

Not Sick, Better

by Nina Dixon, age 17, Coquitlam

Ethan always said fate was in his blood. He wanted to be more than human, more than just soft flesh and bone.

He wanted to be a superhero.

While his friends laughed at his idea, Ethan gathered his collection in a glass jar. Spiders.

He'd talk to them in the dark, after his mom tucked him in bed. He watched how their venom dripped from their fangs, their silk, their legs. And one night, he stuck his arm into the writhing black mass in the jar and let them bite. Again. And again. And again.

At first, he had nothing but a fever. Sweating through wrinkled sheets and his bones crumbled like a cracking mirror. His mother thought it was a terrible flu. By the sixth night, his screams had become something else. An unearthly wail that made the neighbors swear their walls were shaking.

When they found him, Ethan's skin hung loose, wrinkly, and webbed. His face sagged in grim angles, jaw stretching in places where it normally shouldn't. Several legs sprouted from his back in juicy cracks, coarse hair glistened moistly where skin once was. Ethan's nails darkened and wound into hooked claws that clicked on the floorboards like snappy mandibles.

"Mom," he croaked, though his voice came wavered, half human. His lips shriveled back to reveal fangs where teeth had been, flesh ashen.

"I... did it."

He scurried towards her at the speed of lightning, part crawling, part dragging. Silk coiled from the raw wound in his mouth. She screamed, but the webbing hit her throat before she could run. Ethan's laughter was a shriek: high, wavering, and broken into neurotic clicks.

Neighbors arrived too late. They said the house smelled of copper and rot, like eggs and Sulphur in the house. They said the walls twitched. They said they heard him still inside, whispering, "It worked," over and over. His words warped until they barely sounded human.

The rescue team pried open the door. Inside, they found a cocoon in the corner. Blood seeped through its white silk, and it pulsed a little. One officer leaned close, and the cocoon split down the middle. Ethan's head stuck out first, eyes black and melted, mandibles clicking. His voice bubbled with mucus as he chanted.

"Not sick. Better."

His body followed, wrong in every way. It was thin, slippery, spiky with hairs that dripped venom. The cocoon collapsed behind him, still pulsing like a heart.

They opened fire. Bullets punctured him as he shrieked and wailed. His legs carried him up the wall in a scurry, across the ceiling, disappearing into the rafters. Silence fell. Then, a web dropped from the beams above, sticky and red.

"Your turn," Ethan whispered.
