



# WEBSLINGER

**Phil Parker**

'I've been bitten by something!'

'Oh, what have you done now, Peter?'

He looks hurt at my implied criticism but his attention quickly turns back to the red puncture marks on his hand. The others in our class are busy listening to the lead scientist express his intense satisfaction in subjecting insects to bursts of gamma radiation, the guy really is an arrogant shit. Poor Peter has started to lose the plot big time. He's sweating like he's in the tropics, the area around the bite mark is already turning an angry red.

'You ought to get that looked at.'

Pete looks at me and I can see real fear in his eyes. He's trembling too. I'm not sure



what to do next. Pete is going to curse me if I make a big fuss and there's nothing wrong with him, I mean, the guy is a wuss. But what if he really is ill? That's when I notice it, scuttling along his sleeve. A spider. It's small. I mean, tiny. If that's the culprit then what I'm witnessing is less of an infection and more of a

panic attack. That certainly fits Peter's profile. I tell him to calm down, point at the departing spider that's abseiling from his sleeve onto a work bench. That little thing couldn't hurt anyone.

It works. It takes a while, the scientist is moving on to talk about the real-world applications for his work. He must have delusions of grandeur, he plans to send insects up into space to find out how they cope in zero gravity. I think he's got carried away with Ranger 3 going to the moon last week and Telstar beaming satellite images across the Atlantic. I mean, who's going to be interested in a bunch of insects flying around the planet? It's stupid, if you ask me. We should be more interested in stopping the Russians sending nuclear missiles to Cuba. But what do I know? It's 1962 and I'm just a kid.

I lose interest. Something far more exciting has grabbed my attention. Gwen Tracey is smiling at me.

The following day I haven't heard from Pete, we're supposed to meet at the library to do some research for our science project. I wait for half an hour and I'm about to give up and go home when he arrives, breathless and sweaty. His tee shirt is plastered to his chest, I

can't help but notice the change. Pete's always been skinny but now he has pectoral definition and biceps.

'Have you been going to the gym, Pete?'

That panicked look from yesterday has returned. The guy stares at me like I've asked him something very personal. He shakes his head with his typical level of distraction.

'Are you all right, Pete? You look even more neurotic than usual.'

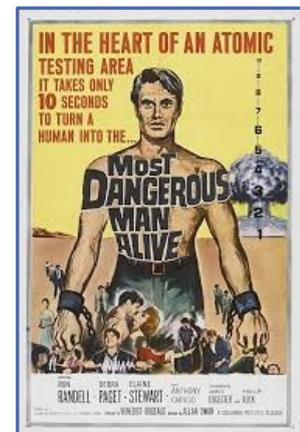
He's still staring at me, like he's trying to find the words to tell me something. I'm getting irritated, he's turned up late, no apology and no excuse apparently. Eventually, he holds up his right hand. For a second or two I'm not sure what he wants me to do. I see the red patch and remember the itty-bitty spider bite. Jeez, is he still worrying about that? The red inflammation has faded, I can just make out the two little holes.

'Yeah, that teeny-tiny spider sunk its fangs in your hand. What do you think is going to happen Pete? Eh? Are you going to turn into a monster?'

I can't help but chuckle. Pete and I go to the cinema every Saturday, we've seen a whole bunch of films on this theme.

'Hey, perhaps you're going to turn into someone like that guy in *The Most Dangerous Man in the World*. Do you remember it? That guy was affected by radiation, perhaps your spider was too!'

That only makes matters worse. It sends Pete into a tailspin of panic. I spend ages calming him down. I blame his Aunt Kay and Uncle Ken for him being like this. They treat him like a little kid rather than a sixteen year old.



We haven't finished our research because Pete keeps checking his pulse and wiping his forehead and stuff. My dad says Pete's a hypochondriac and I'm starting to think he's right. We haven't got much done so I insist we come back tomorrow and finish it then. I'm quite glad really, I've got a date with Gwen this evening. I'm going to take her for a soda and then go to the cinema, *Invasion of the Star Creatures* should scare her enough so she cuddles up to me if I'm lucky.

It's been two days and I haven't seen Peter. He didn't turn up to finish our research so I've had to do all of it. I am not pleased.

I've decided Peter Barker is weird. No other word for it. He hasn't come out of his room except for meals in three days, so his Aunt Kay tells me when I go over to their house in Queens. She asks me to go upstairs and try to talk some sense into him, she and her husband are worried.

I knock on his bedroom door and get told to go away.

'It's me Peter, your one-time research partner and incredibly patient friend Larry Osburn. Can I come in?'

The door opens slowly. Pete's pale features appear in the space between the door and its frame. He looks hunted and spooked.

'If you come in, you have to promise you don't tell anyone what you see in here.'

'Jeez, Pete. What have you done?'

'Just promise me, Larry.'

I promise. Whatever he's done, my curiosity is piqued. I'll decide if I'm going to keep my promise afterwards.

'I promise.'

The door swings wider and I gasp. Out loud. I try to find words to describe my reactions to what I see but my brain has shut down.



His room is filled with spider webs. And I mean, filled. I can't move more than a couple of steps before there's white strands in my hair and face. It's like curtains hanging from every surface. Thick, gooey stuff that I have trouble brushing off my skin.

The teenage boy I've known for much of my life, whose greatest problems have been acne and anxiety, sits dejectedly on his bed. I can't see the sheets, spider silk covers every inch.

'I don't know what to do, Larry. I daren't leave the room for anything longer than a few minutes at a time.'

'Are you making this stuff then?'

Pete nods, his face flushes a familiar shade of red. He gets like that whenever he meets girls.

'Is this because of the spider bite?'

Another nod. His eyes are big and wide, tears appear and trickle down his cheeks.

'I'm turning into a spider, Larry. What can I do to stop it?'

The guy is desperate and I try to think of something good that will motivate him, help him deal with what's happening to his body. Hopefully cheer him up too.

'In my comics a few months ago, there was a group of special heroes. They were affected by radiation too. They were called the Fabulous Four. Perhaps you could be like them? You know, fight crime and stuff like that?'

He glares at me.

'Are you fucking serious?'

I've never heard Pete swear before, I'm genuinely shocked. He leaps to his feet, face right in front of mine, aggressive and angry suddenly.

'How do you suggest I fight crime with fucking spider's webs?'

I admit that I have no ideas. Suddenly the tempest that's brought him to his feet deserts him and he slumps back onto the bed.

'What do you know about spiders, Larry?'

I tell him I know next to nothing. He sighs heavily.

'Then let me explain. Spiders produce their silk from glands and churn it out through things call spinnerets. It takes the form of a liquid inside the body, it squirts out and turns into silk when it meets the air.'

He fixes me with his tear-filled eyes.



‘Do you know the only gland I possess that can squirt out stuff in large quantities?’

It takes a moment for me to catch up with what he’s telling me. At that point I look around, surrounded as I am by material that he’s excreted from a place I really don’t want to think about. It’s in my hair, stuck to my skin, I’ve had to wipe out of my face for fuck sake! I want to be sick.

‘Now do you see how stupid your crime-fighting idea is?’ he says and more tears tumble down his cheeks.

‘Yeah, I do, Pete. Yeah. Stupid of me.’

I’m heading for the door. Before I vomit.

‘Got to go. Appointment. Urgent. See you.’

I rush downstairs. Aunt May and Uncle Ken wait anxiously for my report. I hurtle through their front door to empty my stomach onto their flower bed. After I’ve finished retching and as I cling to a fence post to remain upright, I realise they’re still watching me.

‘Pete’s going to need a doctor,’ I say. ‘Scientists too probably. But, whatever you do, don’t touch the web.’

I half stagger, half run off down the street. The first thing I’m going to do when I get home is throw all my comics in the bin. The idiots that make up those stories haven’t got a clue about what really happens. They ought to meet the kid who used to be my friend. Who is now some kind of Spider Man. Poor bastard.