

DON WEBB

THE EVIL MIRACLE

Martha Wills made the down payment on the Starlight Motel in 1966 in memory of her only love. Now in 1992 she is sixty-seven and wondering if there is a chance of selling it in a terrible real estate market. And there are the spiders.

The tarantulas-- big furry black ones-- had always been a problem. Just one of them padding across the asphalt would bring a Yankee tourist screaming for his)or more likely his family's) life. Across the highway the old prairie dog town was full of 'em, and they became quite frisky in the warm weather. Martha knew them as harmless. You damn near had to step on one to get him to bite you.

As a child she and her brother Billy used to fish 'em out of holes with bubble gum. You'd get your well-chewed bubble-gum -long, dangly, and pink -- and you'd

lower the string into a prairie dog hole. You'd pull up a tarantula and swing 'em round--sort of a living hairy yo-yo. Tourists didn't relate well to this story. Next were the garden spiders. Black-and-white wonders of the spider world, they could've been designed by Picasso. They spun huge webs to glisten rose window-like with the morning dew. Usually she'd have one on the roses out front and one in the bear grass out back. But this year they were everywhere --

linking guests' cars with their sticky floss; obscuring doorways, filling the aluminum steps which led to the diving board of her pool. Martha had taken to getting up at dawn and dewebbing the place.

Finally there were the brown recluses. A different matter. They were one of the

truly poisonous species. The bite could be fatal. Martha's cousin was once bitten. The tissues of his leg turned black and smelled of rot. When months later-- Robert had healed, he was missing a handful of leg. The tiny brown recluse likes to sleep in shoes and other tight places. Martha had found six in

the twenty-seven years she owned the Starlight. Three of the six she had found last month. She figured that the spider increase was somehow due to pesticide use. She'd half-slept through a TV movie with that theme. She didn't tell anyone

about the spiders. She didn't want rumors to start. Brown recluses could kill. In the days when the Starlight catered to an interstate tourist trade, a death would have meant nothing. Somebody from New York/ Ontario/Alabama had died. So what.? Who cares? But the small patronage the Starlight now enjoyed was connected to the hospital. Her clients were the families of the patients. They came in from nearby little towns and left after cures, deaths, or loss of hope.

But they recommended the Starlight to their plagued neighbors. Cheap and clean, they said, in walking distance of the hospital and the McDonald's. One death from spiders -- or even the notion that such a death was likely -- would close the Starlight by the same word of mouth that kept it open.

Martha hadn't told her niece or her nephews that she was going to sell the Starlight. If she told them-- she'd have to do it. 'Cause she's that way. Women

don't make it in the business world if they appear indecisive. It was like Mr. Rheims said, you have to have fire in your heart and ice in your veins. Mr.

Rheims represented the appearance of love to her. Perhaps she even loved him. His name was John.

It was early in the morning and the maids hadn't arrived. Martha turned on the lawn sprinklers. Just so. Any more and people's cars would get wet, any less and the grass wouldn't. She said good morning to Mrs. Abrams, who was already on her way to sit in the ICU waiting room. Promised her that she'd pray for Mr. Abrams. She removed the web across the office door and went inside to make her first pot of decal

Across the quiet highway she noticed one of her guests doing something very strange.

The fellow had checked in over a week ago. Martha had been preparing for bed -- the Starlight hadn't had a night clerk in three years -- when someone hit the buzzer in front. Wearing her peach-colored fuzzy bathrobe, she had checked him in. He wore this khaki outfit; if he had a pith helmet, she would've sworn he was on safari. He had known her name.

"You're Martha Wills, right? That's what I was told, Martha Wills."

It was late and she hadn't asked who or why, but she wondered. Folks always talk about the Starlight, never about Martha. She didn't think anyone had mentioned her by name since she won \$100 by being the ten thousandth customer at a Food King.

But the strange man in khaki -- what was his name? -- was picking up bits of spider web with tweezers. He was putting the webs in some kind of tiny glass test tube. One strand per tube. He capped each tube with a black rubber stopper, then carefully put the tubes into a case specially fitted to hold them.

Her secret was out. This was some kind of scientist here to study the spiders. Her heart sped up. Her doctor had told her to avoid excitement and coffee. Her heart sped up and this scared her. It was almost a pain to feel this feeling in her chest.

She gripped the smooth wooden counter with the thumb and index finger of her left hand. She could feel her pulse through her fingertip. She would have to relax -- have to use the method she learned at Amarillo Community College. Relax, now, relax. Relax between each beat. When she felt calm, she looked at the tar-brown nail of her thumb and wished for the millionth time she could give up smoking.

She couldn't see the strange man from the window of the motel office.

His name was Olin Fletcher, and immediately it became Dr. Fletcher in her mind.

She decided to call a realtor that afternoon. The realtor came along with a photographer. He shot the Starlight from several angles while his boss drank iced tea with Martha. They agreed on the truths and lies that could be used to

sell the motel. The realtor cautioned her against any kind of For Sale sign. That almost always scared away guests. In fact, Martha might want to run some undetectable promotion to fill up the units. The realtor couldn't promise a sale--it was a slow market--but if Martha could wait six to twelve months, the realtor was willing to work with her. Then the realtor mentioned a figure. It was twenty thousand more than Martha was even hoping for. She should've come to this decision long ago. The realtor also told Martha that the housing market was worse, and when the time came to move from the Starlight she was sure she could find Martha an affordable house in town.

Move from the Starlight. She hadn't quite figured that part yet. Damn Dr. Fletcher.

She served the realtor some carrot cake. She bought it from a shop in town and carefully put it on her grandmother's green platter. Everyone thought it was her own. She pushed her gold-rimmed spectacles up the slope of her sweat-shiny nose. She looked outside and saw that Dr. Fletcher was pestering the photographer. Fletcher had finally donned a pith helmet. What did he think he was -- on safari.? Trying to talk the photographer into shooting some footage of the quaint aboriginal motel.? Please, God, don't let him say anything.

She'd lost track of what the realtor was saying; and now the realtor was leaving, and she hoped she didn't look like a senile fool. Dammit she wasn't old. She was just distracted. She'd always been distracted by the Starlight.

The realtor and the photographer left. Martha heard the doors slamming shut on their white station wagon -- the sound of gravel as they sped off in the dry Texas heat. She wondered if she had agreed to anything. This was the worst it had ever been. She was letting words make solid life decisions for her and she didn't even know what the words were. She'd let her life drift into this state of disconnectedness. She was worse off than the Starlight. Both were real only in the past, sharing the fate of ruins -- sagging shapes and spiders.

She would put a few things right, though, and one of them would be Dr. Fletcher.

Her chance came two days later. Fletcher stood in front of the Starlight on the tiny strip of Bermuda grass that separated the asphalt of the parking lot from the asphalt of the highway. He admired the burnt orange sunset broken by the Spanish tile roof of the Veterans Hospital. He must have heard her walk up behind him for at the perfect moment he waved his right arm to the sky and said, "It looks like an opened paradise."

She almost fell backwards, because the same words had been said to her twenty-seven years before. Her blood must've collected in her feet, which suddenly seemed made of lead, and her voice must've gone there too for when she spoke she had to lift each word against the gravity of the whole earth. "How poetic," she said, and thought it was the most stupid and flat thing she had ever said in her life -- save for when she had said those same words twenty-seven years before. And then it had been worse because she had said them to a man whom she had just fallen in love with. A Miata whizzed by with its

bass

so loud she could feel it in her hollow chest. She looked hard at this strange man in the safari suit. It couldn't be the same man. He had his height, but it couldn't be the same man. It couldn't be the same man, because this man brought

fear and disappointment and the other had brought love and hope. It was a terrible thing to be an innkeeper because your guests were always bringing you emotions from their strange, far-off lands.

"You think so?" he said. "I'm a lonely man and lonely men are given to poetry."

She would break the pattern. She would say something different. She had to remember. Ah! she knew -- comment on something new.

"I like the way the orange light shines on the metal of the new water tower," she said. It was awkward as hell, but at least it was original.

He looked at her with his little green eyes filled with hate. She knew she had stopped him at some game he was playing, but she wasn't sure that she had done a good thing.

"The man taking pictures told me that you were going to sell this place."

"Are you interested in buying it?" I wouldn't sell it to you/or a kazillion dollars, she thought.

"Me. No. Even as interesting a site as it is." He shook his head. "It would tie me down too much."

He turned to face the Starlight, and she automatically turned as well. Together they began walking toward the office.

"Could I get you something? A Coke? I like to do special things for my customers who stay for weeks." She would find out his game.

"Not yet," he said. "Not yet."

And before she could say anything else, she saw Mrs. Abrams walking like a wooden zombie. Her cheeks were shiny with tears. Martha remembered that she hadn't prayed for Mr. Abrams. She went toward the grieving woman, immersed in her real life's work. It was only much later after she had literally tucked Mrs.

Abrams into bed that she thought of the meaning of "Not yet, not yet."

Martha's relatives came the next day and it was like a funeral.

She had called them at eleven o'clock in the morning -- her nephews Bill, at his dry cleaning shop, and Ralph, at the Frame-It-Yourself in the mall; and her niece Sarah, at the Credit Bureau. Apparently the three of them had decided among themselves that if Aunt Martha ever sold the Starlight, she must be in bad health and soon to die. Or at least soon to be a burden. Sarah, along with the two nephews, drove up in her slate-blue Ford Escort. They stayed inside the car

for a few minutes talking among themselves. Martha watched them through the office's bay window.

When they came in they talked too loud as though she was deaf. They were overly solicitous. They kept telling her to sit down and not to fuss. Sarah's mouth said that Aunt Martha could come live with her; although Sarah's eyes said she would rather go to the dentist seven thousand times instead. Bill and Ralph were full of information on the wonderful retirement communities the city had to offer. It seemed that there was the place that began as a sort of apartment-- "Just like being a guest at the Starlight"-- and then as she deteriorated she could be eased into nursing home-type care. A simple gentle process perfectly tied with the dimming of the light.

She told them that she was getting her own house. A house away from them. They could just leave. And she cried and they left.

This had never happened before.

She had just called them out of courtesy; they had no place in her life. If John hadn't left. No.

She had been with him a month in 1966. He had brought her love and mystery and magic. She'd been a maid then and the Starlight a more prosperous establishment living on the lifeblood of Route 66. He had changed her life so much that she knew she would have to hold onto this place.

He had told her that a certain kind of man meets a certain kind of woman and both are changed by the experience. This can happen at the most unlikely places, but at likely times. There is a time when a man has reached a certain stage of his personal development -- that only a certain woman could excite love, imagination, and will.

And for that woman, of course, there was only that certain man.

After they had known each other for a week (and had only made love once), he took her to a used book store and bought her a copy of Goethe's Faust. He read to her about Gretchen-- not at the beginning of the play, but at the end. When Faust's damnation is near -- when he has pushed his powers and knowledge to the max and only Hell awaits. Yet Gretchen's prayers open Heaven's gate for him. Her love and constant devotion translate him to a state of glory and knowledge of God.

But Faust abandoned Gretchen, she had said.

"He did what he had to do," he said. "He stuck to his quest."

"But he was evil," she said.

"He sought knowledge and power. Is that evil? Perhaps it's just breaking the human horizons. Galileo was evil when he moved the center of the universe from the earth to the sun. From that understanding we have the space program. Someday we'll even have a man on the moon. Is it evil to want knowledge and power? We

send our kids to college so they can get an education and a good job. Our nation is full of tiny Fausts, but we have forgotten the importance of love in the equation."

He had said many strange and wonderful things and she knew how Eve felt listening to the Serpent in the Garden. Early on she realized that he would someday abandon her. She didn't think it would matter. Although she had never known love before -- she had known sex and she had known friendship -- she thought that knowing how to love is enough. She would take that knowing and use it on an appropriate man. None of these mystery men stopping in for love and magic. She had tried. After that morning when she woke up alone, and realized that it was really so-- she tried. She tried finding other men -- men whose place was inside the city. She tried with men she met through singles bars, churches, adult educational programs. There were wild times, fast times, hard times but no love.

She tried to forget about John Rheims. But everything that called to love, the love songs on the radio, a dingy Valentine card found in the street, the sun in the sky, put John's face in her mind.

Had it really been love? Could there have been love in such a short time? And if he really felt the way she did, could he have left her? These questions were with her always.

Three months after John's departure, she won a magazine distributor's sweepstakes. She bought the Starlight from her boss, who was able to fulfill his lifelong dream of retiring to the Hamptons. While he contemplated the cold North Atlantic, she read detective novels and tried their methods at the scene of the crime.

For the first three years she was too busy to do anything except hope for his imminent return. The address in the register proved to be false, but she hoped that he would prove true. For the next three years she took to asking traveling salesmen and professional vagabonds if they'd ever met anyone like John. Then she bought the property next door-- put in sixteen more units and a restaurant, and for six years she made money hand over fist. She worked all the time and didn't think much. She invested her money wisely. When her brother drank himself to death, she was able to send her nephews and niece to college. Good colleges, too. A few months before her establishment was totally bypassed by the new business loop, she sold the restaurant and the sixteen units to her competitor next door.

The kids came back from college and six quiet years passed. She developed herself. She learned to paint. She took night classes at the community college. She hired herself three assistant managers and she permitted herself a couple of vacations. She woke up one morning and was surprised to see her mother in the mirror-- so she stopped looking for love. It just wasn't dignified somehow.

These were the years of the secret. She told no one of John, and if anyone remembered the name she advised them she was well over that. She thought that if she spoke not--the memory would lessen. Yet by hiding the secret in silence--it grew ever stronger until it became the driver of her life.

During the eight years that followed, as the Starlight began its decline, Martha pulled her money out. She never let the place get run down or shabby after all, she lived there and one should take care of one's own environment. But she let some of the staff go, she put more of her own salary into T-bills, she created the economic means to live out her life.

She had been thirty-nine when she met John. Now she was sixty-six.

She was still surprised when she qualified for a senior discount. Someone would die in a dramatic fashion, and on the news they would say, "an elderly woman." And Martha would find out that the woman was her age. Several friends from her high school class had shown up in the obituaries.

She should have had the answers by now. Instead, terrifying events were threatening the order she took for granted.

She didn't sleep.

Her arthritis was bad.

She felt somewhat better after a long hot shower. She wanted to confront Dr. Fletcher at dawn -- or as soon thereafter as she could.

She knocked on his door at 6:50. She knew she was waking up other guests, but she plain didn't care. She knocked, waited, knocked, waited, and put her pass key in the lock. Just as she turned the key a chattering noise came from within.

Her nerve failed. Dr. Fletcher said, "Later, Ms. Wills, later." She went back to her room and threw up.

There was someone in the office wanting to check out -- pissed off by the early morning knocking. Martha Wills' reflection was pale and sweaty in the office window.

The day was long and she didn't eat anything. At sunset she ventured outside. He was standing on the strip of grass between the parking lot and the old highway again. She was weak and kept falling in and out of visions from her past. Whatever unknown lodestone drew her to this meeting, it had overcome her will. Fletcher raised his arm to the magnificent sunset. "It looks like an opened paradise."

"How poetic," she said.

"I'm a lonely man and lonely men are given to poetry," he said.

"It seems that poetry should attract the perfect audience."

Fletcher turned to her and said, "Now, Martha Wills, now. We have said the words and you know and believe that these words are not said here and now by accident."

"I know and believe," she said, and suddenly everything had that slow-moving clarity of a dream.

They walked back to his room. She sat on the green vinyl chair and he took a small brass jar from his suitcase on the dresser. The jar was simple and unadorned. It looked like an old-fashioned jelly jar save for its material. It seemed very old. He unscrewed the jar; it made a noise like a scratchy seventy-eight on her grandmother's Victrola. The noise was John Rheim's voice. He said, "You know, Martha, I only want one thing."

"I know," she said.

"The jar," said Dr. Fletcher, "always makes those sounds. I found it ten years ago in a market in Marrakesh. I've spent ten years trying to find out what it means. I can't tell you the number of nights I've spent turning the lid again and again. To find why the jar said these things, I studied phonics, statistics -- at first it was a hobby. Then an obsession. Eventually I had to learn the hidden lore of mankind, and I can tell you that it is a good thing that many things are hidden."

"So you found out about John and me," she said. "Let me ask you something. Do you love your little jar?"

"It tortures, it tantalizes. For a while I thought I loved it, but what it woke up in me is curiosity. All of the strange and beautiful things in my life came from my quest. Even now I don't know what's in the jar. It won't open. The recording principle is simple -- the technology is mysterious because of reasons of metallurgy. I've had offers of thousands of dollars from material scientists for my jar. So do you know what the words mean?"

"I know," she said. "But you haven't told me about the spiders."

"They always show up," he said. "They're always waiting when I get to a place. I don't know how the spiders fit in. They're another piece of the puzzle; so what do the words mean?"

For the first time she saw another human being in Fletcher. His green eyes were alive with want. This was someone who was like herself.

"I know," she said. "But you must tell me where John is. I think I even understand the spiders."

"I don't know. A magician of Marrakesh, who lived in an artificial cave beneath the city, recognized the voice. He said that it belonged to someone who stood outside the circles of time-- a voice sometimes heard in the wind at the sacred sites of the most ancient cities. What does he want?"

"He wants my forgiveness."

"Will you give it to him?"

"He is a devil, an evil man. He revolted against God, having to know everything.

But I learned love from him and not from God."

"I learned curiosity from him. I had to track down hundreds of people to reconstruct your first meeting."

"Play the message again," she said.

He spun the lid on the small brass jar. "You know, Martha, I only want one thing."

"And the lid never comes off?"

"Just round and round. I'd thought of removing it by force, but I might destroy the very mystery I'm seeking to answer."

Martha pulled herself up in her chair. She sat in a very dignified manner with her hands on her lap. "Play the message again."

"You know, Martha, I only want one thing."

"I forgive you for leaving me, John, and I hope you have found what you sought."

There was a slight metallic ping! from the jar. Fletcher started to twist at the lid, but stopped himself. He had been so long apart from his mystery, his beloved, and he had to force himself to stay separate. He managed to ask, "You said you knew about the spiders."

"I had forgotten. I don't know how I had forgotten this with months of spiders showing up to change my life. John has reached out to change my life again. I guess I'm ready for retirement. I guess I'd been waiting to say the words, too.

He used spiders as a metaphor for his Work. He said that spiders were perfect Faustian creatures. They make their own worlds out of the material in their black hearts. Each is its own god; I objected to the metaphor. I told him that God had foreordained each spider to weave its web. Those perfect patterns of symmetry that catch the morning sun are examples of God's will. He said, 'I'll show you some real magic sometime. I'll get spiders to make something other than a preordained web.'"

Fletcher gave the lid another turn. It came off. The jar was empty, but the room was suddenly filled with the fragrance of roses.

Then from beneath the bed, from behind the curtains, from underneath the crack of the door-- they came. Spiders. Thousands, maybe millions of them. Fletcher dropped the jar and they scurried over to it. The jar was soon covered.

The swarming mass was organizing. Tarantulas at the bottom, garden spiders in the middle, brown recluses at the top. The mass split into three almost

perfect
balls, one atop the other.

Fletcher looked at Martha and Martha looked at Fletcher.

There weren't any more spiders coming in.

Martha rose. The spider snowman stood a foot taller than she. She walked to it, and after a moment of dreadful deliberation -- stuck her left hand into the center of the garden spider ball. It felt lacy and dry inside -- like sticking her hand into a pile of feathers. She felt around -- seeking the jar, which she presumed to be in the center. Her fingers found something long and smooth. At first she thought it was a pencil. As she grabbed it her index finger was pricked by something sharp -- or maybe a spider had bitten her. She pulled it out carefully.

In her left hand she held a single perfect black roses.