

A Tangled Web

By Theodore Dalrymple

The last, and indeed the only, time I saw a film about an invasion of Earth by giant spiders was 42 years ago in the Teatro Municipal of Uyuni, on the Bolivian Altiplano. The spectators wanted the spiders to defeat the Americans who were fighting them, and cheered the arachnids on to victory, but were disappointed in the end when a neutron bomb destroyed them.



Wolf Spider

Source: Bigstock

The spiders arrived on a meteor from outer space (presumably they were either well insulated or heat-resistant, but the wonders of evolution will never cease). Outer space is full of meteors bearing spiders, it seems, for 49 years after that film was made, another of the genre has just been released, called *Sting*, in which such a

spider arrives on Earth—this time in Brooklyn rather than rural Wisconsin.

It arrives in a tenement building where an unpleasant, spoiled, but intelligent and manipulative little girl called Charlotte befriends it and treats it as a pet. At this stage, though a fair size for a spider, it is very small by comparison with what it is soon to become. She names it *Sting*, and miraculously *Sting* seems to understand English, to which it responds with meaningful squeaks and whistles. English is truly the universal language, in outer space as on Earth. As the Southern preacher once said, if English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.

Charlotte feeds Sting live cockroaches, the least dangerous of the fauna to be found in her part of Brooklyn. Sting, defying the laws of growth, grows in four days to the size of a baby dinosaur, thanks to its carnivorous diet, including a large parrot and a dog. It (Charlotte calls it "her," suggesting her—Charlotte's—incipient career as a militant feminist) drags her mother and stepfather, with whom she has a conflictual relationship, into the bowels of the waste disposal system of the tenement building, where it cocoons them in spider's web for its later consumption at its own leisure.

Fortunately, Charlotte, who is a petulant adult in all but size, has discovered that Sting doesn't like mothballs, so she dissolves mothballs in water in a food mixer and, armed with mothball water, frees her mother and stepfather from their cocoons (mothball water dissolves Sting's web filaments as well as burns its flesh, as holy water burns Count Dracula's flesh).

Sting is eventually killed when crushed by the steel exit to the waste disposal system, and Charlotte and her stepfather are reconciled. I must say that, as family therapy, this all seems a little extreme. However, the end of the film is not entirely happy, for one sees a bit of the meteor that has fallen on Brooklyn opening for another spider to emerge, leaving the possibility of a sequel if box office receipts merit it. Suffice it to say that if there were to be such a sequel, I will not be going to see it.

Clearly the film makes sly reference to *The Giant Spider Invasion* of 1975, for in that film there is a character called Helga played by a young German actress, and in *Sting* there is a character called Helga, now suffering from Alzheimer's disease, played by an old German actress. If the original giant spiders had been successful, of course, Helga wouldn't have lived to suffer from Alzheimer's disease.

The ghastliest scene in the whole film by far is not the one

in which the spider, still quite small, crawls into the mouth of a woman, descends her esophagus, and consumes her from the inside to the sound of Schubert's "Ave Maria," but when stepfather and stepdaughter are reconciled, the former assuring the latter that she has done nothing wrong, the little madam, presumably on the grounds that to understand all is to forgive all—with the possible exception of Donald Trump, of course. Anyway, it is nauseatingly sentimental and makes the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* seem like a dispassionate clinical description.

This film is the most terrible rubbish, of course, and I watched it in the cinema to the sound of people eating junk food behind me. Sting's anthropophagy did not seem to diminish their appetite for food that would do them far more harm in the long run than all the spiders in the world, including the venomous ones of Australia.

I confess that I myself don't like spiders much: They give me the creeps. Oddly enough, I love insects but not arachnids. I can watch insects for hours. I have a basic rule, which I have adopted and adapted from *Animal Farm*: six legs good, eight legs bad. I am not keen, either, on creatures with thirty legs, in particular the *Scutigera coleoptrata* that appears quite often in my bath in France. It is an ugly little beast, pasty-colored, with a tendency to scuttle as if always caught *in flagrante*. Moreover, it can give you a little nip, though this is said to be no worse than a bee-sting. It is claimed that they are useful creatures, eliminating, at least partially, those worse than themselves, such as cockroaches. I have never seen a cockroach in my house, so perhaps this is right.

But to return to *Sting*: I noticed that, though it takes place in Brooklyn, it was funded by Australian filmmakers. Many Australians are afraid of spiders, because in Australia, even in Sydney, venomous spiders can emerge from a lavatory bowl (so it is widely believed) and give you a fatal bite in the

buttocks. The worst spider, the funnel web, has mandibles so strong that (again, so it is said) they can penetrate a finger- or a toenail. Perhaps the Australians thought that an irrational fear shared is an irrational fear halved.

On this subject, I must just recommend the autobiography of Professor Struan Sutherland, titled *A Venomous Life*. Sutherland was an Australian doctor and toxicologist who developed an antivenom against the venom of the funnel web spider that was so successful that very few people now die from this spider's bite, only one since I saw the film in Bolivia. What about Australians in the middle of nowhere, I hear you ask, who would not have swift access to that antivenom? Well, there are very few Australians in the middle of nowhere; Australia is the most highly urbanized country in the world. There is, of course, a lot of middle of nowhere in Australia.

Anyway, the late Struan Sutherland's autobiography is a wonderfully entertaining read, he not having been a man to hide his light under a bushel, to put it mildly. Read it if you can—copies are now difficult to come by. The machinations of the bureaucrats that he recounts are far worse, more deadly and more prevalent, than mere spider bites.