

„Free“

by Norman Blake McKenzie, Florida

It is not hard to conceive how freedom can mean so much to someone held under such depriving conditions. So much so that captivity of a pet becomes abhorrent. The desire to connect with something, anything, but refusing to hold that something against its will. Preferring to live alone rather than subject another life to confinement. I exist within these walls. Two meters by three meters. I am regularly visited by all sorts of critters. Frogs, toads, crickets, beetles, ants, a snake once and spiders. Most men capture these critters and build lovely little homes for them. No matter the beauty of the home, it is still merely a box, a cage. Depriving the critter of freedom.

This is the story of Charlotte. She is a beautiful spider. A Granddaddy longlegs. I awoke one morning to find a new occupant in my cell. This was nearly three years ago. I named her Charlotte, after the story I loved as a child, “Charlotte’s Web”. When Charlotte first appeared in my cell, she was too small for me to determine gender. I refused to catch her and put her in a lovely box. I watched her intently, busy as she created her web. Upon completion she moved to the center of her new home and waited. As the days passed I grew anxious as I watched her body slowly decrease in size. I knew she was hungry, yet she refused to leave and find better hunting grounds. I decided if nothing would fly into her web, I would feed her myself. The smallest of insects I would catch and toss them into her web. The first was a small common-house-fly. I watched her rush to it and quickly wrap it into a web such as a cocoon. She fed upon it until it was a mere husk, then delicately tossed the husk out of her web and repaired the damage to her home. She returned to the center of her web and splayed out her tiny legs. Miraculously her tiny body took on the weight of the fly. I felt she was satiated and happy with her choice of deciding where to make her home.

Time passed and I watched her grow. She became a beautiful spider that I eventually could identify as a female. At times, during the winter mostly, food would become scarceness. In one such period I feared she would leave me, because I could not provide for her. It was a long cold winter with no insects to be found to feed her by. I watched her little body slowly melt away with each passing day. I just knew one day I would wake up and she would be gone. I had come to care so much about this little spider that I agonized over her starvation. So much so that I added her into my daily prayers, begging that God provide me with food to give to Charlotte. Strangely enough a cricket appeared. It was the coldest of days, unheard of for a cricket to be out in such weather. A very large cricket too! Bigger, by far, than any insect I had ever given to Charlotte. I feared it would harm her if I tossed it into her web. Immediately Charlotte was upon it. A mighty struggle ensued. Charlotte’s long legs prevailed and she quickly wrapped the cricket up in a cocoon. She fed upon the cricket longer than I ever saw her feed. Three days! I watched her shrunken body fill out as life and energy returned to her. Yet still she continued to feed. I grew worried that she might harm herself by how big she was getting! Finally she tossed the husk of the cricket out of her web, repaired the damage and returned to the center to rest. I was proud to see how big her tiny body was. The days passed without any movement from her.

Then one day I awoke to find there were two spiders in her web. I quickly got my glasses and stood up on my foot locker to get a closer look. No, it wasn’t two spiders. Charlotte had shed her exoskeleton! She was now even larger. Her long beautiful legs had visible markings on them now. I was very impressed.

I carefully removed her shedding from her web. So attached to Charlotte I had become, her shedding was like holding the first tooth a child loses. I simply could not throw it away. I decided to mount her shedding, so proud of her I was. Meticulously I placed her shedding on a piece of clean white paper. Then carefully covered it with a single piece of clear tape. So proud of it, I mailed it to someone very dear to me as a gift.

Then one day the guards came to my cell and told me to pack all of my belongings, I was being transferred to outside court. What to do!? What to do!? I couldn't catch Charlotte and give her to one of my neighbors. I knew they would put her in a box, I said my goodbyes and left her there in her web. I was gone for seven days. When I returned I was placed back in the same cell. I quickly looked up in the corner... but Charlotte was gone. Her web was even gone.

I asked my neighbor if anyone had been in this cell. The guards had sent in trustee inmates to sweep and mop the cell floor. They swept Charlotte away as well. I didn't want to think of how it must have been for Charlotte. To be callously swept away. Surely it traumatized her greatly. My only hope was that she died fast and didn't suffer. I settled back into my cell of deprivation. My eyes unconsciously finding their way to the corner in the ceiling where Charlotte used to live.

Two weeks after I returned I woke up to a usual day. I stood at the sink brushing my teeth. I was looking in the mirror above the sink and I noticed something in the reflection. I quickly turned to see a spider in the same corner where Charlotte once lived. I rushed over to the corner and leaped up on the top of the foot locker. I squinted to see. To see, to see, to see! My glasses, where are my glasses? I found my glasses and returned to the foot locker. I looked up in the corner and to my amazement there was Charlotte! And she was healthy, all eight legs, calmly rebuilding her web. Charlotte had returned to live with me. I can only imagine her journey. Somehow she survived. I knew it was her because I knew every detail of her markings on her legs. Charlotte had passed every cell on this wing to return to this specific cell, to return to live her life with me.

No one would believe this, but it's absolutely true. Three years she and I have lived together.

Charlotte is free. As I write this page to you, Charlotte sleeps in her web.
Free.

