taught me about God's personality, I had other God-like qualities in regards to that spider. I was very curious about it and a little scared of it too.

Feeling almighty, I proclaimed, "I am your God! You must pray to me, or I will squish you!"

She looked up at me with her 1/2-dozen eyes, holding up her two front legs and waved them, as if worshipping me. Or, maybe like some people try to do God, preparing to bite.

After I saw her anxiously preening and polishing her 1/8-inch-long ebony fangs, as if hungry, I realized that she probably was a brown recluse spider. She was brown, always tried to hide, and had a fiddish design on her abdomen — all, as I recalled, characteristics of a brown recluse spider.

Lil' Brownie was dangerous!

But I liked tough girls... and tender ones.

As she sat in her cage polishing her fangs — I too have done so — I considered whether or not to kill her so that she couldn't hurt me or others. Then my ceaselessly roaming mind realized that, undoubtably, there've been government officials with the same thoughts about felons like moi.

I wanted to see how she worked, to satisfy my curiosity and, maybe, so I could better protect myself from her kind. That, I realized, was likely the rationalization used by the shrinks and staff in my supermax for their restrictive treatment of me and my kind!

She hid. Out of fear? Out of insecurity caused by some hurt she didn't want repeated? I too often hid from people!

She was kept in a small cage by a megalomaniac and became angry when it was rattled or she was interfered with, as-did-I!

Because of her dangerousness, her captor treated her as an it.
And maybe she was a he?!

My realization of our common characteristics felt like an awakening into a prophetic dream.

Still, she/he was dangerous... as my captors say I am. I told Chief Crowbar that I was gonna vivisect Lil' Brownie, as it was probably a brown recluse. He threatened then pleaded with me not to do so. He killed a man (so he said), as had I, yet couldn't stand me killing a spider?!

At first I thought that he was just being a nature-lovin' Injun. But I came to realize that, like me, Chief Crowbar sympathized with the critter, possibly being aware of what he had in common with her.

I didn't want to snuff another unpopular creature and told Chief Crowbar that I'd release Lil' Brownie the next time I went outside.

Russia's got honest thieves and America's got whatever I am. People can get along with me, if they respect my boundaries; they could do the same with my spider (unless they look like a big roach!).

On May 30th, 2008, I smuggled Lil' Brownie outside, held inside two sandwich bags. I released her into a rec. cage, as any decent spider god would do.

At first she didn't want to go - either wanting to bite me or a victim of the spider version of Stockholm syndrome. She had a lot in common with me, kinda reminding me of my first girlfriend too.

Eventually, after chasing me around for a while, apparently wanting to bite me (like that first girlfriend!), she went and hid under the siding on my prison's wall.

A few days later, while I was being brought to outside rec., I heard a guard bragging about smushing a "huge spider" that was boldly patrolling in front of the door. The other guard thought that was funny.