

***TO CATCH FLIES***  
**a short story by Caroline Koonce**

Have you ever gotten the chance to peruse my library, my friend?

I fancy myself a bit of a book collector at times. I've got pamphlets and textbooks and novels and even a new form of literature called a *magazine*. I think it'll catch on. I've got books on the stars, on courtship rituals, on wild & fantastical adventures. I'd sit under my covers at night, a candle lit on the nightstand next to me, and read until the words were seared into the skin behind my eyes.

It's a common habit among the wealthier families of England to collect books, the allure of a private library to show off one's intellectualism and intelligence too strong to ignore. That's just how the wealthy are – it's all about status, appearances. I still remember attending a dinner party at one of my father's associates' house, where I snuck off to read only to discover that the books were blank.

My father, thankfully, at least had the decency to purchase actual books. He encouraged my book-hoarding habits – one of the only things he encouraged, if I'm being honest. For all his faults, he did everything he could in order to ensure I had a well-rounded education. He hired private tutors, arranged for my stay at a boarding school, even supervised my studies himself when he could. He purchased some of the books on these very shelves.

I know why he fostered this love of reading in me. He thought I was weak. Lily-livered, soft, foppish, a right ponce if I'm being crude. I would never distinguish myself from my peers by my bravery or my physical skill, and he knew it. I flinched away from blood; I loved flowers and insects; I cried when I fell down; I enjoyed sitting in the parlor and talking with my mother as she embroidered. When I'd come home bruised and bloodied, hurt and terrified, he'd shepherd me to the main bathroom and stare at me with those sneering eyes as I patched myself up. No worry, no concern for my well-being, only a thick, slimy coating of disgust.

He'd given up on my being a proper son a long time ago. It hung in the air like smoke from one of his cigars – something we both knew existed but never had the strength to acknowledge. If he admitted his... failures, with me, he'd have to reckon with it more than he already had. I was his shame, the dirt under his boots that wouldn't shake loose, the termite that made a home in his foundations.

He did his best to teach me the ways of men, but that was the one thing I never managed to learn. The problem, simply put, was me.

And it wasn't that I didn't try – God, I tried. My journals were filled with lists of unspoken rules, warnings that stretched on for pages and pages, the parchment covered in dark scrolls of ink. I could have written *several* books on the topic of manhood by the end of those days. I was a veritable scholar of masculinity, and yet the practical applications of my studies escaped me.

I held myself rigid when my father swung his cleaver into the goose's neck. I tried to ignore my mother when I saw her sitting glassy-eyed in the parlor, her embroidery limp and still in her hands. I fought back stinging tears when my father took out his frustrations on my small body. I was a man, by God, and I was going to try my best to act like one – but it never took. I was broken in some fundamental way.

My father wasn't the only one to see my brokenness and try to crash the parts of my soul together. The boys at school could see it as well. Knowing what you do now, I don't think you'll be surprised to hear I was bullied horribly as a child.

Maybe it was their way of trying to teach me. Was it pure bullying, or was it 'guidance' in disguise? In hindsight I'm not sure, and I'm not sure I care to learn. Whatever their cause, they were proper arseholes about it.

Their specific brand of terror was different from my father's lessons. Oh, sure, some parts were the same – the beatings, the ugly names, that was my father's language and I had learnt it well. I don't think there was a day in my childhood where my skin wasn't blooming with black and blue. But I knew how to hide the bruises and smile pleasantly to the adults with purposely avoidant gazes. Bruises I could deal with. Cruel words, too.

It was the things they made me do.

I don't know if you have ever been in that position, but that – that – loss of control, the *humiliation*, like you're a goddamned *puppet*, strung up for their entertainment.

They would make me do things, **humiliating** things. Tying my hands to a rowboat's oars and weighing the bottom down with heavy rocks, or making me stick my hand up a horse's arse, or stealing my clothes when I went for a swim so I'd have to walk back naked. They'd make me eat things from the forest and laughed when I puked it all up. They'd make me stand with an apple on my head while the other boys shot at it, and laughed uproariously when I pissed my pants with the terror of it all.

It was all so goddamned *funny* to them.

I couldn't tell anyone what they were doing to me – who would have listened? I had no friends, no one to stand up or take my side. Whenever a teacher would catch us, they'd laugh and say "Don't worry. Arthur's our mate!" The teacher would turn to me, and I would smile and nod. And that would be it. To admit that I was being bullied – to admit that my singular achievement had been marred by this growing *wrongness* within me – was simply not an option. I was caught in their web, dancing as they pulled the strings.

I was helpless. And those boys knew it.

And then one day, I read a book.

I was about eleven or so, spending yet another summer day in my father's library, this time working my way through a series of books on the flora and fauna of our homeland. I was particularly interested in any texts about the insect population, much to my father's consternation. He would never admit to any fears, being the pinnacle of manhood that he was, but if he had one it would have been insects. It brings a smile to my face to know that he was not infallible.

I had just finished *Historia Insectorum Generalis* by Jan Goedart – a fantastic work if you can stomach the art. I had spent days poring over the diagrams of metamorphosing larvae and pupae, watching them writhe and tear themselves asunder, drinking it all in under the warm glow of the summer sun. I was in my element.

I had just returned the Goedart to the shelves when I noticed it – a thin book, slim in the way that only children's books are. It had been some time since I was truly a child, so its presence on my father's shelves was conspicuous. When I skimmed through the pages I even noticed crosshatched pictures in place of diagrams; something my father would never allow – I enjoy all kinds of literature, but even my eyelids drooped at the density of my father's books. He would have never let me read such a trifling, inane thing, and as such I immediately plucked it off the shelf and set it aside for the day's reading.

After making headway into a copy of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* – a fascinating study into the anatomy of the modern ant, I highly recommend it – I picked up the children's book. The title, embossed artfully onto the light green cover, glittered golden in the late afternoon light as I held it up.

*Cobwebs to Catch Flies, or, Dialogues in Short Sentences.* No author was listed.

A drawing of four girls smiling and walking in a group sat beneath the title, drawn in the same gold ink. If you looked closely at the girls, close enough that any man would have missed it at a

cursory glance, you could see tiny, shimmering threads connecting each of them at the joints, the threads stretching up and out of frame.

Fascinated, I opened the book. It was undoubtedly material I had learned a long time ago under my tutors, but I'd never seen it presented with such style and artistry! Surely there must have been something new to discover there, I thought, or they wouldn't have made it so bloody beautiful to look at.

The book had no table of contents or advertisements in the front, unlike all the other grammar books I'd read in the past. It instead started with an introduction from the unnamed author.

*To My Little Readers:*

*My Dears: Do not imagine that, like a great spider, I will give you a hard gripe, and infuse venom to blow you up.*

At the unknown author's words I was seized by a vise, my muscles shifting and locking into place. Terror shot across my face as I felt a phantom venom flood out from the pages, filling my veins with ice and fire. I sat rigid with my hands clenched around the book, my blood cracking and bubbling underneath my skin. I would have screamed my throat raw and bleeding if I could move. I was frozen in amber, unblinking, suspended in agony.

*No; I mean to catch you gently, whisper in your ear, **Be good, and you will be beloved, be good, and you will be happy.** And then release you, to frisk about in pursuit of your innocent pastimes.*

I felt a thousand tiny hooks begin to embed themselves in my skin, in the tips of my fingers, in my mouth, in my eyes, holding them open as I tried to tear away from the book in the futile hope that it would break the spell that had come over me.

*Dear little creatures! Enjoy your sports; be as merry as you will, but remember the old proverb, **'Be merry and wise.'***

An excruciating *tug* came from where the hooks had bit into my tender flesh, wrenching my body up and out of its seated position. Tears fell from my unblinking eyes, dripping quietly on the book, the ink running wet and blurry.

*Your whole duty is contained in one short precept, **Obey readily and cheerfully.***

My face was torn open by a rictus grin, the corners of my mouth pulling wide and splitting. A faint trickle of blood seeped from my lips. My arms and legs twisted about in stiff, jerking movements, the hooks puppeteering me towards the door on the far side of the room.

*Happy little creatures! You will never taste such careless hours as you do now; when you grow up, you will have many cares; you may have many sorrows;*

I somehow knew that if I left this room in my paralyzed state, I would never regain control. The further I read the more I felt the hooks dig into my flesh, pulling and scraping and tearing at my unmarred skin – and yet I could not stop reading.

*Yet assure yourselves, if you be good, you will be happy; happy forever.*

I managed to wrench my eyes away from the book, looking above me in a silent prayer as agonizing pains ripped through my small body. As I stared at the ceiling faint golden threads began to shimmer in the afternoon light; each one connecting to a hook.

*Remember this, my dear little readers, from your friend - **The Spider.***

I began to twist the doorknob, my hand shaking so hard that it rattled against the neighboring wood. The pages of the book cut into my fingers as I gripped it ever tighter, fighting, clawing, I had to do something to help myself. The hinges creaked as *the door **began to open*** –

– and my father slammed the door against the wall, knocking the book out of my hands and onto the floor, where it closed shut. I dropped to my knees in front of him, my strings cut, sobbing into the fine carpet.

He looked down at my crumpled form, unknowing of the horrors I'd just experienced, a familiar slimy disgust coating his tongue. "Get up, boy." I rose on trembling legs, my whole body covered with pinpricks of pain.

"Get out of here. Go outside for once – the Parrishes should be wrapping up their summer lessons soon, you can waste the hours with them. Do something, anything, I don't give a rat's ass," he sneered, hatred dripping off of him in waves.

I made to leave the room, tear tracks drying on my cheeks. A fervent shooting *panic* ran through me as I grabbed the doorknob, surely opening the door to some kind of – hellish purgatory, or something. But the hallway beyond was just a hallway. I waved my hand through the gap – nothing amiss as far as I could see. I took a tentative step across the threshold –

“Pick up this book. I didn’t raise you to treat this house like a pigsty.”

I turned back, cringing as I picked up the book with delicate fingers; as if touching it would thread my hooks with those golden strings. I knew the hooks weren’t actually there, they couldn’t have been, I must have hallucinated the whole ordeal –

“And wipe that blood off your mouth.”

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There was no way in hell I was going to ‘waste the hours’ with Sebastian & Hector on a good day, much less after something like *this*. My father wasn’t a stupid man, but he didn’t exactly have a grasp on my mind. Or the concept of emotions at all, really.

I hid away in my room for days, trying to understand what exactly had happened to me. I would obsessively inspect my skin for pockmarks or stray threads, spending hours upon hours checking and rechecking until I’d soothed the pit of fear that had taken up residence in my stomach. I’d even sent myself into another hyperventilating panic after I found a thread from my nightshirt in my bed. I wasn’t doing well, but I was... coping, in a sense.

It couldn’t last forever, though. My father barged into my room about a week into my seclusion, face red and blooming with rage. I wasn’t checking for threads then, thank God, but my sitting quietly only seemed to anger him further. He hauled me up by the ear, throwing me at the feet of my wardrobe. “Get dressed.”

I pulled on a simple shirt and trousers with sweaty hands, dread already churning in my gut. “Father, I –”

“I don’t want to see you inside until the sun has set. I won’t stand for this namby pamby shit any longer, boy. It’s time you start acting like the heir to the Bennett estate, not a fainting servant girl.”

And that was that. Father’s word was law, of course. When had I ever had a say in what I did with my life?

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I ended up wandering the beaches for some hours, cataloging the flora and fauna I saw along the way. There were some truly gorgeous specimens out there that day – have you ever heard of

diving beetles? A whole colony of them, nestled in a grove of floating lilies in a tidal pool. I sat on my haunches and watched them swim about as if in a trance, darting between the flowers.

“*Arthur!* Is that you over there?”

Fuck. I turned to my right and there they were, the very picture of boyish glory. Sebastian and Hector Parrish, in the flesh, clad in simple yet deceptively expensive playclothes. The port-wine stain on Hector’s head shone in the afternoon sunlight, the only way I had to tell the two apart. Some say that birthmarks like his are the mark of a witch, that a mark means the Devil has claimed you for his own. I think his mark just meant he was a poncey git.

“Hi Hector, hi Sebastian,” I said, exhaustion already creeping into my bones. What would they make me do this time? Would they force feed me waterside plants, laughing when I retched? Would they strip me like a newborn babe? Would they stick my head in the waves until I bobbed up, red and gasping for air?

Four eyes locked onto me, their heads tilting in unison. “Do you want to play with us today, Arthur?”

“I’m quite alright, thank you.” I dragged my toes in the sand. I’d left my shoes by the tidal pool. Fat chance I would ever see those again.

They crept ever closer, Hector placing a hand on my shoulder. Goosebumps raised across my skin. “That wasn’t a question.”

I took a deep breath, in and out, like I’d seen my mother do when she dropped stitches while lace-making. Inhaling, exhaling, flowing, cycling. It wasn’t enough. A wave crested within me, threatening to break.

“Please leave me alone.”

Twin voices laughed in amazement at my proclamation. “Awwww, really? Don’t you want to have a bit of fun, Arthur?” Hector’s hand tightened around my shoulder, marching me towards the waves. I struggled in his grip, but he really was a much larger boy than me. Sebastian’s hand around my other arm wasn’t helping matters either. “You don’t want to go for a *swim*?”

Thrashing, they dragged me down the beach to the coastline before pinning my arms behind my back and thrusting my head into the water. We’d played this ‘game’ before – all I ever won was a mouthful of foul-tasting seawater and a new nightmare to ruin my sheets with. I screamed and jerked about, but all that did was send water flooding into my lungs.

By some miracle of God, I managed to wrench myself free. I pulled myself out of the water and whipped around, turning to face them.

“I said leave me **alone!**”

And for a moment, the world held its breath. The wind stilled, the insects stopped singing their chorus, even the ocean paused in its endless quest to beat back the shore.

Golden threads appeared in the air, trailing from the hooks still embedded in my fingertips. They floated in the quelled wind, streaming about like jellyfish tentacles. I stared at them in wonder, my fear quenched by the sheer beauty of the sight. When I experimentally moved my fingers there was no longer pain, just a gentle tugging sensation.

The same could not be said for Sebastian and Hector. I watched with a perverse sense of justice as thousands of tiny hooks dug into their tender, unmarred flesh, blood beading across their skin. While I'd borne the ordeal silently, they had no such restraint. They screamed for what felt like *hours*.

Once the hooks were anchored in place, the threads began to loop and tie themselves around the twins, flashing in the light. Whimpers and cries poured forth from Sebastian and Hector as a web spun itself around them.

They could have moved at any time, of course. None of the threads physically restricted their movement. Only the thought of pain kept them anchored in place.

Two pairs of eyes stared at me in horror as I gathered the ends of the threads in my hands. I plucked one experimentally – Hector's left hand shot forward, his fingers curling. I tugged on another – the same rictus grin I'd worn stretched across Sebastian's face. Without thinking, I smiled back.

As I looked between them, a sick joy building in my chest, I noticed something new in their pained expressions. Twin tears tracks ran down their cheeks, mixing pink with their blood and staining their once-pristine shirts. For a moment I was confused – the Parrishes weren't criers. I'd regrettably known them long enough to learn this. Even when Sebastian broke his nose playing croquet, or when Hector had gotten kicked in the balls by a *very* disgruntled horse, the most they let out was a low-pitched yell of pain. Nothing... nothing like this.

.... What was I *doing*? Oh **God**, *what had I done*?

I was a **monster**.

I dropped the threads, racing to tear them, rip the hooks out of my fingers, do *something*. They tore free after a couple of harsh yanks and I sprinted away from the beach, feet bare and smarting. My blood roared in my ears as I ran, my mind spinning dizzily.

Sebastian and Hector had still been snared in the web when I left, even after I cut off the source. I still had the hooks in me, even after I closed the book. I had to torch the rot at the root. If I didn't burn it out, it would consume us – and I couldn't let that happen, even to gits like them. No one deserved this.

I flung open the door to my father's library, which was thankfully empty. The book sat innocuously on its shelf, sandwiched between volumes of Shakespeare and Ovid. I grabbed a handkerchief from his desk and wrapped my hand in it before touching the book, subconsciously knowing that if I touched it with my bare skin I wouldn't be able to resist. I silently ran to the kitchen, praying to any god that would listen that the oven fire had been stoked and that the room was vacant of anyone that might stop me.

For once, my prayers were answered. I flung open the door to the oven and threw the book inside, the handkerchief following behind. I sat in front of the oven, watching it slowly smolder. It would haunt me if I didn't know it was gone, if I couldn't see it happen. As it burnt, I swear I could see golden threads flickering in the air above me.

When the last of the book lay smoking on the coals, forever returned to fire, I felt a pain like almost no other. Thousands of tiny hooks dug themselves *out* of my skin, pulling and ripping and tearing until I was writhing and screaming in agony. I'm told that my mother almost fainted when she ran in and saw me on the floor, bloodied like I'd been shot with buckshot. It turns out that you lose a lot more blood when something *leaves* you than when it enters.

I laid convalescing for another week, thankfully without the compulsion to check my body for hooks or threads. My mother doted upon me every day, feeding me broth and changing my bandages in a way that she hadn't done since I was a very small boy. It was nice to spend more time with her, even under such horrible circumstances. I didn't realize how much I missed her.

My father visited my sickbed once.

“Albion Parrish came to our house yesterday for tea,” he said, pursing his mouth as if every word tasted bitter. “He said that his sons had come about some queer injuries, almost as if they'd been peppered with buckshot or if somethings had... dug into them. I gave my condolences and wished them both a speedy recovery, of course.”

I held my breath. A strange look crossed my father's face before he spoke again, like the bitterness had begun to churn within his gut.

"I know you must have been involved, somehow. I don't know what happened, and I don't particularly care. Just don't let it happen again."

He left the room silently, giving me time to think before my mother came in to change my bandages again. It took me a while to parse out what his expression meant, what exactly he was feeling. It was much later when I realized he was looking at me with fear. He was *afraid* of me.

I didn't know how to feel about that. I didn't like being rotten. I didn't like knowing that I had put those boys through that same hell I'd experienced.

I later realized that Father had looked at me with that foul-tasting fear many times before. Especially when he'd found my journals documenting the flora and insect life nearby, that same expression crossed his face. This wrongness inside of me, this ruin that he hated – he was afraid of that. He was afraid of me. How could he control me after that came to light?

I don't want to hurt people. I've never wanted to hurt people. I'm not a *monster* – but there was power in being seen as one.

They still bullied me after that, of course. Still taunted me, still beat me blue and bloody – but they never tried to make me do anything. Not anymore.

Perhaps it was that I was no longer helpless, that they were afraid of me. Perhaps, more kindly, it was because they now understood the truth of what they had done to me. Their pockmarked scars still shone red in the light – Hector's skin pitted on the meat of his hand, Sebastian's creating a set of dimpled gashes by the corners of his mouth. It didn't matter either way.

All I knew is that if I was ever caught in a web again, I wouldn't let myself be a fly.