I was the first Superman. I would run around with a towel tied around my neck and save the world, one catastrophe at a time. At the age of ten, I was forced to prove this gift of distinction. Rusty, Chip, Pete, Tommy and I were sitting around on the front porch one summer afternoon with nothing to do when Rusty piped up, “Did ya know the news says that the average person eats eight spiders a year?”

Knowing I claimed to be Superman, the boys looked at me. Rusty’s freckles spread across his face, and all I remember seeing were his two big front teeth. I took it as a dare.

“Eight spiders is nothing,” I said, “I even eat more dirt than most people just playing stick ball with you guys.”

Chip, Rusty’s younger brother, elbowed him. Both boys had red hair and freckles. Most folks thought they were twins. They even dressed alike: jeans with sizeable cuffs, t-shirts, and Red Sox baseball caps. Rusty cleared his throat as if to call attention to the whole group. He reached deep into his pocket and pulled out his fist. When he opened his hand, there were gum-balls, bottle caps, marbles, a rusty nail, and a nickel—a shiny, silver nickel.

“Five cents says you can’t beat that,” he spit.

The other three boys gasped at the challenge. Even without my cape, I drew on my super-human strength, threw my fist in the air and announced, “I’ll do it!”

The first spider was hard to find. It was one of those crab-looking spiders that walked sideways. I caught that one right between my hands, and before it had a chance to crawl out, I popped it in my mouth, shut my eyes and swallowed hard. My friends made puking sounds as I chewed, and I began to feel slightly ill. My eyes rolled up into my head. Rusty flipped his nickel in the air. I was going to make sure that the second one would be easier to eat.

The boys followed me into the house. I put a mound of peanut butter on a cracker, and then headed outside with my friends in tow. Pete offered
to help with the next one since he knew where I was headed. He was one of those kids who always had rocks in his shoes, his neck was usually three shades of dirt darker than the rest of his skin, and his clothes always looked as if he slept in them. He crawled under the back porch where it was dark and damp. The second spider was there. It was missing a leg and walking in a circle, but the boys agreed that it still counted as one. Pete threw the spider on my cracker and I took a bite. It wasn’t so bad, but the peanut butter stuck to the roof of my mouth.

With spiders three and four, we got very innovative. We would have made a million if we knew the idea would become a gag-gift one day. Together we caught two in a glass pickling jar. Tommy, who usually played the part of my archenemy when I wore my cape, suggested we drown them with the hose, and then stick them in the freezer to make ice cubes. These two spiders were the easiest to eat because they just seemed part of the ice. I just crunched away as the boys watched. Rusty grimaced. His freckles all met in the middle of his face. He dug deep into his pocket again. I could tell he knew his nickel was on its way out.

I got out my magnifying glass and fried the next spider. There was an anthill across the street that we usually used to practice the method of ultra-violet magnification—and only once did the fire department have to intervene. For spider five, all five of us walked the street sides checking gutters and sewer grates until Chip found it—large, slow, and brown. The sun shone brightly, so it didn’t take long before the spider quit moving. I popped it in and swallowed quickly, then gagged because its furry legs felt like they were creeping down my throat. I felt my face turn red and beads of sweat form on my brow. Again my friends made noises and Rusty waved the coin in front of me, the way a matador tempts a bull with his red cape. I wanted to give up—this was torture, and I was suffering. But if I quit, none of my friends would let me live it down. My Super reputation hung in the balance, and so did the nickel.

Now lightheaded and feeling more ill, I hunted with the gang all afternoon for spider six. Tommy found the spider hanging from the swings at school. It was a quick one. It was hanging from its web when I grabbed its thread. The spider shot straight down. I kept pulling the thread up to try to grab the spider, but the faster I went, the faster the spider spun his thread. Eventually, I was able to get my mouth under the spider as he “spun to his
The seventh spider wasn’t hard to eat. I found this one in the noodle drawer in the kitchen. It was dead and lying in the corner with broken bits of pasta and breadcrumbs. It tasted like stale popcorn, and I wished I had some butter to go with it. After I swallowed it, Rusty argued that it shouldn’t count since it was already dead.

“But it was a spider,” I protested.

Rusty’s freckles gathered in the center of his face again, “Let’s vote on it. All in favor of it NOT counting as one of the eight spiders raise your hand.”

Chip and Rusty’s hands went up. Tommy and Pete looked at me. I pleaded my case, “Guys, do you know what a nickel can buy? I’m planning on going to Penny Mart after this and getting lollipops, licorice whips, and lemon drops!”

Chip put his hand down. Rusty made a fist and punched it into his open hand. We all knew that meant Chip was going to be in for it later, but his hand remained at his side. I could tell Tommy and Pete were already counting the pieces of candy that would soon be theirs.

I only had one more spider to go. Spider eight was the biggest spider. I would make it be the finale, and I was going to do it up good. To add to the drama, I made sure everyone was watching when I squished the spider across my palm and licked it off my hand like a Popsicle. My buddies jeered and applauded all at once. Rusty dug deep into his pocket again and pulled out the coin. It shone bright like a beacon, reflecting the sun.

From that day on I no longer wore the cape. I didn’t need it to prove my super-human power since it had been witnessed first hand.

Rusty was bitter even though I shared some of my winnings with him. He said he still didn’t think I was a Superman. Instead he whacked me on the shoulder with a stick and said, “From now on, you will be known as Spider-man.”