

No Ordinary Spider

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Arigope aurantia

She arrives on July 20th.

I come outside to water my mint, and a web nearly two feet across reveals itself to me. The zipper running up the middle announces her identity. Although I've never seen an *Arigope aurantia* with my own eyes, I've encountered enough photos to recognize her.

She is almost as big as my thumb, and though I know she means me no harm, her size makes me nervous. The fear comes from more than just her size; she is the black and yellow of the wasps that have terrorized the corners of my roof, gone so far as to build nests in my mailbox, every year.

Yet she also intrigues me. The more I remind myself she can't hurt me, that she won't even try as long as I keep my distance, the more curious I become. She does not reciprocate, though. Despite the fact that I'm separated from her by at least eighteen inches of greenery, the second she deems me too close, she shakes the web so as to scare me off. The old adage: "An animal is more afraid of you than you are of it."

My bedroom, as it turns out, is a better place for watching. The windows run all the way to the floor, so I can crouch at the foot of my bed and stare without disturbing her. Behind the glass, I'm closer than I could ever get through the bushes. With only eight inches between us, I can see how the yellow and black stripes on her abdomen look soft, even inviting. I imagine that if I were able to run my finger across her body, the texture would be the smooth but slightly stiff feel of crushed velvet.

The summer she spins her web between a patch of helmet flowers and my bedroom window is the third summer I have lived at the house in East Austin. It is the only summer I have not had a wasp problem.

People ask if I have named her. I know better than to name wild animals. I already know how this story is going to end.

Egg Sacs

The first egg sac appears August 24th. I come into my bedroom mid-morning to see it clinging to my window, secured by a thick layer of silk.

I feel as though I have been given a gift, though I know how this story is going to end.

The sac is the size of my eye, the shape of a gargantuan tear, mostly tan, with bits of darker brown and black. It occupies my attention for days on end. I have never seen an egg sac in real life, much less four feet from my bed.

The second egg sac appears September 12th. In a way, this one is more a surprise than the first. I never thought a spider would lay more than one egg sac. Yet here it is, nearly blending in with the faded brown paint on the side of the house, covered in sticky webbing.

On October 6th, I return from walking the dog, and as I look into the yard to make sure she's still there, I notice the web is empty. Fearing she's dead (even though I've known all along how this story is going to end), I hurry to my bedroom window, where I can get a better angle of the web. My fear becomes exhilaration when I realize she is on the window, putting a protective web around the third egg sac, just a few inches below the first one.

If I hadn't been so groggy upon waking, I might have noticed her making the sac itself.

As I park myself on the bedroom floor to watch her, I notice how hard she works. I think she must be tired, and then wonder if I'm anthropomorphizing her. But the egg sac is wider than she is; certainly she had to expend a great deal of energy to make it. Plus, a window is not necessarily an ideal surface. During the thirty minutes I spend watching her, I notice how frequently she struggles to grip the glass, to get secure footing. Her legs thrash and flail, and I wish there was anything I could do to help. Of course, she has a mission, and she will not be deterred. The tiny spider does not need the assistance of my huge, ungainly hands.

I wonder if this is how all mothers feel sometimes: suspended from a strong but thin rope, scrambling to find purchase on a dirty pane of glass.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Arachnophobia is one of the most common phobias in the world. It comes in third, behind fear of public speaking (glossophobia), and fear of death (necrophobia). 30.5% of the United States population fears spiders. Arachnophobia outranks the fear of the dark (achluophobia), heights (acrophobia), social situations (sociophobia), flying (aerophobia), closed spaces (claustrophobia), open spaces (agoraphobia), and thunder and lightning (brontophobia). I learn that my own fear of spiders is fairly mild. Apparently, those with fears deeper than mine will avoid the outdoors or ritualistically check bedding and shoes to ensure no spiders are lying in wait. Some cannot watch television shows or movies with spiders in them.

I wonder how these people get through Halloween.

For those whose arachnophobia is so debilitating that it interferes with daily life, a therapist can help. Changing thought patterns, mild exposure to the phobia, and systemic desensitization are all options.

All I have to do is sit at a window and watch her weave.

All I have to do is get too close to the web and see how she shakes the silk to scare you off. See how she doesn't attack. See how she just wants to be left in peace, to eat other bugs and to lay eggs, to survive.

Gasteracantha cancriformis

Two years before my *Arigope* arrives, I move to the house in East Austin. The day after I settle in, I sign divorce papers. Though the entire process only took six months, I feel as though I have aged five years.

A week before the move, I turned thirty. My friend gave me a free-standing hammock with a shade canopy as a combination birthday/housewarming/divorce present. I have the hammock set up in the middle of my yard before I bother to finish unpacking books, clothes, or kitchen supplies.

The hammock becomes my favorite part of the house. The dog and I go out there every morning and, if the mosquitos aren't too thick, in the evening. I drink tea and read while he chases squirrels.

Two months after setting up the hammock, I come out one morning to discover that a tiny spider has woven a web between two of the poles holding up the shade structure. Thanks to Google I'm able to identify her as a spiny orb weaver (*Gasteracantha cancriformis*).

Though I have never been religious, in my heart, I've always held some innate sense of superstition. I am certain her presence is an auspicious one, though I'm not sure what she could possibly signify.

Sadly, the poles of a hammock shade structure turn out to be an inopportune place for a small spider to build a web. She stays with me all of two weeks. The one day, desperate for a squirrel, the dog jumps off the hammock and tears through the web.

The spider rightly realizes my hammock is not a safe space. I do not see her again. When I realize she is gone and not coming back, I cannot help but cry at my sense of loss. I feel that the universe had offered me a gift, and I failed to care for the treasure properly.

Feeding

I cannot watch a film in which a dog dies. If any animal is harmed during a scene, I have to look away. I feel guilty when I destroy a wasp nest. My heart is so soft I cannot even bring myself to kill a cockroach.

Yet I love to watch my spider kill and eat her prey.

She primarily eats bees and butterflies, and so I think I should feel at least a little guilty, given the ongoing threat to pollinator populations. But all I have is awe when a honeybee, heavy with pollen, slams into her web. Within 30 seconds, she has the creature immobilized and wrapped up. Sometimes she eats it on the spot, but often, she leaves the corpse for later.

Butterflies provide the most entertainment. My yard contains smaller species: Carolina satyr (*Hermeuptychia sosybius*), checkered white (*Pontia protodice*), and ceraunus blue (*Hemiargus ceraunus*). Still, they're bigger than honeybees, and put up more of a fight.

One afternoon, a ceraunus blue gets caught, and takes nearly a minute to subdue. It thrashes its wings in hopes of breaking free of the sticky silk, in hopes of intimidating the spider, but she is undeterred. Through my bedroom window, I am close enough that I can see her fangs descend. When she bites the butterfly, it looks almost intimate, almost kind. This must be what the kiss of death looks like. Eventually, the wings slow down, and then stop entirely. Once the butterfly is paralyzed for good, the spider finishes wrapping it up in a tiny shroud, then hauls it to the center of the web to feast.

Exterminators

"Get an exterminator. They like to hang around your house rafters and they are not fun in your house! They multiply like crazy."

"You do realize, these egg sacs become spiders by the hundreds?"

"They are creepy as hell!"

"KILL IT WITH FIRE."

As though a garden spider would actually want to get in the house. Poised between the helmet flowers and the bedroom window, my spider has ready access to bees, wasps, crickets, and butterflies. Many mornings, she has to pause halfway through a meal to kill and wrap another creature that has gotten stuck in her web. If for some reason she got into the house, she would just want to get back outside. There's no space where she could actually build a web, and even if she managed to do so, there isn't a steady stream of food passing by. She would have to contend with the dog, who would see her as some sort of toy.

The attic wouldn't be much better. Maybe she could hang a web there, but certainly the space lacks the ready access to pollinators buzzing around flowers. The only thing living up there, as far as I can tell, are the rats my landlord continually fails to exterminate.

I don't trust that the people my roommate hires to mow the lawn will respect my spider. That they'll try to get rid of her out of fear or misunderstanding. I buy a lawnmower and start cutting the grass myself.

Venomous Spiders

No matter how frightening spiders might seem, there are only three species that are actually harmful to humans: black widow (*Latrodectus*), brown widow (*Latrodectus geometricus*), and brown recluse (*Loxosceles reclusa*). Fortunately, they all have distinctive appearances. The black widow is most commonly known, with the telltale red hourglass standing out in contrast to the black abdomen. The brown widow has a similar red marking, but a tan body, the head and legs like milk chocolate and the abdomen like

cream, and along its back orange and black markings that resemble scales in pattern if not in texture. Finally, the brown recluse, with an unmarked body, but its coloring and long legs obvious to anyone it encounters.

If you take the time to commit their images to memory, you will have an easier time around safe spiders. No orbweaver or jumping spider, no house spider or cobweb spider or wolf spider, not even the large and hairy tarantula, resembles the three deadly ones. If you look at a spider and don't see the telltale colors or markings, you can remind yourself it means you no harm. If it's in your house, perhaps you'll work up the courage to scoop it up and set it free rather than kill it. If it's in your garden, you might even be willing to let the spider coexist, and it will thrive on all the pests that would otherwise plague you.

A year and a half before my marriage fell apart, I discovered a brown recluse in our downstairs half-bath. We kept the cleaning supplies under the sink. Since we hardly ever cleaned, and since the full bath upstairs was much more comfortable, we could easily go an entire month, if not longer, without going in. One morning, though, I decided enough was enough with the grime in the upstairs bathroom, and went in search of toilet bowl cleaner. When I went into the half-bath and turned on the lights, there was a brown spider sitting on the mirror. Its abdomen and legs were acorn-brown, and the head had an amber tone. I had never seen spider legs that long. At the time, they seemed the length of coffee stirrers.

Cleaning could wait. I turned the light off, closed the door, stuffed the gap between the door and the floor with trash bags, and went searching online to see whether or not my worst fears were true. The images of brown recluse spiders on my screen were all dead-ringers for the creature in my bathroom.

I went upstairs where my husband was still dozing.

"There's a brown recluse in the downstairs bathroom."

He opened his eyes, but turned so his back was toward me. "So?"

"So what are you going to do about it," I asked him.

I stood in the doorway watching him, until a few minutes later he got up, sighed, put on his winter gloves, went downstairs, and killed it.

Four years almost to the day, I cannot decide what to make of that moment. It smacks of feminist hypocrisy, of being equal in all things except pest control. It smacks of being a sitcom caricature, the nagging wife who won't let the poor husband sleep in on Sunday because there is a chore to be done.

But while I can castigate myself for being an obnoxious wife and a bad feminist, I also see it as one of the many warning signs of the impending divorce I refused to acknowledge. The spider was dangerous. I did not love him enough anymore to risk killing it myself. I would not put my safety on the line for him.

Weaving

My spider works in the morning. I read that she is supposed to weave at night, but my spider is no insomniac. (Though I always hope to catch her in the act of eating

the web, I never do.) Her work usually begins within an hour of sunrise; she has started the process by the time the dog and I return from our morning walk. Indoors, I go about my morning routine, and come back outside with coffee about 90 minutes later. At that point, she's usually about three-quarters of the way finished with the process.

I used to meditate with my eyes closed, but now, I have lost interest in dark contemplation. Instead, I sit in the grass and focus on her, the way she reaches each agile leg out to grasp established strands. Though I know she weighs only a few ounces, if that, she seems so heavy in proportion to the thin threads that deploy from her body and drape with precise geometry.

The moment I always wait for is the finishing touch, when she weaves the zipper (known also as the stabilimentum) up through the middle of the web. I assume for some time that this zipper provides stability for the web, but as I read more to try to understand the mystery of her, I learn that the purpose of the stabilimentum is up for debate. However, my hypothesis is decidedly incorrect, disproved before I was even born. Instead, the discussion revolves around the stabilimentum being used to attract mates, or to make the spider appear larger, or to camouflage the web.

I have never known anything so innately as this spider knows how to weave a web. I cannot build myself a home using instinct. I have never learned to trap and kill my own food. Anything I do with any sense of grace has been practiced a thousand hours. Anything I seem to understand at a glance has been learned, often painfully, often a dozen times.

Natural Remedies

Apparently, the best deterrent to spiders in one's home is to keep a clean and tidy house. Repair ripped screens. Caulk up the cracks. Trim your plants. Make sure you don't have flies buzzing around. Defend your territory.

Given the habits of my twenties, there's no surprise that a brown recluse once took refuge in my bathroom. However, given the state of the house in East Austin, I am surprised I don't have more of a problem. Though I've improved my personal cleaning abilities, the landlord is content to let the house fall into ruin. Cracked foundation. Leaky roof. Warped windows and doors.

If you do not want to fill your home and yard with pesticides, the Internet is full of helpful suggestions for natural pest control that may or may not actually work. I am doubtful that horse chestnuts will accomplish much of anything. Catnip apparently does the job, as do various essential oils. I admit, I rarely see spiders in houses with cats, though that might be due to the fact that the cats usually enjoy killing pests of all kinds. Vinegar is supposedly a deterrent, though the jury is out on which kind. Tobacco is another on the list.

You can also trap spiders, if you so desire. For those of us who don't mind seeing dead and dying creatures, there are sticky traps, in which the spiders will get caught, and of course eventually starve to death, unless you smash them first. Or, if you don't have it in your heart to kill the spider, there are instructions on YouTube to make a

Spider Rifle, which sucks the arachnid up and allows you to dispose of it outside still alive.

These days, when I see them in the house, I just let them be. They don't come into the house that often, and they're always tiny. I'm always afraid that I'll injure the spider trying to get it outside. And no, my house isn't overrun. I've never seen a full-blown web indoors. You can call me lazy. You can call me a bleeding heart. I would just rather let a creature be than bother it.

Charlotte

According to my mother, when I was in second grade and my teacher read the class *Charlotte's Web*, Mrs. Gresko had me read aloud the chapter in which Charlotte dies, because she could not keep herself from crying. I have no memory of this ever happening, though I know I didn't cry when my mother read the book to me the year before. I was not nearly as sentimental at seven as I am at thirty-two. Charlotte was a fictional character in a novel. The only person I had lost was my grandmother, and my mind saw a clear division between her death and the passing of a talking spider in a book.

On the night of Sunday, October 9th, I come home after being away for the weekend and am greeted by an empty space between the bushes and the window. The three egg sacs remain safely attached to the window and the siding, but both web and spider are gone.

I cry for two days. Between bouts of tears, I chastise myself for sobbing over the death of a spider, a creature I had the good sense to not even name, because of course she was going to die at the end of the summer. An arachnid that didn't particularly care for my presence, either. My window was merely a safe space with an ideal prey population.

The week after she dies, I re-read *Charlotte's Web*, and I start crying well before Charlotte even dies.

As children, we are told fables and fairy tales to learn lessons. Yet even if we are lucky enough to read *Charlotte's Web* as children, it seems one of the lessons in the book has a hard time sticking. We may retain the lesson about friendship, about sacrifice, but we forget that, for the most part, spiders are a beneficial species. Charlotte reminds us of that in the beginning, when she asks Wilbur, "do you realize that if I didn't catch bugs and eat them, bugs would multiply and get so numerous that they'd destroy they earth, wipe out everything?" How easy, it seems, to forget that the creatures which scare us so are keeping the flies and the wasps at bay, that they protect us from pestilence.

Not long before Charlotte dies, Wilbur proclaims, "To think that when I first met you, I thought you were cruel and bloodthirsty!" This seems a common assumption with every spider a human meets. In truth, I spent nearly two years training myself out of my own fear. Even I had forgotten the lessons of what had been my favorite childhood story. Two years, between the brown recluse in the bathroom and the arrival of the

Gasteracantha cancriformi, for me to learn to be unafraid of the elegant fangs and the spindly legs.

Autumn deepens. The egg sacs won't hatch until spring. Now I wait.