

LIBERATION

by Kevin Anderson

illustrated by Vincent Sammy

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To most people it was just an ordinary Thursday, but to Caroline, today was the day she had decided to rid herself of the spiders living in her brain. She figured that there had to be more than one, even though they only pulled a single spider from that woman in Brazil—living just under the skullcap like a lizard burrowed beneath the floorboards.

It had to be more than one. She'd had so much passion and determination when she was young, it would take several brain-dwelling parasites to eat it all. The spiders lived off of the brain impulses of her desire, feeding on her resolve to do the things she really wanted to do. "That's what the spiders live on," she had said to her roommate exactly one week ago.

Wendy, her roommate, stared back wide-eyed. "Please tell me you're joking, Caroline."

Caroline stepped toward Wendy, excitement and revelation growing in her eyes. "It's all right here." She held out the medical journal, dated July 1986. She pointed to the picture of a woman lying unconscious in an archaic-looking operating room. Then, sliding her finger across to the opposite page, she pointed to a murky photo of something whitish and puffy. The picture was just slightly out of focus like all the images ever captured of Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster, but a multi-legged form was clearly discernable.

It had the characteristics of a spider but looked more like some underwater creature—a mutated octopus or alien squid. The arachnid's legs were thick like tentacles, splayed out on a chalky porcelain table. Pools of blood spotted the off-white surface and a pair of forceps lay next to the spider, providing a sense of scale. The creature's creamy white frame seemed about four inches in length. Its color reminded Caroline of the

salamanders discovered in subterranean caves. Living their whole lives in darkness, the lizards looked pasty—sickly.

Leaning in, Wendy traced a finger along the picture's caption. "It says, it didn't have any eyes."

"It doesn't need them," Caroline said, grinning. "It lives in darkness, just feeling its way around." *Just like the salamanders.*

Wendy stood up. "This doesn't prove anything, Caroline. You don't have spiders living in your brain for god-sakes." She put a hand on her hip, sighing deeply. "Okay, let's just be logical about this for a second. That woman, whoever the hell she is, lives in Brazil. And hey, I'll admit there is all kinds of freaky shit living in the rainforest that we don't know about yet, but spiders that eat your determination, turning women into breeder cows? Come on! And even if there were, how did they get to Seattle? I don't remember you vacationing in Brazil recently."

Caroline had anticipated this question, the problem having occurred to her as well. She had never been out of the state of Washington in her life, let alone south of the equator. She had always wanted to travel. Paris, Rome, Vienna. But when it came down to it, her resolve to make the arrangements seemed to evaporate. *Damn spiders!*

Caroline stepped toward Wendy, slapping the book closed. "I didn't need to go to Brazil. The spiders were brought to me."

Wendy raised a brow, taking a half step back. "What?"

"Since the fifties the rainforest has been heavily harvested and exported to us for our consumption."

"What are you talking about?"

"Where do you think most of our medicines come from? Our birth control, Prozac, Valium? Hell even our makeup—moisturizers, eyeliner, lipstick. You name it. It all comes from the rainforest. Women have been inundated with this stuff for more than fifty years."

"Jeez, you've given this a lot of thought."

"Is it so hard to believe that these parasites have been able to hitch a ride in our birth control pills or some hair product packaged by men for women?"

Wendy sighed, looking at the ground. She took a deep breath and held out a hand. “Look, I know you’ve gone through some rough shit. That asshole husband of yours getting custody of your kids—god, I don’t know how I could live with that. But it doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with you.” Wendy stepped forward, her green eyes empathetic. “You’ve got your life on track now. In a few months we’ll both pass our exams and be certified RNs. It’s gonna be—”

“I don’t even want to be a nurse,” Caroline barked. “That’s what I’m talking about. It was my husband’s decision. He made all the arrangements. Where we would live. When we would have kids. What kind of career I needed to have. Why I needed to get a second job to pay for *his* education. Who he would fuck behind my back.”

Caroline looked down, picturing the unwanted events in her life. “Through everything, I never even raised an objection. Didn’t complain, not even once. My existence is like a movie I’m just watching. I didn’t want to have kids. I don’t think I even wanted to get married. All my life I’ve wanted to do things. But I’ve never done them. Not one.”

When Caroline looked up again, she noticed that Wendy had taken several steps back. Her hands were outstretched covering her retreat.

“Don’t you see?” Caroline gestured to herself. “It’s not just me. Why do you think women are second-class citizens? Why do we accept less pay for the same goddamn job done by a man?” Caroline pointed a finger at Wendy. “Why do you sleep with all those guys when you’ve said you really didn’t want to?”

Wendy dropped her hands, eyes flashing with anger. “There are no spiders living in our brains, goddamn it. I can’t believe I’m even having this conversion.”

“That’s what they want you to believe.”

Wendy cocked her head. “The spiders?”

Caroline nodded. “And men.”

Wendy quieted for a moment, seeming deep in thought. She blinked her eyes slowly then aimed them at Caroline. “I’ve put up with all your craziness, but this ... I can’t be here right now.” She hurried toward the front door of their small high-rise apartment. “Being your friend is just too hard.

I'm gonna ... I'm gonna just go."

Caroline rushed to the door catching it in her hand as Wendy opened it. "You don't really want to go. It's the spid—"

"Let go of the fucking door," Wendy screamed.

The harsh words soaked in fear assaulted Caroline like a bucket of cold water. She let go of the door, stepping back.

Wendy moved through the opening, and without looking back said, "Get some help, Caroline. For god-sakes."

The door slammed shut.

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That was a week ago and Caroline hadn't seen her since. A day or two later Wendy had come back when Caroline was on duty at the hospital, clearing out all her stuff. She must have been in a hurry because she left a couple of things. Knick-knacks mostly, some dishes. Even the note she had left seemed rushed—echoing her final words to Caroline. **Get some help. Please.**

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Placing the stainless steel bit of the cranial drill on the bathroom counter, Caroline surveyed the instruments of her liberation. Scalpel, forceps, sutures and gauze laid out according to size on a seashell-colored countertop. She hadn't noticed before, but she smiled when she saw the resemblance in color of the countertop to the chalky porcelain table the Brazilian brain spider had been photographed on.

She felt a laugh coming but she swallowed it—the sutures above her hipbone were very tender. She had performed that procedure this morning, removing the few ounces of fat she would need later to plug the hole.

Picking up the forceps, she turned them over in her hand. If she used too much pressure the spider's legs might tear off, allowing the arachnid to scurry to the safety and darkness of her gray matter. *Need a soft touch*, she reminded herself. Her surgical instructor had said the same thing just moments before she assisted in her first brain surgery. The patient, some man, died on the table, but not before Caroline got an excellent crash course in poking around the human brain.

She set the forceps down next to the Tupperware container holding her body fat. She pinned back her auburn hair, exposing the creamy white patch of scalp she had shaved clean, just an inch above her ear. It glistened with a single bead of sweat in the soft glow of the bathroom light. She tapped the shaved area with her finger.

Numb.

The anesthetic had taken effect. She had only injected herself with a third of the recommended dose of anesthetic for such a procedure—one requiring the patient to remain conscious. A full dose may have made it difficult to stand or keep a clear head. In any case, her partial dose meant there would be some pain. How much?

Putting her hands on the counter she stared at her small frame in the mirror. She wore only underwear and an Alanis Morissette concert T-shirt. She hadn't actually gone to the concert. She'd wanted to. But hadn't.

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In the mirror she could see the reflection of the bathroom window. The curtain was open and the Seattle skyline bled through. The Space Needle was as erect as ever, jutting up from a pubic-layer of fog, reminding Caroline who really ran the world.

Feeling the need for privacy, she turned, drawing the curtain. Liberation was often a lone pursuit.

Days before she'd begun picturing how she would do this. *Do it quickly. Do it fast. Don't think about it. Thinking might let the spiders know you're coming.*

Picking up the scalpel, she brought it up to her numb flesh. She had planned to cut a fast x-shaped incision, but when she pulled the blade back the wound looked more like a bleeding cross.

She dabbed with the gauze until the flow of blood subsided, then she wiped away the sweat on her brow. Using the scalpel she severed membranes, peeling back the folds of flesh exposing her skull. Not much, just enough to ease the bit of the drill against bone.

No pain yet.

Lifting the drill she placed the bit in the small breach of her scalp. When the stainless-steel instrument tapped against her skull she felt the contact all the way down her spine. The sensation reverberated through her limbs, tapering off like outward-moving ripples on a liquid surface.

She breathed fast, forcing the air in and out. Her heart raced. She pressed her lips together hard, gritting her teeth. *Liberation.*

The sound of the drill coming to life startled her, but not enough to lose focus. She gently pushed the drill inward, keeping her hand steady. Thin bands of smoke laced with ground bone fragments drifted up from the point of contact. *Perfectly normal*, she told herself. *Doing fine.*

She could see the drill going deeper and knew she would have to just eyeball the depth, trying to avoid completely piercing the meninges—the three layers of membranes protecting the brain. She was amazed at the lack of pain but as the familiar burning smell filtered up her nostrils, a blinding white light exploded in her skull.

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Agony pulsed like a flash bulb from a camera going off in her brain. Each flash caused her knees to buckle a little more. She closed her eyes and screamed, reaching out for the mirror. *Open your eyes god damn it, open your eyes. Fight through this.*

She pushed away from the reflective glass, opening one eye. Then slowly opening the other. The drill bit wasn't moving. Her finger had come off the button. *Damn it.* But as she pushed the bit forward she realized nothing solid was pushing back. She had broken through. She backed the drill out and unfolded the surgical mirror rigged to the medicine cabinet.

A clear yellow-tinted liquid was dripping from the hole. *Oh, shit. Cerebrospinal fluid.* She had broken through the mid-meninge layer—the arachnoid. Images from her textbooks, depicting this area as a cobweb of thread-like strands attaching to the innermost region, filled her mind's eye. It was where she felt the spiders lived. But the appearance of cerebrospinal fluid meant she had gone below this into the subarachnoid layer. Caroline knew there was only a finite measure of the precious fluid protecting her brain. Losing a little was okay, most people did throughout their lifetime. But

losing a lot was deadly.

She tilted the hole in her skull up, attempting to use gravity to quell the leak. She picked up a penlight and clicked it on, aiming the light into her exposed brain. The fluid seemed to be stabilizing. *Thank god.*

Her pain had tapered off dramatically, except in regions completely foreign to where all the action was. The muscles around her ribs ached enormously and pulsing pains seemed to anchor themselves in the bottom of her feet.

She took a deep breath and began to flick the penlight on and off, aiming the flickering beam into the hole in her skull. Up until this point her plan contained elements of familiar territory. As a surgical RN intern she had performed and assisted like procedures on dozens of people. But the next part was sheer guesswork.

She hoped that the brain spiders had evolved like other darkness-dwelling creatures on the planet. From the bottom-dwelling enigmas living in the deepest ocean trenches to the eyeless subterranean salamanders, they all shared a phototropic quality. Although none needed light to survive, they would be drawn to it by some instinctual curiosity. Even the creatures without eyes managed to turn toward the light, like a blind man knowing the exact moment someone else enters the room.

Caroline's thumb began to ache as she continued to flick the light on and off. Rotating the penlight in her hand she tried using her index finger to press the button, but found it difficult to aim the light that way. Then it occurred to Caroline that she could just leave the light on, waving in back and forth over the hole. From the spider's point of view it would look the same. *Jeez, she scolded herself. Why don't these things occur to me sooner? Maybe the spiders feed on common sense as well. That would explain a lot.*

Minutes went by. She was starting to feel dizzy. *I can't do this much longer.* "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Then something moved. Just a tip at first. A white needle-like leg appeared.

Caroline stopped moving the penlight, holding her breath.

The thin pasty leg probed the lit area like a blind person's cane. It

moved back and forth. Then suddenly it stopped. Motionless. It was as if it had suddenly become aware it was being watched.

Caroline reached down for the forceps. Her hand fell on empty counter. She wanted to look down at the countertop for the instrument but was afraid to take her eyes off the tiny leg's reflection in the mirror. It was irrational, she knew, but she felt that if she looked away it would disappear. So she locked her gaze on the arachnid, willing it to stay.

Her hand felt along the counter as the spider's leg began feeling the jagged edges of freshly cut bone. Another joined the lone leg. Then another.

Caroline's fingers grazed the forceps's handle. *Thank god.* She raised it up opening the needle-nose end. She eased the instrument forward, watching her movements in the surgical mirror.

Three legs, almost a half-inch long, protruded from her skull. Each one seemed determined to explore a different area of her scalp.

The open forceps hovered over the thickest point of two legs, and Caroline swallowed hard. She felt six years old again, playing that silly game, Operation. The similarities were uncanny. Use your tweezers to remove the ghost white plastic bones without touching the metal edge. A steady hand wins the game, but graze the edge and you lose your turn.

Caroline held her breath knowing that more was at stake than losing her turn. If the spider broke free or she just managed to tear its legs off, she would lose her only chance to get back her will.

Clamping the forceps around the spidery appendages with a touch so soft and accurate she could have picked up a grain of white rice with a pair of chopsticks, she began to pull.

The spider didn't come at first. Several other legs appeared and it looked as if they were searching for a way to anchor themselves. Then it began to slide. It slid quickly through the hole like a newborn calf descending toward the ground. Caroline flicked it into the sink, unclamping the forceps. She tried glancing down at it, but there was new movement in the mirror.

A second spider had found its way to the hole, its legs probing at the light. *How many*, she wondered. *How many?*

Less than ten minutes later she had her answer. There were three in all. The third seemed to almost climb through the hole of its own volition, needing very little encouragement from the forceps. Maybe the spiders sought a kind of liberation of their own.

She repaired the meninges and packed the hole in her skull with her body fat. This should have been surprisingly painful, but it wasn't. She knew that the body's pain receptors could turn themselves off in extreme conditions, but she didn't think that's what it was. As she began to suture her scalp, she glanced at her frame in the mirror. She remembered it being so small before, dwarfed in the ceiling-to-countertop glass. But now it looked as if the mirror could barely contain her frame. She was different. She felt different.

Liberated.

The last suture in, she clipped the excess stitching away. As she laid the scissors down, exhaustion hit her. She bent forward, bracing herself on the counter. Her head hung over the sink, hair dangling above the porcelain. She took slow, deep breaths and had her first opportunity to examine the parasites. Her eyes blinked a few times, not immediately registering what was wrong.

Gone.

The sink was empty.

She smiled as she pictured the watery arachnids scurrying down the drain, traversing the miles of plumbing under the city. *Liberation, my friends. Liberation.*

The air in the bathroom smelled foul so she staggered to the window. She wanted to draw the curtain open but she ended up pulling it off the rod. Pressing her forehead to the glass, she looked down at the women scurrying on the streets that spun out like a web from downtown. *So many women*, she told herself. *There are more of us than there are men.* She smiled as she saw women scurrying to jobs they didn't want, raising families they didn't want, hell even wearing shoes they didn't want.

There're so many of us. So many women needing liberation. I'm gonna' need a lot more drill bits.

There was a tapping at the bathroom door. "Hey Caroline, it's me

Wendy. I know I should have called before coming over like this.”

Caroline pushed away from the window.

“Especially after how I left and all. I’m sorry about that. Anyway I just wanted to come by and pick up my pots and pans. I met this guy and he wants me to cook my famous Italian Casserole for him tonight. I know, I know I hate to cook, but I really like this guy.”

Caroline moved over to the counter.

“Are you in there?” Wendy tapped on the door again.

Caroline grinned at her tall and free image in the mirror. She picked up the drill. *Time to start the liberation.*

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*Kevin Anderson has worked as a marketing professional for fifteen years, writing award-winning copy for TV and radio. His fiction has appeared in speculative anthologies and publications such as **Dark Wisdom #10**, **Surreal Magazine**, **Deathgrip: Exit Laughing** (Hellbound Press) and **Darkness Rising 2005** (Prime Books). He lives and writes in Menifee California, with his wife Hope, daughter Avalon and new son Ronin.*