

# ONE DAY THERE WERE SPIDER-MOUTHS

by Greg Stolze

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The first time anyone saw a spider-mouth in public, it was on Clifton Troy, the movie star. Clifton Troy! He'd called the Hollywood press and a few select bloggers, telling them to make sure to bring cameras. Of course they did. Clifton Troy was reliably good for some sales or clicks or viewers. True, he was now in his fifties and less hot than when he was an action movie heartthrob who made the jump to romantic comedies like *DOUBLE OR NOTHING*. His unexpectedly deft comic timing and deadpanning skills had then earned him the lead in *THE DEVIL'S DELI*. He'd aged into serious drama (Oscar nominee for *THE ALGONQUIN ROUND TABLE*, not a winner though) and settled into smaller roles where he could steal scenes from sexy screen idols half his age.

"Friends... reporters," he said, and got a laugh, "Thank you for coming out today. Thank you very much. I know I've played things close to the vest, I've been... well, one of my publicists called me a 'privacy relic' because I didn't want a Twitter." More chuckles. That handsome face, seamed with years but in a way that looked wise and not, like, gross: It was like having a beer with your favorite uncle. "Today though... today I'm going to share something. It won't be popular with everyone, I know this. I'll make enemies." His expression shifted, becoming pensive, serious. "In a more important sense though... if you hate me after today, we were never really friends, and you never really knew me."

"He's gay," one reporter whispered to her camera operator.

"Nah, he's running for office," was the reply.

Then Clifton Troy split his face open and transformed his mouth into a mass of segmented, wiggling pincers.

It started with the skin of his upper lip rolling away from his teeth, crawling back over his nose, revealing gums and exposing flesh. The bottom lip was even worse, retreating all the way to his neck—the neck many of these reporters present had written about, when there was the plastic surgery rumor.

The process was bloodless, but coarse black hairs grew out of the red flesh, like a lawn growing on sped-up film, while the color deepened to black in order to match. His teeth did not change shape, but somehow reoriented themselves so that they were pointier, and then the jaw split down the middle, oppositely hinged in the corners.

One reporter, as he threw up, was weirdly reminded of old pinball machines, the way the flippers moved independently. That was what the two halves of Clifton Troy's bottom jaw were doing, moving and flexing like fingers, like furry black fingers with a white incisor on the tip of each.

The upper palate divided too, moving from the skull like false teeth coming loose, then folding outward like they were beckoning.

There was a lot of screaming, and maybe a quarter panicked and fled, but most had that weird reporter instinct to keep filming, keep bearing witness.

“Mister Troy! Mister Troy!” The reporter with the question didn’t even realize she was yelling until he looked at her. His mouth snapped back together, instantly. One second, and it looked as normal as it had in POTBELLY.

“Janet, right?” *His smile was normal.* Just moments ago it had been a nightmare, and now it was an above-average, friendly, movie actor smile.

“How did you do that?”

He laughed.

“How do you move your hand to write? How do you... keep your balance walking? It’s natural. It’s perfectly normal to my body.” He held up a hand. “Before you ask, I’m not an alien, not any kind of... of *freak*. I’m the same person I always was. I’ve been able to do this since I was 27 years old, but I was never taught, I never underwent any surgery, I don’t have an event I can point to and say ‘that did it’ I just... woke up one day, yawned hard, and there it went.”

“Do you think this will affect your career?”

He chuckled.

“Why are you telling us this now, after all these years?” she persisted

“Because I’m not the only one,” he said.

###

He wasn’t. The morning after his presser on the west coast, two women and a man stood in front of a police department precinct house in Queens. Their faces and hair were concealed as

they filmed themselves pulling up the lower edge of their scarves and revealing the hairy, wriggling surprises in their mouths. It proved too much even for New Yorkers’ legendary indifference, but the trio had a cab waiting around the corner. By nightfall, the Post had an exclusive with the driver, who’d had no idea—he picked them up at subway station, waited around the corner for a few minutes, then dropped them at a different subway station. Surprisingly, the paper kept in his discursive analysis of how strange it was for them to take a cab from the subway when they could so easily have walked. He couldn’t describe them, however, other than “they looked normal.”

###

Ordinary citizen Jesse Hoskins was the first respondent to CNN’s request to interview a spider-mouth. There was nothing unusual about her, except that she could split the lower half of her face into twisting, grasping finger-teeth. She worked at a Wal-Mart in Nebraska.

“We’ve always been here, I think,” she said. “I’ve had it since I was a little girl... maybe nine years old? I had one aunt over in Kansas who could do it too. My parents didn’t...” She looked away. “Well, they didn’t get it. I got a whuppin’ the first time they saw it. Thought it was the devil, went and got the minister, who then called DCS on my dad for the bruises. A real mess. But my aunt, God rest her soul, she got word of it. Daddy went into AA, convinced himself he’d been seeing things, even though he didn’t have more than one beer a day, usually. Mama, I don’t know what she thought, or told herself. But that aunt, she showed me hers and said it wasn’t bad, just useless, so I ought to keep it to myself. Honestly, I hadn’t brought it out in years before I saw Mr. Troy go on the news.”

Two days later, she lost her job. She sued for wrongful termination, but the suit didn't get settled for another sixteen months.

Not until the Palomino Arena massacre.

###

Pretty soon, everyone was debating just how many there were.

"The government will make a blood test and we'll know," was a popular opinion, but fans of Clifton Troy movies like JIMMY GOES HOME guardedly suggested that maybe there was nothing wrong with it.

Experts discussed "genetic anomalies" and "vestigial skeletal traits" but were absolutely baffled that no one had found a visible spider-mouth in the entire history of human autopsies. "The bond at chin and front palate must be... extremely tight?" the coroner for Harris County, Texas, said but without much conviction.

A set of x-rays went around the Internet that seemed to show something like what Clifton Troy and Jesse Hoskins had demonstrated. It turned out to be from a corpse that had died on a battlefield after an explosion near the face so... it was a dubious case. No one knew.

###

"What's that on the TV?" Pete asked, squinting in the bar's dim.

"Hah. Looks like they found out about the moufs," Stumpy Steve replied. Pete snorted.

Steve had done time for armed robbery, and Pete had been in the same prison for a felony count of receiving stolen property.

"I coulda told 'em," Pete said.

"Sure. Big Doker flashed his at you, right?"

"Yeah. Just about shit my pants."

"Suppose he's going to go on TV, give an interview?" They laughed.

One of them had 'the mouf.' The other had no idea.

###

As for the prison guard who went on Fox News swearing that the spider-mouths were a secret society infiltrating prisons, he became very defensive when the shrill (but lovely) blonde anchor demanded to know why he'd kept their existence secret from the public.

"Would you have believed me?" he asked. "My own wife thought I was a nut when I told her! The other guards all knew, but no one told, and I think," he said, leaning forward, eyes gleaming, "*Some of them* had it too, the *mark*."

"Were you afraid of reprisals?" she asked, with titillating scorn.

"Anyone could be one," the guard insisted. "You can prove you *are* one by showing it, but you can't ever prove you're *not*. For all I know, you could pop out wiggle-teeth right now, if you wanted!"

She laughed it off, and didn't.

In the taxi back to his hotel, the guard realized he should have said, "That's what I'm doing now" when she asked why he told no one.

###

Dr. Hart couldn't stop staring at Mrs. Courtiz' mouth.

"You can see, I'm sure, how our situation has changed," he said.

"No, I see no such thing."

The doctor blinked. “Your son was institutionalized for insisting that there were people with... secret, um...” He looked through his notes. “With ‘secret tentacle-fingers in their faces,’ and that they were tormenting him by, by revealing these to him when there were no other witnesses. A year ago, when he was admitted, his insistence on this *seemed* delusional, but...”

“He also said that I was the primary tormentor,” Mrs. Courtiz replied. “Are you suggesting that I am one of those *things*?”

There was a moment of silence, and then she lifted a hand over her mouth, eyes wide. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!”

“I’m sure there’s no need for...”

She stood. “Doctor,” she said, “I came to you for help, not accusations. And consider this: Sharks are real, but does that mean someone who says there are sharks in his toilet isn’t crazy? Maybe he saw one of those...” She sputtered, at a loss for words. “...*those*, somewhere, but it certainly wasn’t in my home!”

She stalked out.

Dr. Hart said, “Shit.”

###

It was two weeks after Troy’s revelation. There had been many hot takes, think pieces, and memes about being tricked by hot girls with spider faces. The words “chelicera” and “pedipalp” had gone from being hard-crossword exoticisms to everyday language. That was how long it took before a sixteen-year old falsely claimed another boy in his school had “spider-mouthed” at him in the bathroom. The accused denied it, neither could provide evidence, and the principal wound up

finding a pretext to suspend them both for a week. The school board backed her up.

They didn’t establish a solid set of rules and guidelines until after Palomino Arena.

###

Searches for spider-themed and spider-mouth pornography upticked sharply, and the resultant rush to fill the burgeoning new demand was initially poorly shot and framed and, in many cases, had unconvincing special effects. One archivist in France, however, unearthed an early, silent, black and white dirty movie featuring a man with what was, to all appearances, the same kind of oral equipment as Clifton Troy. Eventually, this would be verified by film scholars (several of them somewhat reluctant) and cited as the first evidence that this syndrome was much older than originally believed.

###

The rumors said the spider-mouths could spit poison, or a drug that clouded memory.

The rumors said the spider mouths were the mark of the devil.

The rumors said that only white people could become spider-mouths.

The rumors said that spider-mouth people could change their genitals as well. That one caused some real nightmares when people started haphazardly researching arachnoid reproductive kit.

The rumors said that only people with Jew blood could become spider-mouths.

The rumors said the spider-mouths were aliens who’d come down and founded the Mormon Church as a front

for their invasion and they were now ready to start “stage two.”

The rumors said a lot of things.

###

“Some of us did not expect the abuse that has arisen but, of course, some were well aware how quickly and, I daresay, *hysterically* people reject even slight, cosmetic differences like our own,” Donna Mowbry said, and then unlimbered her chelicerae.

“And so we get your organization,” the CBS news host said. “Why don’t you tell us about it?”

“The Arachnostomia Rights League is inspired by, and in many cases shares membership with, such diverse organizations as the NRA, the ADL, and ACT UP. We’re your basic civil rights watchdog. We focus on discrimination against people with our condition, but we’re well aware of the intersectionality of the struggle.” Once more, as soon as she finished speaking, her mouth transformed into a writhing, hairy mess.

“I notice that you, um, show your ‘condition’ whenever you’re not speaking.”

“In public, yes. People need to get used to this.”

“You do accept that it seems, to us, to be a very sudden shift?”

“Of course, but please understand that we’ve been here a *long* time, and we’re tired of waiting.”

“Which raises the question of why you waited.”

She folded her arms. “Just last week, Glenn Murphy shot and killed his wife of four years in Massachusetts,” she said. “He claimed that she’d revealed an

arachnostoma to him and that he had acted in self-defense. His lawyer says it should be a mitigating factor! But really, this is just the ‘gay panic’ defense all over again—and if he gets away with it, every domestic abuser coast to coast is going to start in with the claims.”

“Why do you suppose his wife did that? One would think that she’d have... some idea how her husband would react...”

“Maybe she was tired of keeping a secret, but it’s pointless to speculate because *she’s dead*. She’s dead and no one’s asking why *he* had to react with violence to a harmless physical trait. No, you’re asking why *she* couldn’t keep it hidden to spare his feelings. That’s all assuming he’s not lying, which he well might be. The coroner can’t tell if she really *was* arachnostomic, because there is *no difference* between us and you,” she said.

Then the squirming appendages reappeared.

###

Only three months after his press conference, Clifton Troy announced he was starring in a remake of the Raul Julia classic *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

###

The first case of a student being bullied *because* someone suspected they had a spider-mouth, instead of bullying *by* having one, came along pretty early too. As with the previous case, it was handled by an underpaid and overworked principal who kicked both students out.

But the first time someone publicly revealed chelicerae in a high school classroom, she was beaten to death two days later. The police pursued leads, but

claimed no one was talking. Her friends insisted that the cops didn't really care.

###

The president unilaterally decided that the military should be purged of all spider-mouth service members. This was announced via Twitter, as was typical.

Soon after, the Secretary of Defense gave a dry, rambling, difficult-to-interpret speech about how it was crucial to act prudently and preserve force unity in a time of transition and uncertainty, the president's concerns were valid but that there was, of course, no "purge" as such.

No one remembered his speech when, two days later, the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps called a press conference, described in agonizing detail the combat action that had earned him a Purple Heart and a Navy Cross, revealed his spider-mouth, then walked away from the podium without answering any questions.

###

"I just can't believe it," Jed Jones said. Another celebrity had outed herself as a spider-mouth, this one a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer.

"Me either," his wife Jen said.

"I mean, it could be anyone you know."

"Not *anyone*," she said. "I'm sure my mom and my sisters aren't. They'd have told me!"

"Would they though? If they had, wouldn't you have... I don't know." He frowned.

"Wouldn't you have felt different about them?"

"Hypothetically, yes, but..."

"And," he said, interrupting her as he did, in a way that seemed less adorable than it had ten years earlier when she thought he was just an 'eager speaker,' "If you felt different, don't you think that would change how you treated them?"

"We'd get past it," she said stubbornly.

"You're sweet."

They kissed.

Both of them had spider-mouths and neither one told. They divorced two years later. She started the process in the troubled months after Palomino Arena.

###

"Why now though?" the newsman asked.

"Why not now?" the spider-mouth replied. "Why should we wait? Why should *we* have had to keep ourselves hidden and silent just because *you* might be uncomfortable?"

"It just seems... frankly impossible that this isn't some recent thing."

"The *thing* is, none of us had any idea how many of us there were. We were all afraid to find one another, until now."

"What changed?"

"The Internet, of course. Each of us discovered we weren't the only one ever, and it was like... like breathing fresh air for the first time."

###

"What the hell is 'Spi-Mo-Con'?" Brent asked, incredulous.

"It's a convention for them spider-mouth freaks," Ross replied.

"A convention? What for?"

"I dunno."

"Well what's it *say*?"

"I din't click on it man."

"Go back!"

"Your phone ain't broke. You got Google."

Brent swore at Ross and started to search.

"It doesn't say anything," Brent said. Ross didn't reply.

"Oh, but you have to *be* one to get in," Brent continued.

"So?"

"So what are they gonna talk about in there?"

"Who cares?"

"No, seriously, what do those weirdos have to discuss that they can't in public? What're they scared of?"

"Do you want to go to this thing? 'Cause it sounds like you want to go."

"No!" Brent said, offended.

"So why get all messed up over it?"

"I'm not messed up, they're the messed up ones! They're the ones trying to keep me out, they're the ones scared of what I might find out if I go there!"

"Do you want to spend, what, fifty bucks and drive two hours to go spend a whole day surrounded by friggin' arachnostomies?" Ross asked.

"It wouldn't do any good if I did, because I'd have to *mouth-out* at the door to get in. Don't you get it? They're going to have infected guards at the doors and everyone going in is going to be infected, and they can talk freely about what they want to do to us normal people without worrying about anyone leaking it!"

"They can't do shit, they're super-rare, like less than one percent."

"No," Brent said. "No, the identified ones are less than one percent, there could be millions of others just waiting. Waiting for the marching orders that come out of this secret fucking meeting."

"This secret meeting they advertising on the Internet?"

"Secret from *normal people*," Brent replied, eyes glittering.

###

The senator and his wife flexed their pedipalps as they lounged in bed, reading off their phones. She closed hers up, which was how he knew she wanted to talk.

"Davies is one for sure," she said. "*For sure.*"

"Yeah, but there's just too much for either side to lose by taking the first move."

"If you two can't be bipartisan about this, *this* of all things..."

"Look, there are a lot of issues that are entangled with this, and *nobody* knows how much of the electorate is our people. If we go all in on arachnostoma rights and we're one percent, it's a disaster, we don't flip anyone and the bigots come at us, it moves the whole process *backwards*."

"What if we're a quarter of the population?"

"We're not."

"How do you *know*?"

"Because someone would have been as stupid as Clifton Troy sooner if we were."

She sighed at that. "If Davies comes out for the rights, will you go bipartisan?"

“It depends,” he said, and he sighed too. “These hashtags don’t look good.”

They were quiet for a minute, then she said, “Did you hear about this convention down in Florida?”

“Spi-Mo-Con?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?” she pressed.

“...it could be interesting,” he said reluctantly. “If they get a huge turnout, and organize. There’s no possible way I could go, of course,”

“Oh, no, of course not,” she said. “Or me.”

“Or Davies,” he said, with a little chuckle.

She laughed too, with her pedipalps out. He found it really cute when she did that.

“It’s ambitious,” he continued. “I mean, Palomino Arena? How many does that hold?”

###

When Palomino Arena exploded, it was called “the worst domestic bombing since Oklahoma City,” although they were hesitant to call it ‘terrorism.’ One hundred and nineteen attendees at Spi-Mo-Con were killed, and hundreds more injured.

The bomber insisted that he had been protecting the world from an insidious, evil threat, but he didn’t seem manic or delusional. He was quiet. Well-spoken. He owned no guns and had never been arrested for domestic battery. Combing over his social media footprint found him asking the same questions as many others, the questions with no good answers—what were the spider-mouths? Where had they come from, really? What *did* they say to one another when they were alone, when they knew no one else was listening?

The day after his arrest, the petition for a presidential pardon had over a million signatures.