

Please enjoy this excerpt from
The Dark Man, By Referral
by Chuck McKenzie

The small cardboard sign pinned to the tray read ‘*Orrible ‘Airy Spiders—\$1 Each* in spooky lettering, and James kept his eyes on it; partly because he found the obvious misspellings thrilling in a way he couldn’t have put into words, and partly (mostly) because it meant he could sort of keep an eye on the Dark Man without looking at his face, and James didn’t want to get a good look at that face, because he felt that if he did he would lose his mind. James thought about all the times Trent had yelled that the Dark Man would come for him for being a little shit, which to James—up until a few moments ago—had been a far less frightening thought than the prospect of what Trent might do to him. Now, though, he stood gripped by a fear so all-consuming that he couldn’t even summon up the ability to run the dozen or so steps that would take him from the deepening dusk to the (relative) safety of home; so instead, because it was all he could seem to do, he focussed upon the sign and upon not looking at the Dark Man’s face.

The brief glimpse James had caught of that face, as he’d turned from waving goodnight to Tim and impossibly found the legendary monster of Stanhope standing before him in the street, had given him a sense of *wrongness* that went beyond fear; it was the same feeling he’d often felt when watching Dad’s favourite old horror movies on Saturday nights, but now inducing nausea instead of thrills without Dad there to cuddle him.

“Master James Kent?” the Dark Man asked.

James blinked, automatically looked up from the sign (“*Look at me when I’m talking to you, ya little shit!*”) and cringed in expectation of awfulness, before realising he could hardly even see the Dark Man’s face, hidden in shadow thrown by the black, wide-brimmed hat

the Dark Man wore. And the Dark Man's clothes...well, he looked like he was wearing one of those robes that nuns wore, and the thought almost made James giggle. Then his thoughts turned back to his immediate situation, and the urge to giggle died. Even standing a few metres away, the Dark Man seemed to tower in a way that adults only did when they were up close and about to hurt you.

James opened his mouth but found himself unable to utter a word.

"I do apologise if I've alarmed you, Master James. That certainly wasn't my intention." The Dark Man's voice was deep and rich, and immediately made James think of Christopher Lee in the Dracula movies.

"How...do you know my name?" James managed.

"I know your name, Master James, because I have in fact been *referred* to you." The Dark Man paused. "Do you know what *referred* means?"

James shook his head. He thought maybe it meant something medical, as he'd heard his GP use the word before.

"Well, it means that someone who has found my services useful has specifically suggested I approach you, because they feel that you, also, might value my services. In other words, they *referred* me to you."

James stared into the shadows covering the Dark Man's face, feeling it looked too *still* in there when the Dark Man spoke. "Who...*referred* me?" he asked, rolling the word around his mouth.

"Ah, now, that would be Master Timothy Brown, at number fortytwo."

James automatically turned his head to look down the street, halfexpecting to see Tim standing there. All he saw was the sun beginning to slip below the horizon, and with that came the thought of being caught out in complete darkness alone with the Dark Man. James hurriedly turned back, to find the Dark Man had silently closed the gap between them and was now definitely within grabbing distance, arms outstretched. James stumbled back a pace. But the Dark Man stood motionless, black-gloved hands holding out the tray to James. It was one of those wooden trays that James sometimes saw old men in suits holding when he went to the railway station with

Mum. Instead of poppies and pins, though, this tray was filled with...well, James guessed they were the ‘Orrible ‘Airy Spiders mentioned on the sign; a mass of whitish-grey egg-shaped objects, each with multiple long, furry-looking legs extending in all directions, and dozens of tiny red eyes clustered around a weird, puckered orifice. No fangs or spinnerets, so not very much like Spiders at all, thought James. They glistened like rotten peaches and jiggled slightly, even though the Dark Man was standing perfectly still.

“Why do they look all sticky?”

“Because they *are* sticky. One throws them against a wall, and the stickiness allows them to walk down that wall.”

James had seen sticky toys that worked the same way before, though he’d never owned one. And suddenly, despite the gross look of the things—or maybe even because of it—he really wanted one.

“Would you like one?” the Dark Man asked, as though reading James’ thoughts.

James instinctively reached out towards the tray, then hesitated. “I don’t have any money,” he admitted. “And I’m not supposed to take stuff from strangers.”

The hat dipped in acknowledgement. “A sensible policy. Master Timothy calls me Mister Black, as does Mistress Heather Noake on the corner, whom I believe you also know, and several other Masters and Mistresses hereabouts.”

“Okay.”

“You see, Master James, the wonderful thing about referrals is that the person referring me to another already knows and trusts me, just as they know and trust you, so you needn’t worry about me despite me being a stranger.”

James began to nod, then suddenly remembered a scene from one of Dad’s movies where a clown in a drain introduces himself to a little boy and tells the boy that the two of them are no longer strangers, and then... But the clown in that movie hadn’t been *referred*. And how would the Dark Man—Mister Black—know everyone’s names if they didn’t already know *him*? And anyway, Mister Black could already have grabbed James a dozen times over if he’d wanted to, so...

“Okay,” James said again. “Yeah. That makes sense, I guess.”

“As to the cost,” and here, Mister Black pushed the tray a little closer to James, “there is none.”

“It says a dollar on the sign.”

“That sign,” Mister Black said, “is for adults, who would not understand that some do not require money for their services.”

James nodded, not really understanding. He reached out and gingerly pulled one of the Spiders from the top of the tray. It quivered in his hand, sticking lightly to his skin, cool and feeling like a half-set jelly. The red eyes stared blindly up at him. “Thank you,” he said, remembering his manners.

“You are very welcome,” Mister Black intoned, withdrawing the tray. “I hope you will enjoy it. Oh. And, ah,” he added, as James began to turn away. “Should you find at any point that you no longer require the Spider, all you need do is simply bring it out to the street, and I shall collect it.”

“Okay,” said James, thinking how unlikely it was that he’d want to return a toy. “But how will you know to be here if I do?”

“I’ll know,” said Mister Black. And he stood and watched as James turned and raced the darkness home.



James lay face-up and wrong-way-around on his bed, flinging the Spider at the wall as though it were a tennis ball. At first, he tried throwing as hard as he could, but found that the mattress prevented him from pulling his arm back sufficiently to aim properly. The Spider ended up splatting just above the bedhead then dropping a centimetre or two before hitting the wooden frame, whereupon it would simply peel off the wall and drop behind the pillows, forcing James to sit up and rummage for it. After a few such attempts he changed tactic and tried lobbing the Spider like a shot-put, placing it in his palm then pulling his arm back flat against the mattress next to his head before ‘releasing’ like one of those giant Roman catapults. The Spider flew in a graceful arc, hitting the top of the wall, and stuck

there for a moment, shuddering. James allowed himself a small, muted cheer. The Spider began a slow roll down the wall, rubbery legs shooting out to slap against the plaster then detaching as they were drawn in under the eggshaped body, only to spray out again in a shower of grasping limbs as the body completed each roll. It took about ten seconds for the Spider to hit the bedhead this time, whereupon it bounced off the top and dropped onto the pillow below, then rolled down and came to rest against the soles of James' feet.

Cool.

James sat up and retrieved the Spider, before resuming his catapulting position. On the second try, the Spider rolled past his foot and ended up just short of James' outstretched hand. That seemed odd. The bed was perfectly flat, and he wouldn't have thought the sticky toy could roll half the length of the mattress. He craned his neck and regarded the Spider warily. The Spider seemed to stare back at him, red eyes glistening. James hesitated, then stretched out his hand, retrieved the Spider, and tried another throw. This time, the Spider rolled all the way into James' outstretched hand, jiggling against his palm. James held the Spider up to his face, not entirely sure what it was he was looking for.

On the next throw, the Spider hit the wall and dropped straight down behind the pillows again.

James sat up and scrambled to retrieve the toy, noting that the Spider was now coated with a thin layer of dust that presumably counteracted the stickiness. James rubbed at the dust, then licked his finger and tried again, with no success. Annoyed, he rolled off his bed and left his room.

Mum was in the kitchen, cutting vegetables. The muffled sound of the telly told James that Trent was in the living room.

“Mum?”

“What's up, buddy?” Mum favoured him with a bright smile.

“How do you clean sticky toys?”

“Sticky toys?” Mum spotted the Spider in James' hand. “Ah, wallwalkers. Umm...warm soapy water, I think.” “Won't that wash the sticky stuff off it?”

“I don’t think so. In fact, I think it sort of revitalises it?”

“How?”

“Not sure. Heard it somewhere. Want me to Google it?”

“Google what?” asked Trent from the kitchen doorway, and James’ heart shrank.

“Cleaning one of those wall-walkers,” Mum said, too brightly. “One of those things you throw against the wall, and it sort of crawls down.”

“Yeah, I know what a wall-walker is. I’m not fuggin’ stupid.”

Mum’s smile vanished, and her eyes briefly met James’. *Don’t poke the bear*. Trent’s tone had been lightly mocking, but that could easily escalate.

“Ay, Jimmy. Show us.”

James slowly turned, keeping his upturned palm close to his body.

Trent sniffed, ran the back of his hand across his nose, and slouched into the kitchen. Came in close (*too close*) to James, towering over him, looking down at the Spider with a sneering half-smile on his face. “Where’d ya get it?”

“A...friend gave it to me.”

Trent snorted. He looked up to smirk at Mum, then turned back to James, darkness clouding his features. The loosened tie hanging beneath five-o-clock jowls made Trent look a bit like a mean Homer Simpson, thought James. “Steal it, didya?”

“No!” There was a time when Mum would have immediately jumped in to defend James, but James knew Mum had learned the hard way to not do that. The faint scar across his cheek prickled in anticipation.

“Who gave it to ya, then?”

“Tim.” James met Trent’s gaze and held it.

Trent stared, then gave Mum a querying look.

“James’ friend from up the road.”

Trent looked back at James. “And Timmy’ll back that up, will he?”

James suddenly felt confident that Tim would do exactly that. It occurred to him that neither he nor any of the other kids would want to tell an adult about Mister Black. It was a shared secret, like a sort of club, and the notion gave him a thrill. “Yep,” he said.

Trent eyed him coldly, then sniffed again. “Better not be lying, or there’ll be *consequences*. The Dark Man doesn’t like kids who lie.” James only just managed to hold back an hysterical giggle.

“Dinner?” Trent asked, not breaking eye-contact with James.

“Ten minutes. Just gotta boil—”

“Fine.” Trent turned and slouched back out of the kitchen. A few seconds later, the volume of the telly increased.

James heard Mum exhale quietly and turned to find she’d already gone back to preparing dinner. *Why do you let him stay here, Mum?* But there was no point asking the same old question. Once, Mum would have said it was because she was lonely. But James knew that was no longer the reason.

Sometimes he wished Trent was just...gone. He couldn’t quite bring himself to wish anything worse. Not after Dad’s accident.

“Mum?”

“Mm?”

“Do you think the Dark Man is real?”

Mum turned, her gaze flickering momentarily to the kitchen doorway. She took a couple of steps closer to James and, lowering her voice, said: “Do *you* think the Dark Man’s real?”

James took a moment to consider how best to answer, then simply shrugged. It seemed the safest response.

Mum nodded. “Okay then. Well, no, he’s not real. At least, not the Dark Man Trent talks about.” Seeing James’ blank look, she sighed. “Monsters aren’t real, buddy. What happened was...there was a sickness that made a lot of locals really ill, and some of them died, and I think people just made up this story about a Dark Man to sort of...help them cope with it. Sometimes it’s easier to blame a person, or even a made-up monster, than it is to blame a random disease.”

“Why?”

“Dunno. It’s just something people do. And this all happened decades ago, long enough for the Dark Man to pass into local legend.”

James digested that. “So...Dad grew up in Stanhope. Was he here when all this happened?”

“Yeah, he was. Trent, too.”

James frowned. “Dad loved horror stuff, but he never told me anything about the Dark Man, or the sickness, or anything like that.”

Mum hesitated. “Sometimes real life is scarier than horror. The disease affected people that Dad knew, and I think maybe he just didn’t want to remember. He never told me much about it either, even after I moved here to be with him. And he probably didn’t want to talk about the Dark Man, because the legend’s now so closely linked to the true story. Does that make sense?”

“I guess. Did Trent know people who got sick? Or died?”

“Probably, yeah.”

“So why does *he* always talk about the Dark Man?”

“Trent...just wants you to behave.” The pain of the lie was obvious on Mum’s face. “If someone told you the Dark Man would get you if you didn’t wash your hands after you went to the toilet, you’d wash your hands, wouldn’t you? And then you hopefully wouldn’t have any disease on your hands. So really those sort of legends are meant to keep you safe.”

James gave Mum a look.

“Okay, so sometimes people just make up stuff to get kids to behave. Remember when you used to believe in Santa, and you’d behave so Santa would bring you toys?”

“I was eight. I’m twelve now.”

Mum smiled sadly. “Yeah. Just about ready to move out and get a job.”

James snorted.

“Okay, enough talk about scary stuff,” Mum said. “Go wash up, buddy.” She nodded towards the Spider. “And give that thing a wash too, if you like.”

James nodded and turned towards the kitchen door.

“James?”

James turned back.

“Don’t use any of what we’ve discussed as an excuse to—”

“I won’t!” James said, emphatically.

“And maybe just don’t mention this talk at all, okay?”

James nodded.

“Good boy.”



Mum and James were already eating dinner, one of the few discourtesies Trent would allow (except for those occasions when he didn’t), when the swearing began out in the hall. They froze, forks half-raised to their mouths.

“The fugg is this??” Trent thundered, striding into the kitchen. James cringed as Trent thrust out his fist, rubbery grey legs dangling between his fingers.

Mum swallowed her food, looking ill. “That’s just James’ toy—”

“*I know what it is!*” Trent rounded on her, and she shrank into herself. “Ya think I’m fuggin’ *retarded*??” He swung back to glare at James, looking like a dog about to attack. “What’s it doing in the fuggin’ bathroom?” A beat. “*Eh?*?”

“I had to wash it,” James croaked. He wished Mum would say something, defend him, even if it meant that Trent’s rage focussed upon her instead. His cheek prickled.

“THEN YOU WASH IT OUTSIDE!!”

Mum made a small noise. Trent swung back to her, leaning over her, pushing his face into hers. “WHAT??”

Mum licked her lips. “I just... Trent, where’s the harm?”

An expression of rabid incredulity crossed Trent’s face. “Leavin’ his shit all over the fuggin’ place? It’s not his fuggin’ HOUSE!!”

James suddenly found himself filled with utter rage. *It’s not yours either! It’s mine and Mum’s and Dad’s and one day I’ll be big enough to throw you out if Mum won’t do it!*

Something of what he was thinking must have shown on his face. Trent looked at him, and his expression went blank. Then he smiled.

Oh shit, thought James.

Trent straightened up and casually strolled over to James, then squatted down on his haunches so their faces were level. “Whaddaya thinking, Jimmy?” he asked quietly. “Maybe you wanna have a go, eh?” *I’d like to punch you so hard you cry.*

“Yeah? Wanna take a swing?”

The silence seemed to stretch forever.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Trent started to straighten, then abruptly thrust his face back towards James with a grunt. A fake-out attack. James had known it was coming, but still couldn’t stop himself from flinching, and was immediately filled with self-loathing. Trent gave a short, ugly bark of laughter. “Fugg with me, and there’ll be fuggin’ *consequences.*” He spun on his heel and flung the Spider hard through the kitchen doorway. A soft thud sounded from the hallway beyond. Trent grabbed his plate, gave James and Mum a hard stare, then loped back to the lounge to eat in front of the telly.

After a long silence, Mum reached over and touched James’ hand. “Hang in there, buddy,” she murmured. “Things’ll get better.”

James pulled his hand away and went back to eating his dinner, carefully regarding the plate in front of him. Only once did he look up, to find Mum staring miserably at him. The shame in her eyes made him feel so bad that he went back to staring at his plate again.



After talking about all the usual stuff—school, mutual friends, girls, and so on—James asked Tim the question he really wanted an answer to: “Why did you refer Mister Black to me?”

Tim dropped his gaze to the road. “Remember when you came to school with stitches across your cheek?” He glanced up at James. “And you told us all you’d run full speed into a door frame?”

James flushed, hoping Tim couldn’t see it in the gloom.

Tim nodded. “Yeah. Well. Last school holidays I got some really bad bruising, here.” He clamped his right hand tightly around his left

wrist for a moment. “Healed up before school started again. There were other times, though...” He gave James a hard look. “Heather referred Mister Black to me. And I haven’t had any more bruising since.”

James couldn’t quite get a fix on what Tim was saying, and couldn’t think of the right questions to ask, and the look Tim was giving him was beginning to make him squirm.

“Don’t worry,” Tim said, eventually. “It’ll all make sense.”

“*What* will?” James asked in frustration. “I don’t understand!”

“You will. I promise. And then things’ll be better.”

“My mum always says that,” James blurted, sourly.

“Mine too. And now things *are* better. You’ll see.”

James shook his head in exasperation, then noticed how dark it had gotten. “I better get going. Trent’s in a shitty mood today. I’m surprised he’s not out here yelling for me to come in.”

“Yeah, my dad used to do that,” Tim said. He smiled, and the interplay of shadow and light from the nearest lamppost seemed to stretch the smile into a maniacal Joker’s grin. “But he’s sick at the moment. *Really* sick. So.” Tim shrugged. “Later.” He turned and ambled away into the darkness.

“Has your dad got Covid?” James called after him. But Tim didn’t reply.



Trent was already snoring in front of the telly when James got back inside. James spent a few minutes unsuccessfully searching the hallway for the Spider, before sadly concluding that Trent had disposed of it. James said goodnight to Mum, sitting at her work laptop in the kitchen, then went to bed and glared at the ceiling until he finally fell asleep.



“Late shift today?” Mum asked, hesitantly.

Trent slumped into his seat with a groan. “Not going. Already rung in.”

“How come?”

“Feel like shit.”

James risked a quick glance up from his cornflakes. Trent had dark smudges under his eyes, contrasted by a pallid, sweaty face.

Mum gave Trent a worried look. “Yeah. You don’t look great. Maybe a bit of breakfast?”

Trent grunted. “No breakfast. Gonna sleep it off.”

“Okay. But maybe go to bed, yeah? You might have cricked your neck last night on the couch.”

“Nah, I’ll stick with the couch.” Trent gave Mum a bleary look, daring her to push the point. She didn’t.

So, Trent had spent the night in the loungeroom. It suddenly occurred to James that his Spider might be in there also. Maybe it had bounced off the hallway wall. And if so, Trent obviously hadn’t found it or they’d be hearing all about it right now. James eyed the kitchen doorway, weighing his chances of checking out the loungeroom before Mum had to drive him to school on her way to work.

“Should you go and get a Covid test?” Mum asked. “A few people in the street have been getting sick. They had to take Glen Brown to hospital, though Jane says it’s not Covid. God, that’s all we need, another outbreak, probably a lockdown—”

“Fuggsake, it’s just ‘flu!” Trent snapped, though with less force than James would have expected.

“Okay then. Well, stay warm and drink plenty of water. James? All set? Need to be in the car in five, buddy.”

“But—” *But you’re not supposed to go to work or school if you’ve been around someone with Covid. You have to get a test, and then wait at home until—*

Mum stared at James. Her eyes flicked to the back of Trent's head, then back to James.

Home all day with Trent.

"Just...need to get my pencil case," James mumbled, through a final mouthful of cereal.

Mum glanced at James' schoolbag, sitting on the floor beside his chair. "Okay. Go on, then."

James got up, moved carefully past Trent, and went down the hallway towards his room. Then he quietly doubled back and slipped into the loungeroom. He scanned the floor, then dropped to his hands and knees and peered underneath the couch. Nothing. Then, despite knowing it was an utterly ridiculous place to look, James leaned over the back of the couch, and pulled aside the cushions.

And there it was. Looking up at him, quivering.

James snatched up the Spider and examined it quickly. All in one piece. No legs torn off. Indeed, the Spider looked *healthier* than when James had seen it last, the colour having changed from sickly greywhite to a pinkish-grey. Maybe that was just something it did. James was sure he'd heard of toys that did that.

The grating of chair legs on linoleum jolted him back to the moment. Instinctively he stuffed the Spider back behind the cushions, then scuttled out into the hallway. A half-second later, Trent loomed in the kitchen doorway. "Whaddya doing? Where's your pencil case?"

"I think it's in my bag after all." No reaction. "I thought I hadn't packed it, but I think I just need to have a better look."

Trent eyed him for a moment, then grunted and shuffled his way past James and vanished into the loungeroom. James went into the kitchen, where Mum was jingling the car keys. "I heard that. In your bag after all, you reckon?" She smiled and unzipped his school bag, revealing the pencil case sitting on top of his books and lunch box. "Well, whaddya know?" Mum leaned towards James and stagewhispered: "You must've had a Man's Look the first time, eh?" The tone was jovial, but the look in her eye told James her 'bullshit detector' was pinging.

He lowered his gaze. "Yeah."

“Well, that’s okay. Got everything now? Let’s go.” She didn’t call out to Trent as they left.

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