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**The Petting Zoo**

At first Johnson thought it was a joke. Speeding down the country road the crude sign was only a blur. But it was that one word. Slowing down, he swung the Lexus onto the paved shoulder. In the rearview mirror, he could see it clearly. The sign was tacked to a stick that was stuck in the ground just beyond the paved shoulder.

     Shifting the powerful car into reverse, Johnson jammed the accelerator down. The tires squealed and loose gravel flew as he tore back up the road. Screeching to a halt, Johnson stared at the faded handwriting:

ELSWORTH'S FAMOUS
SPIDER PETTING ZOO
5Ms Next RT

     Spiders fascinated Johnson. One summer, when he was eight, a large gold and black spider had taken up residence underneath the shingles by the back door. Every morning, Johnson would gather up ants in a jar from a nest in the scrubby woods behind his house. One by one, he would drop the wriggling insects into the web.

     With lightning speed, the spider would spring from her hiding place and race towards the victim. Sinking her fangs into the ant, she would retreat, waiting for the poison to take effect. When the ant slowly stopped struggling, she would climb back down and delicately wrap her prey in a white shroud.

     This continued until, one day, his mother caught him. "What a cruel little boy you are," she scolded between clenched teeth as she pummeled his backside. He could still feel the shame of being spanked.

     Years later, in a rare moment of remorse, Johnson wondered what it was like for the ant. Trapped…helpless…waiting for the spider to return. Did they know fear or horror? Or was that something only humans experienced? The insect brain was too small he told himself. Or so he hoped.

     *Five miles*, thought Johnson, This side trip might only add another half hour or so to his journey. He would still have time once he got to his motel to have a shower. The dinner meeting with the buyer from the supermarket chain wasn't until 6 o'clock and it was only 4 now.

     Coasting forward, Johnson scanned the road looking for the turnoff. About one hundred yards ahead, he saw a lane that intersected with the highway. Flicking on his turn signal, he shot a quick glance at his watch.

     *If I don't find it in fifteen minutes*, he promised himself, *I'll turn back*.

     Accelerating smoothly, he turned onto a well-paved secondary road with deep ditches on either side. Punching the buttons on the CD player, he stretched his arms, settling back into the soft leather seat. As the throbbing beat of Queen filled the Lexus, his mood lightened - an unexpected adventure in an otherwise boring day.

     Johnson hated his job. Endless meetings with bad food and balding buyers. Too many drinks and too many hangovers. He was packing on the pounds, too. *I have to get back to the gym*, he reminded himself.

     The only redeeming feature of his job was that he was good at it. Top sales rep for the last three years. *I should have been an actor*, he told himself. *Instead I'm selling toilet paper and tampons to these turkeys*.

     As the needle on the speedometer crept higher and higher, the neatly kept fields and freshly painted houses became a blur. Mile after mile slipped by. Johnson felt that he and the car had become one, soaring along like a hawk on a summer breeze.

     But his mood soon soured. The condition of the road deteriorated. Asphalt gave way to chip-seal, which gave way to gravel; and, finally ended up as dirt.

     Johnson jumped on the brakes when a huge pothole emerged in the center of the road. Cursing the delay, he checked his watch again. It was almost 5. The long drive down the country road had dulled his sense of time. *I better turn around*, he cautioned himself.

     As he studied the road ahead looking for a safe place to make a U-turn, he saw it. An old farm house set back from the road. If it hadn't been for the pothole, he would have missed it completely. By the mailbox, a freshly painted sign read:

**ELSWORTH'S FAMOUS
SPIDER PETTING ZOO
OPEN YEAR ROUND
ALL VISITORS WELCOME**

     *This must be the place*, he concluded. Carefully turning up the heavily rutted lane, Johnson wondered what he would find.*Perhaps one of the locals playing a joke on the tourists*, he mused.

     Tall grass slapped at the bottom of the car and rusted barbed wire clung to rotted posts that ran alongside the lane. In the untilled fields, scrubby bushes had sprung up like mushrooms. Johnson tried to imagine what the farm looked like in better days, but it was impossible.

     When he reached the top of the hill, the farmhouse looked even more decrepit. Blistered paint hung from the wooden shingles and there was a disturbing sag in the middle of the roof. What once had been the side garden was now occupied by tall thistles and a mass of tangled timbers indicated the former site of the main barn.

     Except for the glass still being intact in the windows, the house looked abandoned. Where is everybody? thought Johnson. In response to his question, an old woman dressed in a black skirt and a woolen sweater stepped out the side door. She was gnarled and withered like the lone apple tree that stood in the yard. Johnson guessed she must have been at least 70, maybe even 80 years old.

     "What you want?" she spat.

     Turning off his iPod and after lowering the car window, he replied, "Is this the petting zoo?"

     "That's what the sign says, don't it?"

     Ignoring her rudeness, Johnson continued, "Are you open?"

     "I'll git Jake. He out back choppin' wood."

     He watched as she shuffled down a dirt path and disappeared around a corner of the house. *Charming*, thought Johnson.

     Opening the car door, he stepped out. Despite the poverty, the farm had a certain rustic appeal which reminded him of the house that he grew up in in the country.

     But there was something odd. Something missing. *Where are the flies?* thought Johnson. On most farms the low buzz of the black swarms was constant. But here there was none. Except for the moaning of the wind, it was quiet.

     Perhaps it was the lack of animals, he thought. Or maybe it was the stiff breeze at the top of the hill that kept them at bay.

     Glancing at his watch, he frowned. It was after 5 o'clock. If he did not get back on the road soon, he would be late for his appointment. Either that or skip his shower. After driving all day, Johnson did not want to skip the soothing ritual.

     Taking one last look around, he reached for the handle of the car door. Just then the old woman reappeared and behind her an even more wizened up old man wearing faded blue overalls and a nicotine-stained undershirt.

     Stopping at the corner of the house, the old man spat out a long jet of chewing tobacco on the ground. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he paused momentarily to study Johnson.

     Speaking to the old woman, he said in a low tone, "Thought I heard a car come up."

     "Wants to see yer spiders," she said before she turned away and went back into the farmhouse, letting the screen door slam behind her.

     "You wanna see my spiders, young fella?"

     "Sure if you're open. How much?"

     Looking over the Lexus, he scratched his ruddy face and said, "Fifty bucks."

     "Fifty! That's ridiculous!"

     Shrugging his shoulders, the old man said, "Take it or leave it. I got work to do."

     Then he spat out another long jet of chewing tobacco and turned to go.

     *I can't leave now after coming all this way*, thought Johnson. Taking another quick glance at his watch, he said irritably, "All right, all right. But this better be good!"

     The old man smirked and licked his lips as Johnson whipped out a crisp fifty dollar bill from his wallet. Johnson did not like the old man's greedy look and hastily shoved his wallet back in his pants pocket.

     "Thanks," said the old man sarcastically, snatching the bill from Johnson's hand. Looking it over carefully, he folded it up neatly, stuck it in his pocket and said, "Follow me."

     The old man led Johnson down an overgrown path to a shed at the back of the farmhouse. Inside, the dim glow of fluorescent tubes highlighted the dozen plywood shelves that ran along the walls. In contrast to the rest of the farm, the shed was neat, almost antiseptic in appearance. Sitting on each shelve was a glass terrarium filled with twigs and rocks. In the case closest to Johnson, a small garden spider was spinning a web in the corner.

     "That's an orb spider," said the old man.

     "I know," said Johnson, annoyed by the interruption,

     "You know spiders?'

     "A bit," replied Johnson. "I used to study them when I was a kid."

     "I bet you're the type that liked to feed 'em, eh? Catch bugs, drop 'em in. See what happens. Fun, ain't it?"

     Suddenly Johnson was uncomfortable. *How did he guess my secret?* he wondered. Johnson felt the warm rush of blood to his neck and ears as he started to blush.

     "No need to be ashamed, young fella. All kids do it. It's natural."

     Trying to change the topic, Johnson asked, "You been at this long?…keeping spiders?"

     "Yeah, I been at it awhile. Most folks are scared of spiders. Not me. Me and spiders git along real good."

     Johnson turned back to watch a large black spider in another case sucking up the half-digested slurry of its latest victim.

     Trying to be polite, Johnson asked, "Bet you don't get many visitors here…being so far from the highway."

     "Don't need 'em," said the old man. "This is just a sideline." Pausing for effect he added, "I breed 'em."

     Johnson looked puzzled.

     "For the college," explained the old man. "They use 'em for research."

     "Does it pay well?"

     "Good 'nuf…Ah, they don't know squat 'bout spiders!," said the old man, spitting on the floor. Johnson looked down and saw that a streak of the sticky black tobacco had splashed on his shoes.

     "I been doing research of my own," said the old man proudly. "Spiders are jes' like any other critter. Cows, horses, dogs - they're all the same. Breed the best with the best and you git the best…Or the…," the old man's voice trailed off as he started to laugh.

     There was something about his tone that made Johnson uneasy.

     "You wanna see my prize winner?"

     Johnson looked around.

     "Oh, she ain't here. I keep her in the barn. She kinda makes these critters nervous. I can't say, I blames them. Wanna see her?"

     The way the old man said it, the question sounded more like a challenge.

     Johnson hesitated. He wanted to say no, but he could not let the old man see he was afraid.

     "Sure," answered Johnson. *What could it be?* he asked himself. *A tarantula?*

     With the old man in front, they went down a lesser-used path to a small barn behind a stand of trees that made it invisible from the farmhouse. A shiny new lock on a rusted hasp yielded to the old man's key.

     "I don't like kids messin' with my stuff."

     The ancient wooden door swung open. Inside it was pitch black. Johnson hesitated. What was it that made him apprehensive? His mouth felt dry and he tried to swallow.

     "Go on in!" taunted the old man as he shoved Johnson through the door.

     Stumbling on the raised sill, Johnson fell to one knee ripping his pants. *Damnit*, he cursed.

     "There's a light switch ahead of you," the old man reassured him. "Jes' pull the string."

     The stench of moldy hay made Johnson gag.

     "Where is it…the spider?" he called out.

     "She's in the back. You can't miss her."

     "Where's the light?"

     "Right in front of you. Can't you see it?" mocked the old man.

     Johnson stretched out his hand. At first, he could not feel anything. Then slowly groping the air in, he caught hold of it. Johnson's heart leapt in relief. But there was something strange. The line didn't feel like string. It was sticky like a…

     Pulling the line, Johnson knew he had made a mistake. Something rustled in the rafters above him and bits of straw floated down.

     Johnson bolted for the opening.

     "Enjoy yourself!" cackled the old man as he slammed the door and locked it.

     "Let me out! Let me out!" shouted Johnson, pounding on the door. "Let me out, you old buzzard!"

     But it was no use. The dried-out wooden door was like iron. Pausing to catch his breath, his fists throbbing, Johnson looked around. Slowly his eyes grew accustomed to the dark. What appeared to be a black chasm was, in fact, the side entrance to the barn. *There must be another way out*, he thought. *But where?*

     In the gloom, he could see that beyond the entry way there was a large open space. And beyond that a boarded-up window through which thin shafts of sunlight streamed.

     *Great! All I have to do is cross the barn, pull off one or two of those boards and climb out*, thought Johnson. *Then I'll show that old man. Fifty bucks! He'll wish I had never stopped.*

     Then he heard another rustle overhead and more straw floated down.

     "Who is it? Who's there?" he called out.

     *I'll bet it's that old man*, thought Johnson. *He thinks he's going to scare me.*

     "Sure! You just keep that up, old man," Johnson called out again. "Let's see how much laughing you do when I bash your face in."

     *But first, I've got to get to that window. Be careful*, he cautioned himself. *This barn must be full of junk. Don't want to fall down and get hurt.*

     Despite the heat in the barn, he shivered. Licking the sweat off his upper lip, Johnson slowly picked his way across the wide wooden-planked barn floor, being careful not to trip. Shadows of old machinery and tools loomed around him. A leather harness that hung from the wall looked like a hangman's noose.

     There was a peculiar smell, too. It reminded him of a package of chicken that he once left in the trunk of his car on a hot summer day. It was the sickly, sweet scent of rotting meat.

     *Oh, gross!* muttered Johnson. *There's a dead animal in here.*

     In less than a minute he had crossed the barn and was standing in front of the boarded-up window. Blocking his exit were three boards nailed haphazardly into the frame.

     Either the old man was too weak or too lazy to drive them all the way in, concluded Johnson. *I can probably pull them off with my bare hands*, he smiled triumphantly.

     The first board was half-rotted and fell apart in his hands. Light streamed in as it came away from the frame. Then he shifted his attention to the second one - the board in the middle. If he could get this one off, he could easily climb out.

     But this board wouldn't be so easy. It was like the old door of the barn, dried out and as tough as steel.

     Gripping the board with both hands, he began pulling. The nails squealed in protest and the board started to move. *Only a little bit further*, grunted Johnson. The thought of throttling the old man excited him. *Just a bit further....another half inch.*He could almost feel his fingers closing around the old man's scrawny neck...the eyes bulging...the tongue sticking out.*Another half inch...!*

     Then it stopped. Desperately, Johnson yanked at the board, but it was no use. It would not yield.

     *I need more leverage*, he said to himself. Balancing on one foot, he braced his other against the window frame and started pulling again. The muscles in his forearms and back bulged as he strained against the board. Sweat rolled down his forehead and into his eyes. *Come on*, he pleaded with the wood. *Come on.*

     In his frustration, Johnson did not hear the soft tap...tap...tap on the floor behind him. Tap...tap....tap. Like a blind man with his cane. Tap...tap...tap. Then it was too late. It struck.

     The force of the attack rammed him face first up against the wall knocking the wind out of him. Warm blood trickled from his nose and ran down his cheek.

     *What was that?*

     Turning around slowly, he could see, in the light from the window, his attacker. It was crouched inside an empty stall along the opposite wall. The legs tensed ready to spring. It was a spider. No doubt one of the old man's experiments. But this was no ordinary spider. It was huge. About the size of a pit bull, with legs that extended out three or four feet on either side. Its eyes stared coldly at him.

     Johnson did a quick tally of his injuries. Except for his bloody nose, he was unharmed. Perhaps the large size of the creature made it difficult for it to mount an attack, he conjectured. Possibly it did not even recognize him as prey.

     *Spiders normally eat moths and insects*, he reminded himself.*Not human beings.*

     When he was a kid, Johnson liked to throw twigs into a web just to see the spider's reaction. Invariably, after pouncing on the object, the spider would pluck it out of the web, turn it over and drop it on the ground. Johnson hoped this spider would show the same lack of interest.

     From its vantage point at the other end of the barn, the creature seemed puzzled - unsure of itself. *Spiders are cautious*, he told himself. *It's waiting for me to make the next move.*Although every fiber in his body screamed run, his brain told him stay still. The spider was too big and too fast to out-run.

     *I need a weapon*, he told himself. Quickly looking about, he saw the rotten board from the window lying at his feet. It was about two feet long with a jagged point at one end. *It'll have to do*. Slowly, he bent down to pick it up.

     The spider crouched low, like a sprinter, ready to strike again. Johnson froze - his fingers only inches from the board.

     "Easy girl," he whispered softly. "Easy."

     The spider relaxed, but not completely. Deliberately, it began to move forward. Tap...tap...tap. Johnson was amazed by the creature's grace. Like a ballerina tiptoeing in from the darkened wings of a theatre, it was a marvel of beauty and design. The body, covered by fine grey hair, had the look of velvet, while the eight legs that extended from the thorax provided speed and balance.

     As it approached Johnson, the spider carefully extended one foreleg towards him. Johnson quickly knocked it away with his hand. The creature stopped and cocked its plate-sized head to one side. The eight eyes looked like black fists. Then the leg came forward again. At the tip, Johnson could see the spike-like claw for catching prey. It touched his left shoulder. Through his jacket he could feel the sharp point digging into his skin. Johnson winced and stepped backwards into the wall. But there was no place to go. Slowly, the other foreleg came forward. Johnson recoiled, trying to ward off the attack with his free arm. But the creature was too strong. It brushed his arm aside, as if it was a piece of lint, and planted a second claw into his other shoulder. Johnson cried out, "Help! Help!"

     Then the spider reared up on its hind legs, forcing Johnson to his knees. For a brief moment, he and the creature looked into each other's eyes. It was almost like love. Then he saw the six-inch fangs that extended from the head. Drops of venom gleamed in the half-light. He watched in fascination as the cruel daggers arched high over him; then he screamed as they plunged deeply into his chest. Instantly, white hot pain ripped through his body.

     Then it was gone. The spider had retreated back to the stall. Johnson knew that he only had a minute or two before the poison paralyzed him.

     *This is it!* he said to himself. *My only chance.*

     Ignoring his wounds, Johnson turned back to the window. Grabbing at the board, he yanked and pulled, to no avail. Already the venom was having its effect. His hands were numb and his arms felt like lead. Gasping for air, he threw himself at the boards again and again. But it was no use. He was beaten. Great sobs shook his body as he slumped to the floor.

     *This can't be happening to me*, he protested. *It's ridiculous.*

     Looking back at the spider, he could see that it still had not moved. *What is she waiting for?* he wondered. *Why doesn't she finish me off?*

     He soon had his answer. Shimmering like a great overcoat, there was something on the spider's back. It moved and undulated like a small wave flowing back and forth. Then a piece of the wave pulled away and dropped to the floor. It was another spider, only a lot smaller - about the size of a rat. Johnson recalled that some spiders carry their young on their backs. Horrified, he realized that he had stumbled into their nursery and it was feeding time. Another one dropped to the floor and then another. Soon there was a long line of spiders slowly crawling towards him. Through fading eyesight, he saw the first one reach his foot. Tentatively, its foreleg probed the air, until it found his leg and patted it. It was light and delicate like the touch of a child. Johnson opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came. The last thing Johnson saw before he lost consciousness was a spider tearing a piece of flesh from the back of his hand.

     Back at the farmhouse, the old man picked up the whisky bottle from the kitchen table, poured himself another drink and plopped down on the ancient *Lay-z-boy* recliner.

     "How long it take, Jake?" asked the old woman.

     "Not long," he grunted. "They ain't et since Sunday."

     "Git a better sign. Attract mo' folks."

     "Nah, the sign's okay. Anyway, we don't need a crowd," said the old man, taking a long, hard swallow.

     "What yer goin' do with his car?" she asked, standing at the window admiring the now ownerless Lexus.

     "I hear young Dougall needs one for runnin' moonshine. Willin' to pay a good price, too," said the old man.

     "Won't he ask questions?" wondered the old woman, pouring a drink and easing herself down onto a dusty couch.

     "Nah. He don't care," snickered the old man. "I'll talk ta him tomorrow. Meanwhile, pass the remote. Let's see what's on *Dr. Phil*."