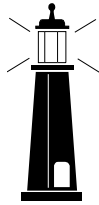


MERCURY CHAMPAGNE

Dan Goodrich



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For Sarah, who dreams with me

Special thanks to my publisher for taking a chance.

Chapter Nine

The camper was much darker now, and he couldn't make out any of the spider's more subtle physical attributes. He wasn't sure now that it was a spider, not exactly. It was more spider-like than an actual spider. There was nothing on it that resembled a head. It had the same pale white, flesh color all over, from the tip of its non-existent head to the end of its bulbous abdomen. Its legs too, were the same color. The spider was roughly the same size as one of Ed's hands. The more he tried to focus on it, the more indistinct it became.

The spider made no attempt to move. Ed sensed a feeling of patience from it. He sat back in the narrow booth and stared at it. The spider shifted; Ed thought it looked like it was unwinding, trying to relax. It gave him the impression of a dog that turns in circles several times before finally settling down to its bed and curling up for the evening. The spider shifted itself from side to side, before allowing its full weight to settle onto the tabletop. Ed felt a feeling of relaxation fall over him. The feeling came from the spider, washing through him. He savored the feeling. Sorcery? He needed no more evidence than the thing before him. Ed was ready to buy the whole notion, and whatever came with it. He felt safe, and the lingering traces of panic that chewed at the edges of his frayed resolve dissipated.

The edgy, snow-howling panic lingered, though. A voice from inside didn't quite care for the phantom spider. "Who's in charge

here, Ed,” the voice asked, “you or the spider?” Ed’s mind balked at the notion of any connection to imaginary spiders, but the spider, with its absence of head and eyes, remained focused on him.

The wind outside assailed the camper with renewed vigor. The camper rocked slightly. A new sound came to Ed over the gusting wind. It came from the direction of the spider, causing him to start. He thought for a moment that it was the spider chattering at him. CLICK-CLICK-CLICK. The spider was gone, though. The feeling of serenity Ed felt moments ago was gone as well. The sound came from the direction of the heater. There was no question that the clicking sound coming from the direction of the heater was in fact, the heater. The propane tank was exhausted. He knew it. He didn’t know a damned thing about the mechanics behind it, but it seemed obvious to him that any amount of clicking that came from the direction of a propane-fueled heater in the middle of a life-threatening snowstorm automatically meant that the heater had given out. There would be no more heat; things could only get worse.

Ed’s mind jumped back to his father’s death. He imagined his dad losing his balance, perhaps smiling at the foolishness of the situation. Perhaps he thought of how cold the water would be or how thoroughly wet it would make him. Not for a moment thinking that the weight and momentum of his fall would capsize the small fishing boat, dropping the starboard (or port side, who knew which?) squarely and certainly in the middle of his back. Surely, he was still conscious, perhaps not fully aware that his back had been broken as he tried to tread water. Was it with growing panic that his dad died? Did the panic escalate with the certainty that he was drowning, that there would be no telling of how foolish he felt for not wearing his life jacket?

The camper lurched. Ed gripped the table. *No, it’s not the camper*, Ed thought. *Fainting*. He shut his eyes against the tilting of everything. Even the darkness behind his eyelids brought a tottering drunkenness to his mind. “Jeezus pleezus!” he said, gripping the table harder. “Sweet Mary and mercy, I’m sick of it!” He opened his eyes, the vertigo seemed worse with them shut.

With the heat from the small furnace now gone, the temperature inside the camper dropped quicker than Ed thought possible.

Everything around him took on a pulsing, tilting sensation. He felt caught in one of those music videos from the early seventies: the camera lens zooming in and out. Hippie vision. Ed could see the plumes of his breath. The temperature *was* dropping. Ed felt his mind going. His pulsing vision continued. In one moment he was standing behind himself, looking over his own shoulder, watching himself breathe. In the next moment he became the breath that he exhaled. He was the exhalation; the sound of his breathing was amplified in his head, like an asthmatic stuck in a tin can. His legs, feet, and toes began to tingle. There was a feeling of weightlessness about him. His arms felt like they were defying gravity. He held his hands in front of his face, examining them, for they too tingled. They were his hands all right, but it seemed to him in the same moment that they might only be copies of his hands. Dream hands, airy, filled with champagne bubbles. The tingling filled every part of him, and he felt himself lift out of the seat. His breathing echoed in his ears. The white puffs of warm breath from his lungs stretched through the camper. A mellifluous rope of breath from his mouth and nose, drifting toward the front of the camper. Ed could feel himself being stretched across the rope. The sound of his breathing washed over him. Waves crashing on a breaker: he was the wave; he was the breaker. The tingling sensation of his body fell into rhythm with his pulsing vision. The sound of his breath matched in time. One moment found Ed stretched along the plumes of his breath, moving slowly forward into the camper, the next found him standing behind himself, watching the breath being drawn back into his lungs. Ed no longer felt cold; he could no longer hear the wind. Each instant, each continuing moment, became its own lifetime. His body tingled, pulsing; his perspective bounced back and forth.

Ed tried to bring his hands in front of his face. *It was*, he thought, *the only way to get a grip on the situation*. His strange, mercurial dream-hands tingled and pulsed, but they were also made of lead. This time he couldn't lift them up to look at them. He tried to glance down. It seemed imperative now to catch a glimpse of his hands, his dream hands. Perhaps he'd see a gopher feather and know that he'd soon wake. As Ed felt himself trying to force his eyes to roll themselves downward just the slightest bit, he found that they too

were out of his control. He pulsed in and out of perspective with each breath from his mouth. As he tried to look down at his hands, his eyes glanced up at the ceiling, against his will. There was the spider. It looked misshapen and bloated. The pale, headless thing “stared” directly into Ed’s eyes. Ed could see thin luminous filaments shooting outward from its abdomen in all directions.

He surrendered to it. Whether by choice or by compulsion, he didn’t know. The luminous web filaments from the spider stretched toward him. The pulsing quickened. Ed was standing again, and then he was weightless. The two perspectives began to blur. The glowing filaments from the spider on the ceiling draped him in a silken, shimmering net, almost a cocoon.

Ed was weightless. The plumes of breath from his nose and mouth disappeared in the cold air of the dark camper. His breathing grew louder. He felt himself coming apart.

As suddenly as the complete weirdness of the situation had taken hold of him, it was gone. Ed was enclosed in a shimmering cocoon from the spider’s webs and floating easily through the air. The pulsing sensation was gone. His perspective was whole once more, though not limited to the sight allowed by his eyes. He was seeing with all of his senses combined. He drifted across the icy, snow-covered landscape brought by the winter storm.

The amplified sound of his breathing was still present, and it added to his new sight. He was a part of the air around him. He took the air into his lungs and expelled it. His perception traveled with each breath taken into his body. He was aware of the spider traveling with him. Its legs twitched as its body pulsed, luminous web filaments continued to flow out from its bloated abdomen. They surrounded Ed and pulled him along. Ed tried once more to look at his hands but found that he could not. His hands were gone; he was gone. He could not look in any single direction, yet he found that he could see easily in all directions. There was no moon overhead. The dark camper receded behind him, looking like a lost, wounded animal abandoned to die. Perhaps that was the truth of it.

Ed forced himself to try and look at his hands again. It was frustrating, and he realized that were it not for the desire to look at his hands, he might feel completely at peace. He listened to the

wind, or maybe the sound of his own amplified breath, and forgot his hands. He surrendered to the floating, peaceful feeling. He drifted upward, higher over the landscape until he was above the clouds—and there was the moon. It was full and stark above him. The stars echoed and pulsed in time with the twitching and spinning of the spider's web. Ed was taken by a feeling of giddiness. It was bliss, almost better than love or the first smell of crisp autumn air.

He floated above the clouds, or perhaps he was being pulled through the sky by the spider spinning its glowing web. He didn't care. The eerie, cramped panic of the previous days and hours were behind him. This was a familiar feeling. He couldn't place a single time when he could remember anything like it, but it was not a strange feeling to him. He'd done this before, this peaceful drifting. Ed felt himself floating higher still, until all around him were glowing strands of web and luminous filaments. He could see the strands protruding from his midsection as he floated along. He looked again to see his hands. Shock gripped him. Fear. There were many hands clutching and grabbing from a tight, pulsing spot in the center of his chest. They were ghost hands, bursting like bubbles from within. He could see through them, clutching at the strands of web around him. A part of him wished for one of the many hands to grab hold of one of the strands of web and pull him in some new direction. Another part of him, the part that was rapt with the joy of being propelled onward by the busy spider, was in charge now. He let the spider do its work. For him to blindly grab hold of one of the strands would bring an unnecessary courtship with disaster.

Facedown in an icy ditch. Though he couldn't remember it happening, he knew that was how he'd brought himself so precipitously close to Death: the phantom hands, like stray thoughts, grasping at anything.

The moon and the stars were gone now. Even the darkness of night had disappeared. Everything was aglow with the luminosity of the strands that surrounded and penetrated him. The only thing that remained unchanged was the spider. It remained above him by a distance of two feet or so, legs twitching and working frantically together as the thing's pale abdomen bobbed and pulsed, issuing forth strands of glowing filament.

Ed could see two bright spots, like the approaching headlights of a car, off in the distance. The distance grew shorter, until the headlights veered off at the last moment. Ed watched, as they grew smaller and disappeared. It had to be Death's headlights. It was either unable to see him, or simply not interested. He found that he didn't care. His euphoric feeling couldn't be dampened. The spider continued to spin its web around him as they glided together across the sky. Was it the sky? A familiar tugging sensation at his midsection pulled at him. The clamoring at his chest, a dozen grasping hands, overpowered him. Ed's omnidirectional perception vanished, too; leaving a feeling of sadness. The spider had ceased its web spinning and now floated motionless in the air behind him. Its legs were curled inward, as though dead. Ed noticed that the spider was gliding along a thin glowing strand that entered the creature's body where a head should be, and exited through its abdomen. He noticed, too, that a similar strand pierced him through an area right above his navel. The strand, he noticed, ran exactly parallel to the one guiding the spider. He felt a sublime sense of serenity. It was a feeling he'd longed for his entire life, and it disappeared as soon as he knew it for what it was.

A sickening tug jerked at his midsection. Ed looked down to see several of the same ghost hands he'd seen earlier, now reaching out from his chest, grabbing outward, trying to reach the flowing web filaments. He felt another sickening pull at his gut. One of the hands clutched a luminous string of web. Ed lurched sideways and then he was traveling in a new direction. The spider continued traveling onward and away from him. It disappeared from sight. Ed could see the moon and stars again. He was falling. There were heavy snow clouds below him, getting closer as he fell. He fell, weightless. The glowing strand of web connected to his midsection tugged harder at his gut. He felt like he was riding an elevator with a broken cable. Now he was in the clouds, blind from the thick cottony wisps, then he broke free and his descent continued. Ed thought he should feel cold. He should be frozen. He should be unable to breathe. Instead he approached the abandoned camper in the middle of the icy field like a kite that's lost its breeze. He could see the line of trees he'd seen the night before—beyond that, more snow. Ed tried to scan quickly for a road. A direction pointing the way out. He couldn't see anything

that looked like it might lead to civilization.

Everything was blanketed in white, a blur, and then darkness.