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# Wenger: I Should Like to be Given Over

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
FINALIST

## I SHOULD LIKE TO BE GIVEN OVER

Alex Wenger

We had apartments across the hall from one another. Is this how people generally meet? I've heard so much going either way. Everyone searching for community, drawn to the few people near them geographically in the city. Or everyone is so bound within themselves that physical meetings are anachronistic.

The spiders have ever been a problem in this building, but they didn't begin to show up in numbers or to bite until we started having sex. They were very little spiders, small enough that you might not notice one beneath your hand. We had a lot of pleasure, but we also had the spiders.

I really wanted to have sex with Sylvia. She was a person very comfortable in her body, a sensualist. I didn't know this until after. I'm not terribly observant. I wanted to fuck her, as badly as anyone I've ever been around. I think I'm hesitant as people go, or at least as men go, and I could not tell at first if she thought much of me at all. I thought, Just give me an opportunity. I thought that I could overwhelm her if given the chance. If I could just put my mouth on her belly, I thought. If she could just feel my hand against the back of her thigh. There is force in me.

Eventually I was able to show her. Never mind how we came to that point. This is not a courtship tale. It is so difficult to hold the pen now. My handwriting is terrible, as I look over it, and I used to take pride in my penmanship. I must get it down tonight.

I surprised her. I overran her, and she hadn't expected that, and I continued to surprise her for months by continuing to overrun her. For a long time, I think, she was alarmed by how

heavy my hand could become. Or sometimes I took her mouth between my fingers, not squeezing, not hard at all.

And she met me. She met me, and surprised me. I had thought only of myself, and it came as a great surprise to me to find her alive and calling in the bed. Her force was unlike mine. Hers was in allowing her mouth to be held, and sometimes, lightly, she bit my fingers. Less to cause pain I think than to feel them between her teeth. She was a sensualist.

There was a lot that I didn't understand. She said that for six months before we crawled into bed, she hadn't been touched and that she hadn't hardly minded. She said I had brought her back to sex. I don't necessarily believe her. I don't disbelieve her. It might be just a thing you say to another person, but I certainly liked to hear it. She convinced me of all sorts of things that may not be true, and don't think I'm not grateful.

The spiders gradually found their way into bed with us. It didn't matter, her bed or mine. At first we were revolted. Of course we were revolted. I will say that I was revolted. I could not stay hard with all of those spiders flitting over her back or across her chest. One might dash up over her breast and across her neck, and that would be the end of me. They crawled on me too. I often couldn't feel them, and it got into my head while I was on top of her that they were swarming over my back. Sometimes I checked and there they were.

Their bites, too, were visible after a couple of hours, and if I looked my form over in the bathroom mirror, I saw dozens of tiny red spots where the spiders had bitten me. They bit her too. Her body was covered in tiny red spots.

We lobbied the building to spray for them, and the super told us there wasn't much to be done. The super is a small guy with large glasses. He has one of those chests that sink in, but he dresses himself as well as he might. He has an air about him. Perhaps he's wise. I've never had enough conversation with him to say either way. He told me there was no helping against the spiders and the way he said it stuck with me. It's likely that he didn't want to be bothered. All supers are useless. But there may

have been something else in it. I don't mean to be coy. I'm sure he knew we were lovers, though I don't know what that signifies. Half the time I believe adulthood is the process of knowing a little less than you did the day previous and discussing it with no one. In any case, the spiders were sprayed. For a week, we fucked without spiders. Then they returned, all at once, as if from holiday. I had brought my face down next to hers, breathing into her hair and into her ear with her arms buckled around my shoulders, and when I pulled up again there were three spiders on her face. There was another spider on my arm.

We could never learn where they came from. They were such tiny black things, they could have climbed out of any invisible seam along the baseboard or wherever. The building sprayed three more times, and each time we had about a week before the spiders returned in the same numbers as before. It was difficult to talk about the spiders because they only came out when we were in the midst of a sex act. There was a lot of stupid talk. For some people, it's their job, it's their life to engage all day in stupid talk. We got the building to agree to pay for a professional inspection. The pest inspector came in, examined each apartment for an hour, and found no evidence of spiders. Or no more than the usual for this building, he said. Sylvia raised a scene. I was more hesitant. We compromised on one last blast. For this one, we had to empty our places of food and vacate the premises for 72 hours. A terrible gas capsule had been planted in each apartment. For 72 hours, death reigned in our apartments. We returned after a long weekend at a hotel and the spiders basically welcomed us back. As the super said, there seemed to be nothing to be done about the spiders.

Neither of us moved, which would have been the obvious thing. We talked about it. There were a couple of things we said, which were probably untrue. Such as: "If it's not spiders it will be something else in another place." Such as: "They'll probably show up anywhere we go anyway." I said the second thing. She avoided discussing what 'we' might do over any sort of long-term. I stopped talking like that when she told me it upset her. Partly

we stayed because it would have been expensive to move.

Instead, we became used to the spiders. Only after the fumigations had failed did I start to consider seriously this policy. Prior to that, the spiders were capable of sending me into helpless rages. They had no reason to be there, and I could not dislodge them. I would feel oily hot and sweaty during these rages.

Neither of us liked to kill the spiders. Or rather the pleasures of killing the spiders were not healthy for me. There is a feeling that comes from smashing a vermin on your own naked self. I had the sense of having violated, and I felt several degrees more naked than I had been before. They looked like crushed blueberries. It's a great feeling, this feeling. But walking this path leads to excesses, and she asked me to stop. We tried not to kill the spiders. They were difficult to brush off and they found their way back quickly. There was really nothing to be done about the spiders.

She was always less bothered by the spiders. Is it more correct to say that I was initially more bothered by the spiders? I don't know. She didn't like the spiders, I don't think, but they didn't upset her as they did me. Sex would be a fight to stay hard in the sight of those little black forms blanketing us and, I knew, biting us, though we usually didn't feel it. There were things we could do, though. Even when I couldn't manfully punch our tickets in the thrusting way, we could minister to one another. I loved to find her from below and look up at her lips slightly open and her throat exposed, and if a spider idled on her throat then I didn't mind it so much. And though she might be swarmed with the spiders, she could make me lurch up almost into a sitting position, pulled by the ecstatic bunching muscles of my torso.

I keep having these spells, and after they pass it's very hard to pick up where I left off. I am tired. The fits, the spells, all my energy is gone when I come out. And sleep isn't what it used to be. Sleep is another state that I emerge from more exhausted than I entered. It is in sleep that the transformation goes forward, I think. I find it very hard to continue this account. Sometimes I question its importance. But I will not be easy with myself. The

days for that are past. You listen to me you. You listen.

We decided the spiders weren't so bad, the little black spiders. I don't know how I went from being limp with the spiders to acceptance of them. Anything I could suggest would be a lie. I don't think there's anything that holds us together as people. I think what other people call our personality is what they know we have done and said in the past. I think some of us are dumb enough to believe what we're told about ourselves. I think that everyone prefers to believe this foolishness because we are terrified that we don't know what anyone will do ten minutes from now. We don't know what we ourselves will do ten minutes from now. I think that all that said we are stultifyingly predictable.

The worst jokes stick around longest. There was a king angry that his rule was failing, and he asked an adviser what to do. The adviser came back a day later with a plan, and the king said that the plan was crap, What else have you got? I have this concept called free will, said the adviser. I don't like the sound of that, said the king. Of course you don't, said the adviser, that's why it will work so well, it sounds like just the thing you would hate. You just watch though. What the hey, said the king. Have people preach it. So it was done, and they laughed about their joke at all the parties. Outside, people ate mud and socks. The king lived a long and happy life. That Happened.

So perhaps I will quit with this account before it's through. I just won't now. I still feel the necessity of it. There wasn't a lot that happened for a few months. The spiders were always there, always leaving bites. For me, I will say, they were peaceful months. For her, I'm not so sure. We talked a great deal, and I knew all about her history and what she loved, and often when she was upset about something but not saying it outright, I divined the thing that was upsetting her. But there was a lot more that I did not know.

She may have suspected things were happening for a good while before it became obvious. When she lay on top of me, and I stroked her bare back one night, I came upon a patch of hard-plated skin at the small of her back. We looked at each other

when my hand stopped there. I don't what it is, she said. I've never had something like that there before. She got off of me, and I got in close to look at the patch. She was a pale girl, and these were darkened plates, overlapping one another like heating vents. The plates were stiff, but they were pliant under pressure. When I depressed them, she asked me to stop. It hurt, she said. I suggested perhaps she get them looked at. It's just skin, she said. I said, You just said you've never had something like this before. I don't think I need to see a doctor, she said. What if it's cancer, I asked. I don't care. You don't care? What was obvious was that she wanted to abandon the conversation, so it ended in tickling and giggling. Her skin began to darken in patches. At first, it became purple as if bruised. Then the skin darkened further into blackness, and the skin became cool to the touch, shiny, and very smooth. When we fucked, we were still visited by the little spiders. I sprung plates. They formed on both sides of my calves. One day I looked down the length of the both of us, at the expanding zones of black and of purple. The spiders crawled about the dark patches and the light. I asked her if she thought we had made the right decision. She was moving her head in sudden ways. She'd done that for a while. She stopped doing this when I put the question to her. We've made the right decision, she said. Then she asked me how much money I had. I wasn't sure, but I gave her what I thought was ballpark for my retirement account. Shall we quit our jobs, I asked. She said she thought it would be smart. I agreed. We cashed in our accounts, little black accounts. I went grocery shopping. What do you think we'll need, I asked. I don't know any more about this than you do, she said. I bought a lot of things. I had no idea what we would need. I can say now we ate all the stuff we used to eat right up until the end. Sometimes I still enjoy microwave pizza. Enjoy is too strong. I eat pizza out of nostalgia. I can't digest it very well.

When we stopped going to work, our lives changed. Our behaviors, I mean. We lay in bed all day with the spiders, and we had a lot of sex, as much as we could without making ourselves

too sore. We stopped watching television, except for the news and commercials. The other programs made no sense.

I think that was when I became aware that my thoughts had changed. It's tough to remember how I used to think. I have thoughts that I can't utter. They are urges. I cannot find words.

I always feel terrible right after I come out of my fits. I feel as though my mind has been screaming. When a little time has passed I can remember better what it's like to slide into the fit and I remember that the advent of the screaming is pleasurable. I've been having more fits.

Our black parts were so sensitive. It took me a little while to learn what I could do to her in those places. Much pressure, and she would start to hurt. I was less so. I found any sort of touch thrilling. When the inside of my thighs turned black, I loved for her to lick the skin there and blow on it. I gritted my teeth and chittered all over.

Our genitals were among the last parts of us to turn black. By then, other alterations had begun to set in. A pair of black legs broke open from her abdomen one day. They were useless at first. They hung limply. When they could move for a long time she had no control over them. They might flare out when she was angry. They twitched when she ate. In her throes of love they were active. I had to be careful when we rutted not to lean on them and hurt her.

I wonder, will we be the only two of our kind, I said once. I don't think we're becoming the same things, she said. Of course not, I said. I'll be a male, and you'll be a female. She said nothing, and I said, Don't you agree? I don't know what you're becoming, she said. Do you know what you're becoming, I countered. She said nothing to that, and I went on, Naturally, we don't know but it only makes logical sense. I said, You're obviously further along than me. I think we should each stay in our own apartment from now on, she said. You can have as much of the food as you'd like. We fought then, a long, tedious quarrel that frightened me very much. I did not say it, did not understand



it explicitly until after, but I had been easy of mind about the transformation because she was going through it with me. What I did say over and over again was that we were becoming spiders and it made no sense to face that alteration alone. We could take care of one another. She finally became fierce with me, You are not becoming a spider! I am the only one who will be a spider. You will be something else. How, I shouted rhetorically, as if before a crowd, how do you know that you will become a spider and I will not? Am I not as black and shiny as you? Do I not chitter as you do? You sound differently than I do, she said. I'm a man and you're further along, I repeated. I knew I sounded silly, but I thought she was wrong.

I still don't understand how she knew what she did, but our developments did diverge. I have lasted much longer than her, and now I suspect that I am not progressing. There are pleasures to my existence, certainly. My body rejoices with sensation. I need only drag my surfaces against a soft fabric, and I am transported. My hearing has fallen off, and I consider this a fine thing. I used to like music, but now I have no need of it, and my whole life I hated loud sudden noises, which have far more trouble reaching me these days. I do wish I was not rendered so lethargic by my fits. Or rather, I wish that I could remain in the fits. I should like to spend an entire day in the internal screaming. Then again, perhaps I have. Time means a lot less to me now. I can't understand clocks anymore, and I have only the faintest memories of the fits. I have a feeling of being caught in transit.

We didn't separate then. Not long after, she stopped talking. I could yet talk, and she could understand my words. She did chitter meaningfully. I can still talk. I've kept my words. Now that she is gone, for good and not just in the other apartment, I turn on the television to hear them talk. It never lasts long. I hate them, all of them, and the stories don't make sense. I don't try to read anymore. I haven't read over what I've recorded here. None of it makes sense. I want instead to pursue things. No, I want to be in the act of pursuit. No, that is wrong. I want to be

in a fit, and when I am in a fit I pursue.

I think when I am in a fit that I do things. I recover from the fit to find myself dappled with substances, much around my mouth. I eat hardly anything here in the apartment in this state.

I know that it was me who argued for us to remain together when she wanted us to separate, but at the final parting I was relieved. By then, she was not speaking, but she let me know. She had many new legs by then, and they could bear her weight. I have stayed on the old two, though I did suffer the painful generation of an extra joint in them. She scuttled away from me on dainty legs, and when I approached her she threatened me with her prong. Each time I approached, she threatened with the prong. We had both developed more patience for certain things by that time, and we spent a very long time me approaching and she threatening. Night became day at least once. Then I stopped and went across the hall to my apartment.

The hall is much quieter these days. Used to be, I heard people come and go and I heard the children from down the hall playing. I don't hear any of that now, though I don't hear well at all anymore.

I think of her frequently. She's gone now, gone completely. My sense of smell is my strongest, most attuned connection to the world now. It tells me what is happening. I could smell her from my futon as she went to and fro. Her scent changed over time. I kept detecting new aspects in her: she became more ferric, a higher sugar content, her body temperature rose. Then she went. I don't know what happened. But she is gone, and the apartment is empty. Perhaps the super will enter it soon, clean her things out. Perhaps not for a while. I don't care about that much. I miss her. Now I wish we hadn't parted, though I can't imagine how it could have gone otherwise at the time. And I hope that my transformation continues. I look to the future with great anticipation. I hope this is not the final stage. I should like to enter a long fit. I should like to be given over. I am ready for that.