

Spiders Inside



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WHAT IS THERE TO FEAR?

A furry black mass of limbs protrudes and carries itself, hidden within the long legs punctuated by joints and dark fiber like hairs are eight beady eyeballs too dark to reflect light. Distending directly beneath the eyes are two smaller limbs that resemble the tusks of a walrus, and attached to these limbs are two large fangs that secrete venom and digestive juices. The size of their bodies can vary from inconspicuously small and pea like to the dinner plate sized giants of their species. Spun along with our imagination they move past phobia and become monsters. Stories depict them bigger than cars, travelling together like a pack of wolves but in greater numbers, ghastly like a herd of zombies with an unrelenting desire to feast solely on human juices. They are fast, much smarter than anticipated and can climb anything. Bullets won't penetrate their tough carapace, their limbs are too strong to break and they're too quick to evade. Fire is the main defense our subconscious has given us. Like the witches from centuries before, we have decided it is the only thing that can take them down for good. If you find yourself in the unfortunate position of being in the sights of their eight eyeballs with no way out, the only mercy available to you is the speed in which these giant hairy creatures will gather you up to their mouths, breaking your bones as they do, and render you permanently immobile with the deep stabbing of their venomous fangs. Or if smaller, dozens of them will unsuspectingly emerge to cover your entire body, biting and sucking you way past death, until you are empty and your body resembles a human raisin all wrapped up in white.

Outside of our nightmares and fictional adaptations they are less deadly and less crazed for human juices, but no less intimidating. These things are terrifying; people have been brought into shrieking fits or reduced to quibbling blobs when one is simply spotted in their vicinity. Their image has been used throughout humanity and in numerous civilizations for a variety of mythological customs, and with the advent of popular entertainment their menacing appearance and creepy instinctual behavior have been used to scare us. What is not intimidating about a

creature that is propelled entirely by the hydraulic power located in each of its eight legs? And that also has eight eyes? Along with a pair of large overhanging fangs that inject both painfully paralyzing venom and a digesting acid that turns the insides of their victims into a liquid substance that can be slurped up as sustenance? A daunting variety of specie types, each with its own personal array of gifts: camouflage, propulsion, speed, aggressiveness, agility, and millions of years of instincts. There is only one species of human left on the planet, and on a physical level there isn't much going for us defensively. No big teeth or night vision. No super strength or speed. No claws or quills or protective shells. No venoms or poisons or toxins. With no exoskeleton and made mostly out of carbon and water we are possibly less defenseless than the sloth whose sole defense is lack of movement.

In short, don't make fun of people who are afraid of spiders. It makes sense.

SPIDER INSIDE

I have a spider in my head, and that is not the worst part. The worst part is that I put it there, and the second worst part is that I can feel it walking around up there. I can feel each of its eight legs moving rapidly and casually across the surface of my brain and along the walls of my skull. I saw the spider before it went in so I can picture it perfectly. I imagine it up there, what it could be doing. When I lay down to sleep nestling into my fluffy duck feathered pillow, maybe it nestles itself into the front of my brain, leaning up against the back of my squishy eyeball. Or in the herky jerky motion of my day maybe it sits comfortably amidst the wires of its new web, stretched across the backend of my skull from one side to the other, enjoying the cozy tight space but surely wishing there was a bit more room. I worry over the damage it is causing me, mentally and physically. It can't be good to constantly be thinking about a spider living inside your skull. Sometimes I sit for hours entranced by my imaginings of what it is doing up there. Who knows how much damage a spider's leg can be to a receptor in the brain? I doubt that has ever been tested. While I possibly lay on the brink of death, or worse, mental retardation, I bet it feels very safe in there surrounded by my thick skull, completely void of predators, and with a nice complimentary comfy juicy bloody brain to enjoy all to itself.

Since this travesty has befallen me I've spent much of my time wondering why more spiders aren't doing this. Why aren't spiders in heads a more common reason for a trip to the hospital? And could this become a growing trend? Might the word spread amongst the countless numbers of spider species? Is this the new threat to the human race?

The strange part is this isn't the first time I've had a spider in my head. It's the second time. I came across the first spider that would eventually inhabit the space between my ears one evening while I was writing. It was so unexpected that I mixed my evening pills with my night pills. I spotted it standing, or maybe it was sitting-I can't tell which is which with that species-in the corner of the wall directly in front of me. I made my writing desk face the wall because Stephen King suggested in a book he wrote that it might help. I am a big Stephen King fan. I

don't think he ever wrote about spiders, a lot about rats though. I mostly write romance and I used to so happily at the original spot of my writing desk, under the window that looked out to a green field and bit further a gray ocean. While I wrote I often theorized that perhaps if the sky was more often blue than it was gray the ocean would be bluer too. I like advice and I figured it couldn't hurt any, to move my desk around, but in the end it did.

My initial response to seeing the spider was to ignore it, this has been my usual mode of handling most things in my life, but I soon found that in this instance I could not do that. Maybe it was the mix up of the pills. Or maybe it was the sundown effect; I am getting up there. Whatever the reason I was stuck with it and once something gets in there it tends to stay awhile. The New Doctor says it's like when a record gets stuck playing the same song.

I was never particularly afraid of spiders, but I do recall a preference to always remain a safe distance away from them at all times. It was the feeling of their touch that frightened me the most. And this one was just too close for me to ignore, it wasn't within touching distance but it could be pretty quick. I didn't know what to do. I casually greeted it, not wanting to seem rude in case I angered it, who knows what pisses them off. If horror movies have taught me anything it is that being rude or mean, even to a doll, can result in an unexpected and horrifying death. Better to play it safe and assume everything can kill you. I tried to return to my work, resting my fingers onto the keys and waited for them to change my mind. I started to think about a time when I was a kid laying on the lawn in the back yard and seeing the contrast of the large brown spider on the bare skin of my left leg. How I had tried to run away from it but it never let me go. I kicked and jerked as I ran, but somehow it stayed stuck to me even as it climbed up my leg. I ran laps around the yard screeching until mother came and fearlessly swiped it away. I have never forgotten how all those legs felt moving, one after the other, on my skin, tickling the soft hairs on my leg. My mind back to the keyboard I tried to again forget that it was there at all, within feet of me. I even tried to forget that spiders existed as a species at all. In my mind I put white pillows in place of spiders. I imagined a pillow resting in the middle of a web, a pillow

wrapping up a fly in silk, and a tiny pillow on the wall facing me. It didn't really help. I had work to do, love to make, the last thing I needed was a spider on the brain. I rubbed at the corners of my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. The New Doctor says this action might hint at some deeper issue. I pushed at my eyeballs until I saw streaks of colours and then I started to imagine it launching itself at me and, God forbid, landing on my face. I opened my eyes again. I could see its dark body contrast against the soft salmon walls of my room. I waited.

When it became clear that it had no intention of crawling off and on to another space, preferably out of my sight, any time soon I knew that I would have to do something. Before seeing The New Doctor I would never had done something, I would have gone to bed and lost a night of work because of a spider. I am fine with most other creepy crawlers. Ladybugs are a delight to come across, a June bugs idiocy is fascinating, the sound of crickets is tranquil, potato bugs remind me of prehistoric fossils, and an ant's intelligence and strength is most impressive. Spiders are like the earth's monster. Fearful as I was, I resigned myself to fixing this problem. I raised my head and turned my body, meeting its gaze with the hopes of quelling my fear and finding a speedy solution.

It was a gray-looking spider with a medium-sized body and what I had judged to be above average sized legs that made it seem all the more ominous as they were very long and stereotypically spider like. The thought of killing it crossed my mind more than once as the speediest solution but was dismissed each time when I remembered that I do not like to kill things. I especially don't like to kill things that can fly, sting, bite, jump and move fast. I also don't like to kill things that tend to be squishy or crunchy or gooey. I could only imagine the sound and feeling I would have to endure as I pressed out this spider's existence, coupled with the small amount of guilt that would surely come after I wiped away its insides from my wall. The last time I tried to trap something it was a bumble bee. Let's just say my aim isn't too great. Looking around my room for help I felt at a loss and wished that someone else was there to take care of it. I thought about The New Doctor and what he had said about not letting the little

things take over and how there always was another solution if I was willing to see it. I rubbed at my eyes again.

‘Look’, I said. ‘I understand your species has been around a lot longer than mine. Entire eons more. And believe me I’m sympathetic to that.’ I paused here briefly, hoping to portray some of my sincerity. I was terribly aware of the silence in the room when I stopped speaking. I tried not to let it make me feel foolish and kept on. ‘And you probably feel that you have some sort of right to be here, in my room. And maybe you’re thinking ‘screw you weird old human and the boat your ancestors rode in on.’ And I would agree with you entirely as I personally didn’t decide to come here. It was my ancestors who made that decision for me, and therefore had no say in the matter what so ever. I am merely trying to survive on this land, like you, to the best of my ability.’

I paused here to take a sip of tea. I licked my lips and kept on. ‘Fortunately for me, my species happens to be very resourceful and fortunately for my brother’s resourcefulness I was able to acquire this comfortable living space that you have recently decided to inhabit. So here’s what I suggest.’ I said with a bit of a smile. ‘I will agree to allow you to remain here for as long as you like, so long as you agree not to ever come anywhere near me. It is nothing personal to you as a living being but it is personal to you as a species of arachnid that I happen to find particularly terrifying. You have to understand; to me you’re more than ugly. You’re creepy. And, if I am being perfectly honest, you disgust me entirely. Surely I’m no prize to you either, and I take no offense in this whatsoever.’

I watched as it carefully move two inches to the right and stopped. I kept on.

‘Regardless of this, I do feel that it’s possible for two different species to coexist. I am an animal lover despite my current inability to own a pet. Humans are not the only one’s entitled to live on this planet. Sharing is caring is a principle belief of mine and one that I think should be taken into consideration much more than it is. I not so long ago shared my bedroom with a beetle. And to show that my beliefs are more than just words, I’ll open my doors to you also. *Mi*

casa, su casa, as they say. I will not squish you,' I smiled at the spider with my right hand on my chest and left hand in the air to show that I meant it, 'and I'll do my best to avoid destroying your webs, but please do try to keep the number of them to a minimum and be mindful of where they are placed. Nothing low hanging. I hate walking into them.'

After this point I raised a finger to then stress my serious side, 'but more importantly than all the spider webs in the world, stay the fuck away from me at all times.'

The spider of course said nothing. I was grateful for that. It had remained more or less in the same spot on the wall the entire time. Because it helped make me feel better I decided to take that as silent consent, and since I myself accepted the terms it seemed that we were in agreement. A pact between two species, arachnid and hominid. I really had all the faith in the world in our dealing. It continued to stay in that spot on the wall while I sat there typing away.

Despite my faith in our pact I spent the very next day moving carefully through my room half expecting it to have grown many sizes overnight and jump out at me. I thought about calling The New Doctor to tell him about the problem I solved, but to be honest I was a bit shy about the how. He called me a few days later, when things had settled down and I was able to move about at a normal speed. I told him about the spider and how afraid I was and how I almost got stuck. He congratulated me. He didn't ask how.

Weeks had passed without incident. At times I'd forgotten it was there at all. And there were other times where I wouldn't see it for days and days. Like the beetle, it was a quiet roommate and we did spend some time together. It seemed to take interest in my hygiene as I'd often find it perched in the top corner of my shower staring down at me. More than once I watched it walk along edges of the ceilings. I took interest in its fabulous web making abilities, watching as it built an entire web from start to finish one afternoon. It took hours to make and the little guy never stopped once, it just kept pulling out more and more silk and stringing it along. It had made this beautifully intricate web across the kitchen window. It was quite large, and when the sun shone through it in the morning the rays reflected off the silk creating a

colourful light show, it was very appealing to look at. I was sad to have to destroy it. But I like to air out my kitchen while I cook, and besides I don't know that it would have caught anything there. I explained this while I took a newspaper to it, breaking all the strands that held it in place. I often wondered how long the spider would hang around for.

How long do spiders live?

Things were good until they weren't. It all started to take a turn for the worst that night I found it making its way along my satin duvet that I got as a Christmas gift one year from my brother. If it hadn't been in motion I doubt I would have noticed it. Technically this wasn't breaking any rule, as I wasn't in the bed at the time, but I could have been. And that was cutting it too close. Clearly more boundaries needed to be set. I decided to address the matter straight away. I rubbed my eyes as I spoke.

'A bed is a personal space,' I said, wanting to explain, 'and I just think it would make me more comfortable if you didn't go near it.' I paced back and forth along the edge of my bed, thinking about how close we could have been to, there was a good chance I could have sat on it. I left the bedroom in a huff. If I saw it at all the following day I did my best to make it seem otherwise. If I have learned anything from my mother it is that the silent treatment works wonders.

I found it in there again the very next night, this time standing – or sitting - under the covers. The dark gray patch of leggy body sat on my clean crisp white sheet. I was all set for bed, cup of tea, book in hand, spirits high on after concluding a particularly difficult portion of the book I was working on. Thankfully, I decided to switch on my bedside lamp before climbing inside. I don't always do this. I dare say that it wouldn't have been my fault if I sat on it. Immediately I began to regret our arrangement. I started to come up with a series of reasons and arguments as to why this wasn't working out for me. Its presence and blatant disrespect didn't sit well with me. I wondered what else it might be capable of aside from poor manners. I

wouldn't let myself be bullied around in my own home, after everything I had done. I let the beetle in, and it left without a word of goodbye or a thank you, and now this.

I yelled at the spider on my bed, 'I told you this space wasn't for you! I told you!'

I stood with my hands in fists at my sides, giving it my best glare, waiting for it to move, to slink its way out of my bedroom. But it stayed, didn't move an inch. I decided to take matters into my own hands. With the edge of my book I flicked it off my bed and onto the floor, watching it scramble under the bedside table. I really could have been much less gentle about it.

I didn't see it at all the next day, or the day after. I looked for it when showered. I kept an eye on the walls and windows, nervous with the anticipation. I saw it three nights later, right before going to bed, on the wall, not two feet above my head board. It wasn't in my bed or anywhere near touching me but again I didn't feel good about it. Maybe because of our recent dispute, perhaps I could sense a little animosity, maybe even aggression emanating from it. I rubbed at my eyes. I couldn't imagine anything good coming from an aggressive spider so I decided to take the diplomatic approach again and respectfully address it face on.

'Look,' I said before placing my book and cup of tea down on the bedside table, 'I'm sorry about the other night, but you know what you did and you knew how I felt about it.' I sighed loudly hoping to emphasise my hard feelings on the matter. 'Let's just forget it, okay?'

It stayed motionless like it always did when we quarrelled, a characteristic I was beginning to resent. I hated always being the bad guy turned softie just to make things run smoothly. I pulled back the covers and set to do some reading like I'd originally intended. I did my very best to not think about the close proximity of the spider. As my eyes scanned the words on the page I imagined the spider's long legs slowly creeping down my bedroom wall, stretching out a limb as it reaches the tips of some strands of hair and settling itself down on top of my head. I couldn't stand it.

'I'm going to read on the couch for a while,' I said.

I found the couch to be a sad replacement for my bed but I made do. I even ended up dozing off a while. I awoke a few hours passed midnight and stumbled my way to the washroom for a quick pee. I flicked on the light and, as is habit, looked at myself in the mirror. I saw it right away; I mean how could I miss it? A gray looking spider, its long legs spread wide to cover the most area of my face, sitting, or standing, along the right side of my cheek. I shut my eyes at the sight of it, I could hear my heart thump and my skin grew hot. I wanted to rub my eyes but what if I touched the spider? Out of nowhere I made an angry grunting screaming noise, like an ape maybe, as I slapped my face repeatedly with both hands for a full minute until I couldn't take the sting of the slaps anymore and I was sure it was gone.

Afterwards I set to shouting, 'That's it! You broke the number one rule!'

Of course I was shouting at nothing, it probably scampered off during all the slapping, but I knew it was still close, hiding under some nook. It knew it could still ear me. 'You broke the rule and now you must die!'

It took a few comfort drinks for me to stop shaking and calm down, my face still sore from the beating I'd given it. I decided that the next time I seen the spider I would kill it. I'd tried my best to coexist, more than anyone else surely would have.

I practiced stomping it to death with my slipper-covered feet, raising my leg high and landing it heavily onto the floor. I did this repeatedly with both feet for several minutes. I then practiced squishing it with my book, a thousand paged hardcover classic. Perfect, I thought.

Feeling betrayed and a bit tipsy I tried for my bed again. I tore off the sheets, squeezing as I bunched them up and threw them in the corner. I fell asleep atop my bare mattress hoping he had hidden in the sheets.

I woke up hours later, my eyes open to the ceiling. I could feel it there and at the bottom field of my vision I could see where its legs bent, the tips of its eight legs pressed into my cheek, its abdomen resting on my skin. My face began to twitch slightly above my lip, it moved to a step or two away in response. I wouldn't let myself miss this time. I knew it had to be quick,

otherwise it would see my hand coming. I moved my arm in anticipation, readying it for the swing, this time with more planned accuracy and force. And then it was over.

As you know, the inner ear is a sensitive spot on the human body. It's covered with tiny delicate hairs and as such it is perceptive to the slightest of touches. I felt every movement that spider made as it climbed over the ridges of my ear and squeezed its body into the hole that lead to my ear canal and down toward my brain. I felt it go all the way through to the other side, the inside. The sensation it caused was so overwhelming and paralyzing that I didn't even try to stop it.

Dumbfounded, I stared hard at myself in the mirror for several minutes, as if I would be able to see into my head. I didn't feel anything for a few moments. I imagine now that it must've been scared and unsure, completely surrounded in darkness, not ready to take a step, huddled inside the unknown safety of my skull. But soon enough I felt some movement, the feeling of which instantly drove me mad. I wanted to rip out my eyes and get it.

I punched my head, shook it violently, hit it off the wall. This of course only increased the spider's movements, being battered around like a bug in a jar, which subsequently increased the level of my insanity. I was literally humming with rage as an attempt to control myself before I did something really crazy. I must've resembled the Hulk just before he starts to turn green and tear off his clothes. What seemed to be an impossibly long time had passed before I'd exhausted myself, or once I'd gotten used to the sensation of having a spider walking in my head. I calmed slightly and attempted to begin thinking of ways of extracting it from within me.

I first tried lying my head down on one side, plugging the other ear with wads of cotton balls, in the hope that gravity might coax it out. I laid there for hours on my sofa, staring blankly at the wall, wishing repeatedly that I'd just killed the thing when given the chance and how the old adage of no good deed goes unpunished is so true. The sting of betrayal was there too.

With one failed attempt I moved on to submerging my head in hot water. An even less logical idea than the first. I knew good and well that my head wouldn't fill with water as I'd

hoped or that the temperature of the water would somehow cook the spider encased in my skull. But I did it anyway. I was desperate. I drew a bath, made it as hot as I could stand and laid down in it. As I waited for the spider to boil to death I repeatedly drained and refilled the tub with hotter water, trying to keep the temperature up. All this did was allow me to hear it better, with my head in the water the echoing the sound of its fast paced movements sounded like a distant knocking. *Tuh tuh tuh tuh. Tuh tuh tuh tuh.* After temporarily thrashing around in a fit of hysteria before I got out of the bath, I turned to staring at myself in the mirror again and begging it to please come out, tempting it with all the flies money could buy. I cried as I pleaded to my reflection. When that stopped I grabbed a bottle of Jameson, wrapped myself in my softest robe and tried to sleep.

It was a restless night, and when morning came I dressed and headed to the hospital. I explained what had happened in full detail, even mentioning the inter species agreement I'd made a month before, regardless of how it made me look. The doctor read my chart, nodding as I spoke, he seemed sympathetic. He peered in my ears but said he could see nothing. He made a comment that could've been taken as a light hearted remark, 'little guy is probably really in there.'

I didn't laugh, only imagining the 'little guy' at the farthest corner of my skull, attempting to avoid the spotlight of the instrument the doctor was wielding, like a criminal on the lamb. Seeing nothing he sent me to get an x-ray. The image that came back was a side view of my head, a profile shot showing my brain and a small mass resting on top of it about the size and shape of a large pea.

'You have two options,' the doctor said to me as he examined one of the images. 'You can leave it there and hope it will die or we can go in and get it out.'

'How long will it take to die?' I asked desperately.

'Anywhere from 6 to 23 days.' He paused, thinking it over. 'It depends,' he added.

I didn't ask how he knew this. I was too busy trying to grasp at the idea of that thing living inside my head for an additional 6 minutes let alone 6 to 23 days. I had to stop myself from launching head first into the closest, hardest thing I could find.

'How soon can you operate?'

The doctor smiled. 'You understand of course that we'll have to saw through your head and remove the top of your skull, exposing your brain entirely?'

'Yes,' I replied encouragingly, understanding how that would enable the doctor to have the freedom to easily capture the spider as well as remove any webs or burrows it may have created in the meantime.

'Okay. I'll consult with my colleagues and we'll begin surgery first thing tomorrow morning.'

The doctor stood up, closed my file and made a move to exit the room, but I stopped him before he could leave.

'There is just one thing, Doctor,' I said, holding onto the white sleeve of his doctor's attire.

'Yes?'

'I want you to keep it alive when you take it out. Please. Put it in a jar or something for me?'

The doctor looked at me, a puzzled expression across his face. 'You want to keep it?' he asked.

'No,' I replied firmly, 'I want to kill it. I want to pull the legs off one at a time.'

The surgery itself was a success. My skull came off, the spider was captured, my skull went back on and after 18 hours of sleeping I woke up with staples in my head, looking a bit like Frankenstein. Despite all this feeling a little groggy and sore, I was happy, because nestled in my two hands was a glass jar with holes poked in the lid, a courtesy I may not have afforded the spider myself. Inside was a gray spider with a medium-sized body and what I'd judged to be

shattered bones sticking out every which way. But spiders are built differently. I knew that at least. I remembered reading once that a spider can regrow lost limbs. I wondered if I could ever really be sure if it was dead. Yet, there it lay, still in the same position as when I'd first stopped shaking the jar. I allowed myself to feel comforted and fell back onto the bed, switched off the light and set to sleep again.

Ten seconds later, I switched the light back on.

I did this many times throughout the night.

What woke me the next morning wasn't my intense paranoia over the spider safely secured in a glass jar, but the lovely warmth of the sun. The feeling was so comforting that for a brief moment I'd forgotten all about the spider and the foolish agreement we had made months prior, a brief friendship followed by the spider's subsequent betrayal and inhabitation of my head which led to the surgical removal of my skull securing its capture which allowed me to satisfy my need to destroy it. But as fast as that pleasant moment came it was gone again as I turned to look at the spider.

I stared at the empty space that the jar had once filled not hours before, quickly calculating all the realistic possibilities as to where the spider had gone while simultaneously forcing myself to quell the more unlikely and terrifying possibilities of its supernatural escape. My rational brain had triumphed and narrowed it down to one option: someone else had taken it. The doctor. A nurse. A wandering child.

I was trying not to be too upset by this, *my* missing spider.

It was difficult to move. After the operation, my body seemed detached from my head. My brain was pounding in my ears. I saw the small white capsule full of colourful pills that had been left for me. Hoping that the pills were pain medication, I quickly washed them down and attempted to pull myself out of bed. My legs felt weak, but once on my feet, I wasn't really able to walk, and so I hobbled, step by step out of my room and down the hall. My right hand running along the wall kept me steady, my head seemed to weigh a ton, it hurt to lift it, it hurt to look

ahead. I kept my eyes to the linoleum floor, watching my cold bare feet make their way. Somehow I knew where I was going.

Not two minutes after I'd dragged my body out of bed and exited my room a nurse had stopped me. She placed her body in front of mine, hands on my shoulders, effectively blocking me. The idea of having to walk around her seemed exhausting and I was certain that she was aware of this. Annoyed, I attempted to shoo her away like a fly. I hated flies – their never ending buzzing and disgusting attraction to fecal matter and rotten food. I never felt any guilt over flattening them out of existence and wiping their gooey insides off my wall. Spiders eat flies, I thought to myself, as if just only realizing this now. The nurse was speaking to me but all I could hear was buzzing. I summoned all my strength, placed my hands firmly around her shoulders, pulled her close to my Frankenstein head and said, 'Shoo fly! Stop bothering me!.' And then when that didn't produce results, I added, 'Get the fuck out of my way before I suck you dry!' I can't be sure, but I may have even made a sucking sound after saying this.

I continued making my way down the hall until I recognized the welcome mat in front of a door. I knocked 3 times. The door opened. I was leaning most of my weight against the wall now, my right leg bent at the knee. I was so tired; I quickly discerned that there was most likely a sleeping aid in amongst those pills I'd taken minutes ago.

'My dear Sir, I dare say you should not be out of...'. The Doctor started but I cut him off, I wasn't in the mood.

'Where's my spider?' I asked, trying desperately to lift my head up to meet his eyes. 'I left it on your bedside table in a sealed jar.'

'Perhaps the cleaner had removed it this morning,' the doctor suggested. 'She is very thorough and as I think of it, she has quite a dislike for spiders.'

'Why?' I asked. 'Did one ever get inside her head?' I laughed, attempting to point at my own head but only managed to raise my arm high enough to point at the wall adjacent us. My

body shook so hard from all the laughing that I collapsed onto the floor, slapping my knee on the way down. Then blackness.

I woke up back in my hospital bed feeling weak and drugged. I looked over at my bedside table. The jar was still gone. I sank heavily into my pillow. I felt at a loss and laid there quietly for some time, tears running down my cheek and hitting the pillow with a soft *tup*. I watched the light slowly leave the room as the sun went down, casting large shadows across the room. I watched them shrink and grow as the sun moved through the room. A small shadow emerged at the far end of the room, slowly making its way alongside the wall. It was size of a baseball, bulbous shaped. My eyes followed it as I sat up to find the thing that was casting the shadow. I scanned the empty space between the walls, back and forth, but there was nothing. Just a bare wall and pink linoleum floors. I looked back to the window where the sun was coming through; it was bright on my eyes accustomed to the dimly lit room. On the windowsill I saw something move, it was small and dark and slowly making its way. I looked across from it to the shadow on the wall, this time I saw faint lines jutting out from the bulbous mass.

I felt my body begin to tingle as I wondered over the possibilities. This rush of adrenaline enabled me to move despite the heaviness of my body. With my bare feet on the floor, my legs braced against the bed, I felt weaker than before. The idea of walking a single step seemed treacherous. I lowered myself onto all fours, guiding myself down carefully, until I was able make my way over to the windowsill. My head felt like it weighed a hundred pounds so I let it sag low off my neck, my gaze going no further than a few inches ahead of my hands. I moved each of my limbs in a jerky motion, making me think of a poorly designed robot. I stopped moving when my head hit the wall, I lifted my gaze up to find the windowsill and then raised my to meet it. I hurt from the weight of my body that wobbled on my knee caps. But it was ignored when I saw what was now within my reach. With my right hand I let go of the windowsill and laid my hand down, blocking its path. Without any hesitation it turned to go back the other way. I blocked its way again with my other hand, this time it stopped just shy of my skin. I anticipated

its touch. I stared down at it, neither of us making a move. As I lowered my face closer and closer it started moving again, faster than before, again in the opposite direction. I watched and felt it scurry over the top of my hand. I almost flattened it as I slapped my other hand down on top of it once it had made it over. I folded my hand over it, feeling its whole body and concentrating on not squeezing too hard. It helped that it didn't squirm. The body felt so fragile, it would've been so easy to squish. I lifted it up to my eyelevel and peered in between two of my fingers. Ignoring its eyes I studied the long legs and dark brown body with a spotted design along its robust backside. I nodded in agreement over its strange attractiveness and placed my ear in my hand. I laughed feeling it scurry, pushing itself this way and that. I started closing my hand around my ear giving it only the one way to go. I waited for it to make its entrance.

HOME SWEET HOME

We moved during the summer months. I did most of the moving while Becky and the girls packed everything neatly into boxes. It took a few trips, but we got it done cheaply. It was a hell of a time to do it in that heat, but Becky wanted to wait until after the girls had finished their school year. I didn't see the problem – the girls were young and bright, they would've adjusted fine. I went along with it anyhow, like I usually do. The house we were moving into, the neighbourhood, it was an upgrade to say the least – a real home with a lawn, driveway and backyard. All the things normal, “successful”, families have.

I bought the house after getting a permanent position at 'The Mill', as it was known – full time hours doing regular 9 – 5 shifts with benefits. They were hard days for the most part, but I wasn't old yet. Still I could feel it coming on too fast. The promotion I got, although for a shit job, was a life saver. Before the promotion I was working all hours of the day, and then sometimes no hours. I didn't know how many more back shifts I had left in me and we couldn't afford me not working for days. The Mill was a place where people either worked a few years to get out of the hole or for the rest of their life. It was the place that let you get your footing, a place for last ditched efforts to make some desperate money, and a place for those who had nowhere else to go. It was where you worked if you dropped out of high school. It was where you worked if working in The Mill ran in the family. Or like me, it was where you worked if all you had was a high school education and a growing family to support. The Mill was filled with guys like me.

Becky was really pushing for me to get the promotion, as if I didn't want it enough for myself, like I enjoyed working backshifts every day. We fought a lot about money, what we could and couldn't afford and what we classified as 'needs'. She'd ask, 'Is that a need or a want?' For a while it seemed like that was all we talked about. I hate money. Becky ended all our fights with 'I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to hold out.' Sometimes adding “living in

this little apartment that never stays clean.” Some days it drove her just short of crazy, she said. I knew our place was small and getting smaller. It was our first place together, long before the girls, when things were simpler and saving money wasn’t a hopeful projection into the future. Being cramped in that tiny apartment all day every day, she said she felt that she needed the change more than anyone. She had the girls to look after and doing anything in that cramped kitchen was, she said, a nightmare. I am sure it was tough for her, but it wasn’t easy for me either; it wasn’t easy for any of us, the girls included.

Our girls, Suzy and Sheena, are still young enough to not understand what being poor means, and I was grateful for that. ‘God willing,’ as some might say, they ‘d grow up and things would become clearer to them. They’d be able to draw comparisons between themselves and everyone else. This is a long and drawn out way to say that when I got that full time position, it went beyond solving money matters. But you know how it is – where one door closes a window opens, and that window was worse than any raggedy old door. Worse than any of us could have ever imagined.

I eased off the gas as I turned onto our street, wanting them to get a good look at their new neighbourhood. The old place was in an apartment building pinned between two main roads. There was constant traffic noise. All I can remember us hearing as we made our way down the smooth black street was the hum of a distant lawn mower and children. It was an oddly perfect moment.

It was a small white house with light blue shutters sitting on top of a small hill. I picked it out myself. Becky was always busy with the girls and it seemed like too much trouble to tout them all around the city looking at house after house. This way it got to be a surprise. I went over for a few hours after work, the day before we moved, to mow the lawn and repaint the shutters. It looked pretty good – not the best on the block, but not the worst, and that’s what mattered. I did the best I could to hide my excitement and seem nonchalant about it all, as if

moving into a new house happened to me all the time and not something we had spent almost a decade saving for.

The weight that left my shoulders after the first night in our new home was immeasurable. I'd finally done right. I promised Becky I would when she first told me she was pregnant with Suzie. Becky squeezed my arm and gave me her happy smile, all teeth.

I smiled back. I was no fool, I knew how important it was to savor the good times.

The house wasn't all that big once we'd filled it with our stuff. The girls had to share a room but they preferred sleeping together anyway. At least their new room was twice the size it had been in the last place and it had a window that faced the front lawn instead of a side street.

From the kitchen window, I watched the girls playing in their new backyard. I turned to see Becky struggle to carry a large box marked *kitchen*, one of many. I hate unpacking –it can take forever to decide where something should go. Or I should say, it takes Becky forever to decide, and it may never find a forever spot.

I called for the girls to come in and start unpacking in their room, even though I knew in five minutes they'd be doing something completely unrelated, most likely inspired by having rediscovered some of the contents of their boxes. The girls responded in unison, as they'd been doing since they could talk. Unless being spoken to individually, the two almost always chimed in unison. It was uncanny, adorable and at times a bit *Children of the Corn* creepy.

'They love it here Budd,' Becky said as she slipped her arm around my waist, 'I love it here,' she added.

Enjoying my proud moment but not wanting to show it, I reached around Becky for the cupboard doors. I began opening and closing them, playing their loud squeak.

Then came the high pitched screams of our girls. Becky moved first, right past me to the screaming that didn't stop until both of us were in their sight.

'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!' the girls yelled in unison.

They were standing in the middle of their bedroom, holding each other with one arm and pointing with the other at the far corner. The room was crammed with boxes and haphazardly placed furniture. It was hard to see the source of their terror.

I stepped over the piles of half emptied boxes, past the girls towards the spot they were so adamantly pointing towards.

I laughed and turned to Becky who was standing with her arms around the girls.. I smiled at her.

'A spider,' I said.

'A *big* spider, Daddy,' Suzie added.

'*Kill* it!' Sheena demanded, stomping her feet.

'I'm not going to kill it,' I said. 'It's probably more afraid of us than we are of it.'

I took a couple steps towards it and got a better look. It was a fair sized spider. The diameter of a coffee cup, maybe even bigger.

I knelt down slowly onto the carpet. My delicate movements made me realise I was kind of afraid myself. I wouldn't say I was afraid of spiders but I wouldn't say I wasn't.. If I hadn't had an audience I'd have most likely grabbed the broom and shooed it out of the house, or squashed it with my boot if the broom proved unsuccessful.

The spider's eyes seemed quite large, almost covering the entire top half of its body. I was two feet away and could easily see every one of them. Its black bumps made it look sick. The rest of it was thin and gangly, with dark gray thick fur covering its whole body. It wasn't the size of the eyeballs that bothered me, it was the intensity of the stare.

'You OK Daddy?' said the kids.

'Sure,' I replied, as casually as I could manage.

I found myself staring at the spider for a long moment before I pulled out my work gloves and made a move for it. I hoped it would get spooked and run off before I had a chance to touch it. It stayed very still the whole time. I wondered if it was dead.

I placed my hands either side of the spider, palms facing up, with the hopes of easily scooping it up.

The instant my glove touched the spider, it launched up onto its back legs, stretching them out. It appeared twice as big as it had the moment before.

I propelled myself as far back as possible.

The girls screamed.

I jumped.

Becky was annoyed.

Feeling a bit scared and annoyed at myself I snapped back at her, silencing the room and effectively making me the monster.

I tried to ignore what had just happened and asked Becky if she'd get me a cup.

She left the room without saying anything. Becky returned with a drinking glass, not quite what I'd wanted. She handed it to me while doing her very best not to make eye contact.

With my new weapon in hand, I pulled myself within arm's reach of the spider. It had resorted back down on all eight legs, once again appearing so still it looked like it was dead. . It was an intense few seconds before I could psych myself up enough to slam the glass down.

I watched as the imprisoned spider raised its front legs repeatedly, bucking up and down. I turned back to see if anyone had seen my triumph, but their faces didn't show the relief or gratitude I was expecting. Instead Becky whispered, 'There's another one, right beside you.'

I turned my head left then right, looking for the thing that my wife was mistaking for a spider, but I didn't see it. I snapped at her again, demanding to know where it was.

The girls responded this time. 'It's right there Daddy,' they whispered raising their arms out in front of them, their tiny fingers pointing outwards.

I followed their fingers to a spot on the floor, a foot to my left. A spider, identical to the one I'd trapped under the glass. I wasn't sure what to do but moving seemed a bad idea. The

spider sat facing both me and the glass, seemingly assessing the situation. I stayed on my knees with one hand holding the first spider hostage and the other one holding me steady.

My heartbeat steadily increased.

I whispered for Becky, but no answer. When I whispered louder the spider moved slightly, facing me directly. I asked her to throw something at it with the hopes of breaking its gaze.

Becky, sensing my distress, backed the girls out of the room and picked up the nearest empty box. I strained to watch her out of the corner of my eye.

‘Do I just *throw* it?’ she asked..

‘No,’ I said, ‘try and throw it on top of it, to trap it.’

I should’ve just killed them. I knew the likelihood of Becky actually tossing the large box on top of the spider was small. . As soon as she let the box go, the spider ran at her. Its little legs launched itself forward at a surprising speed, but fear had Becky move quicker. She ran out of the room and into the kitchen. The spider darted after her, ignoring the girls and me. It followed her out the door and down the hallway and into the kitchen.

Becky was standing on the table, screaming and stomping. By the time I got there the thing had climbed the table leg and was a foot away from her bare feet. Becky continued to stomp, but it kept moving forward, more slowly now, one leg at a time.

I flattened it dead with my gloved hand. I left Becky and the smooshed spider on the table to check on the other one I’d left under the glass. As Becky climbed off the table, I heard the girls tell her, ‘We don’t want to sleep in that room anymore.’

It was close to midnight before Becky and me could convince the girls that there were no more spiders, lifting and going through every single box and possible hiding spot, even though we weren’t too sure ourselves.

I freed the spider I'd trapped in the glass, even though Becky wanted me to kill it. I couldn't do it. It turned out I'd broken off the top half of one of its front legs when I slammed the glass down. I reassured her with this fact, saying that it would probably die anyway. I carried the glass in one hand onto the back porch. It was pretty dark out so I switched on the back light. It was just sitting there now, calmly awaiting its fate.

I looked at the missing front leg. 'Sorry guy,' I said. 'Be free now.'

I flung the glass forward, launching the spider onto the grass. It was too dark to see where it landed, but I tried to search for it anyway. Mostly I wanted to make sure I wasn't trying to make its way back inside.

The next morning, Becky and I decided to make an extra special effort to keep the girls' minds off the incident from the night before. Luckily it wasn't too hard – they were so excited about waking up in their new home and in their new neighbourhood that they'd pretty much all but forgotten about the spiders. Becky had seemed to have forgotten about it too. She brought it up once while cleaning up the mess from the morning's breakfast off the kitchen table.

'I don't think I've ever been chased by a spider before,' she said, laughing it off.

I, on the other hand couldn't stop thinking about it.

While we worked on the house, I kept an eye out for the spiders, half expecting to see one or more dart out from some corner. I regretted releasing the spider the night before. I should've listened to Becky and killed it. I imagined the wounded spider telling its buddies what I'd done to its leg, riling them up and devising a plan to take me out. I tried to talk to Becky about it some more but she was being sensible and I didn't want to hear any of that.

'Budd, you said that no one had been living in the house for over a year. They've probably been here for a while, thought it was their territory or something. I don't know, what does it matter now? Let's just forget it. I don't want the girls getting upset again.'

I told her what I was worried about, how I regretted not killing that spider, that it was probably angry at me.

‘Yea, you trapped it inside of a cup, I would be angry at you too.’

‘It chased you onto the kitchen table. What spider does that? And where did that other one come from?’

Becky stopped responding; it was what she did whenever I got angry or went off on a tangent. She’d ignore me and later say that there was no point in trying to reason with me when I was like that.

‘I bet there’s a nest somewhere,’ was all I said, hoping it would scare her as I left her to finish the unpacking.

The second day was a bit better. I felt comforted having not seen a single spider the day before, not even a bug. I was able to get a lot done. Things seemed to be back on track, until I went to bed that night.

Only my nightmares are in black and white, the rest are in colour. I hadn’t dreamt in colour since we moved into the house, since I’d seen the spiders. I didn’t remember what I’d dreamt the first night I slept in the house until I woke up from a nightmare that second night. One nightmare triggering another. It was overwhelming. On the second night I dreamt of finding Suzie in her bed covered in web and sucked dry, her mouth gaping open, eyes sunk in. Then I remembered what I’d dreamt the first night, only it came in pieces like a puzzle with missing bits. The smell of burning. There were spiders everywhere, staring.

I woke up covered in sweat. I couldn’t lie still knowing they could still be in the house, or that there were more. I had to find them if they were there, and wipe them all out.

I got up, leaving Becky sleeping soundly. I searched in every room in the house, saving the bedrooms for later when everyone would be awake. I turned on every light and set up my work lights in areas where I felt it wasn’t bright enough. I found some beetles and even some

spiders, and killed them, but they were nothing like the ones from before. I imagined them moving through the walls like mice so I cut out a couple of holes in the walls, big enough to fit my head into. When I didn't find anything there I convinced myself I would in the basement.

I was sure there'd be a nest down there. I flicked on the light that dangled above and walked down the wooden steps. The light only covered the stairs so I brought a flashlight with me and a bottle of raid.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs and shone the flashlight over the basement. It was almost empty – there wouldn't be many places for critters to hide. I stood quiet and still for a few moments while having visions of finding a giant spider tucked away in a corner, pumping out hundreds of babies. I took some steps forward, expecting to see one dart across the floor or hear one scatter away. I found nothing. I spent over an hour down there. I shone the flashlight into every crack in the wall and in every corner and under the stairs. I even kicked at the wall hoping to scare some out. You'd think I'd have been relieved, but I was disappointed because I knew they were there and hadn't found them yet.

Over supper Becky discretely questioned me about what I'd been up to the night before, and why there were holes in the walls. She knew what I'd been doing.

'Find what you were looking for?' she asked. I made sure the girls weren't paying attention, and as usual the two were safely chatting and giggling in their own world. . I told her I hadn't found what I was looking for but that I knew I would.

And speak of the devil, as they say, I appeared to have summoned one, sitting in the middle of our dinner table facing me. I wondered how long it had been there.

My thoughts of finding something to kill it with were interrupted when Becky caught sight of what I'd so intently been glaring at. She shrieked and pushed her chair away from the table.

The commotion set the spider running. It wove its way around the salt and pepper shakers, the jug of water, and between the girls' plates, disappearing off the side of the table. But I kept my eye on it, and when it moved from my sight I slid off the chair, dropping to my knees to catch where it was heading. It was hanging off the side of the table, two of its back legs holding it up while the rest dangled downwards.

It fell to the floor, making a light thud as it landed and scurried off towards the nearest wall. I crawled after it, moving quickly under the table, almost knocking Suzie off her chair in the process. I watched it slip underneath the baseboards and into the wall.

By the time Becky put the girls to bed, I'd pulled up all the base boards in the kitchen. The floor was covered in wood and newly-bent nails. I was still on my hands and knees wielding a flashlight and peering into crevices and cracks.

My knees and back were screaming. Years of working at The Mill had done their toll in making me feel old. I kept on searching, running my hands along the bare wall and periodically sticking fingers inside any space they would fit.

Becky was standing there, watching me. 'Let's just call an exterminator tomorrow,' she said. 'Okay?'

I said nothing.

'Please Budd,' she added.

I turned to sit, taking my gloves off and tossed them on the floor.

I agreed with Becky. I'd wanted to avoid the expense by fixing the problem myself, but come to think of it, the idea of poisoning those fuckers was well worth the money. Choke the bastards out, I thought.

I looked around at the mess I'd made of my new home. How unglued I felt all of a sudden, and just when things seemed to be going so well. I thought about the spiders and reached for the gloves, ready to hammer in all the base boards again.

As I bent down to pick up the hammer I spotted one directly in front of me, a few steps away. I shone the light, and realised there were dozens of others behind it, all motionless and looking identical. My mind began to imagine all of them running at me, as in my dream. ,

I threw the hammer into the center of the cluster, denting the floor and hitting none of them as they scurried out of the way creating two piles of spiders now separated by a small space around the hammer.

The oddness of this behaviour only enraged me more. I picked up one of the longer base boards and swiped it along the floor, hitting many of them as it went by. The noise brought Becky back into the kitchen. I looked up at her to make sure she was seeing this. I kept swiping as they moved away, sending one or two flying across the floor or into the wall.

Eventually they all made their way under the fridge in single file. I dropped the floor board and made a move to pull the fridge out from the wall but Becky stopped me, hissing at me to just leave them alone. Frankly, I was glad to hear fear in her voice and satisfied that I'd managed to hit some of the spiders.

I picked up the flashlight and scanned the area but found nothing. I was sure I'd killed at least a few of them. I returned my attention to Becky, asking her if she'd seen how many there'd been. Had she seen how they moved together, like a school of fish?

She said nothing.

When I told her that they weren't normal, she nodded in silent agreement and led me to bed.

Suzie woke up with a headache and stayed in bed all day. The exterminator came and looked the house over and said that he couldn't find a trace of an infestation. I couldn't really care and to be honest I wasn't all that surprised he hadn't. Becky and I saw them –we knew they were there.

'Spiders' he said, 'are considered to be a beneficial type of bug.' He had a deep southern accent and when he said bug it sounded like there were a few extra 'u's in there. 'They eat stuff you probably didn't even know was living here with you. And they don't leave much behind, web clusters, a nest or two, that sort of thing. It is not unusual for there to be nothing either.

Most of them around here are harmless. It's the phobias that get people wanting to kill them.' He looked up at me when he said this last bit.

I said I was doing it for the girls, that they were terrified of them, lost sleep over it and everything. I tried to change the subject, by asking him what he was looking for.

'Cocoons,' he told me. 'If I can find the nest I probably won't need to fumigate your place – save you some money.' He, held up his index finger and said, 'One cocoon can contain hundreds of spiderlings.'

My insides coiled at the idea of there possibly being hundreds of those things in his house. I suggested he fumigate regardless just to be sure.

I went to work the next day. Becky took the girls to her sisters while the house was being fumigated. I looked forward to coming home to a spider-free home.

It was the middle of the night when something came into our bedroom. The house had been fumigated a week prior, and I hadn't seen so much as an ant in the house, but I still couldn't let

it go. The nightmares kept my fears alive and I began to imagine things. And when that door opened I pictured a cluster of spiders forming a human shape and walking into my room.

I had to shake it off to see that it was only Sheena. Just a nightmare, I thought – a waking dream.

‘Mom,’ she whispered an inch above Becky’s ear, waking her up with a jolt.

Becky asked her what was wrong, ‘There’s something wrong with Suzie.’

I jumped out of bed and headed for the girls’ room. Still talking with her mother, I could faintly make out Sheena say one word: ‘Spiders.’

I pushed open their bedroom door, not sure what to expect, and switched on the light. There was Suzie laying still, flat on her back. She looked fine, but then I worried as to why the bright light hadn’t woken her. The few times I’d ever been left to take the girls to school, I’d wake them by flicking the light on. It would always do the trick.

From outside of the doorway Becky asked if she was okay. I told her that I didn’t know, that she hadn’t woken up when I had turned on the light.

‘Suzie!’ Becky called, using her stern voice usually reserved for when one or both of the girls were up to something.

Suzie opened her eyes and then shut them again, placing her arm across her face to block the light. She started to cry.

I asked her if she was alright as Becky rocked her like an infant in her arms.

Through sobs she said that her head hurt a lot. I was relieved but not satisfied. I’d never admit it then, but I was convinced that the spiders had something to do with it.

I pulled Sheena out of the room and asked her to tell me exactly what she’d seen. Tears streaked her face. ‘I saw her shaking,’ was what she said, and then she shook her arms and head, re-enacting what she’d seen her sister do, imitating a seizure. And then she said, ‘And I saw spiders on her.’

It was late so we didn't have to wait long before being seen by a doctor at the hospital. I explained about the possible seizure, or what Sheena had depicted, and her headaches the days past. He stayed with Suzie while someone else ran some tests and I sent Becky home with Sheena to sleep.

Some time passed, a few hours at least, when the doctor told me that Suzie was fine, that the headaches could be attributed to a number of things like stress. His recommendation was taking it easy for a while. That's all doctors ever seem to say when they don't have an answer for you. I half listened to the man's advice while I debated whether or not I should ask the question I'd wanted to ask as soon as we had gotten into the hospital.

'We've been seeing a lot of spiders around the house lately,' I said to him after he'd finished talking. I tried to be as casual as I could. The doctor didn't say anything so I told him that Sheena had seen some spiders crawling on her when she was sleeping.

'Okay,' the doctor said. 'And?'

'Is it possible if one of them could have gotten inside her head, messed things up, laid some eggs or something?'

'Short answer is no', he said laughing.

It was the sound of panic in Becky's voice that woke me up.

I was having another dream about spiders in the house. Becky's scream was part of the dream. Everything was in black and white. I could smell burning again, but this time I realized it was me. My legs were burnt badly and I was crawling, trying to get out of the house. I knew if I didn't escape they'd all get a piece of me. I could hear Becky scream. I don't know if I made it.

I awoke in darkness, alone. I opened the bedroom door and could hear Becky again. Sheena was standing at the doorway crying, both of her hands were up around her mouth like she was trying to hold it all in, it was something she only did when really upset.

As I got closer to her I saw one and then two and then several spiders emerge from out of her bedroom door, scurrying down the hallway towards the kitchen. I grabbed Sheena up, afraid that they might climb on her. I wanted to chase them down, stomp on them, but I was in my underwear and a part of me was too afraid.

I called out for Becky. She came out of the room carrying Sheena. They were both white as ghosts but Sheena wasn't awake. Becky was shaking. All she could say was, 'They were crawling all over her. They were all over her.'

We headed back to the hospital that night. I had Becky pack some bags, I knew we wouldn't be going back home until I was sure they were gone.

Sheena was hooked up to all kinds of things, laying in the hospital bed. She still hadn't woken up. I hated to think it but she looked like she was already dead, she was so still. It killed me to see her there like that. I let the sound of her heart monitor remind me that she was still alive. I thought for a second about saying a prayer or something but all that came out were threats to the world or the universe or fate, whatever.

Then Becky walked in. She was still crying. She said the doctors didn't know what was wrong and that she had had another seizure but that they didn't know what had caused it, that sometimes kids get seizures for a while and then stop. Or that it could be some sort of epileptic disorder. Or a brain tumor. Hearing all that made me realize I didn't want to be there anymore. I was exhausted. There wasn't anything I could do for Sheena and being around my wife made me feel like a failure. I lifted myself out of the chair and directed Becky into it. I gave Sheena a kiss. I

told Becky I was going to pick up a couple of things and that I would be back later. I was half down the hall before she could finish her protest.

I felt bad about leaving the girls at the hospital but I couldn't wait any longer. I needed a minute to think, away from the girls and Becky. The only thing I could think to do was fix the house, make it safe for when Sheena got better. Keep the spiders away from her, out of her head. But aside from an exterminator I didn't know what other options I had. Hire a different one? As broke as we were, I'd have done it if I thought it would do any good. I drove around in the truck for about an hour before I finally got my bright idea.

It was dark by the time I pulled up to the front of the house. I'd stopped to pick up a few things before heading over. The place looked completely vacant like it did the first time I'd seen it, only then the sight of the house felt hopeful. Now it seemed anything but. I sat in the truck for a long while, imagining what they were doing in there. I knew they made Sheena sick somehow. I got out of the truck and walked up the front lawn towards one of the lower windows. I peered inside. Everything looked still and quiet, just as it should. I went around the back to look in through the patio door. The kitchen looked the same. 'Not a creepy crawler in sight,' I said to myself, knocking on the glass pane a few times and watching to see if it startled anything hiding inside.

I could feel myself getting more and more frustrated by the minute, too afraid to go inside my own house. I slammed my fists hard onto the glass and from the corner of my eye I was sure I saw one dart across the kitchen floor.

As if this was all the proof I was looking for, I headed back to the truck and pulled out what I'd picked up earlier – two cans of aerosol spray, a shiny new zippo lighter, and a goalie stick. I slipped them into my front pockets. I took off my sneakers and put on my work boots, tucking my pants into the top of the boots.

Once inside the house, I strained my eyes in the dark to pick up any movement. I stood in the middle of the kitchen still as a board but slowly turning my head from side to side, scanning everything in sight. The only light was the moon, streamed in through the windows. I don't know why I didn't turn on a light. The silence of the house was broken intermittently from passing cars and a barking dog. I remember feeling oddly comforted by these sounds that reminded me of the safety that was just outside the house walls.

For a while nothing happened and I was comforted by this too. But still I was frustrated and scared. I admit I cried there for a bit, a grown man standing in my own kitchen ready to wield a goalie stick at any moment. I thought about Suzie and how I probably should be with her in the hospital instead of standing in my kitchen looking like a serial killer from a horror movie waiting to kill spiders that I believed were taking over my house and possibly destroying family. Destroying me for sure.

The fear quickly turned to anger. I started to yell. I flipped the kitchen table, picked up one of the chairs and smashed it on the floor, hacking at the remaining chairs with the goalie stick until what was once our family dinner table was now a pile of broken wood. I would've kept going had I not been swiftly brought to the floor by my own doing. In my blind rage one of the swings missed the chair and hit me in the middle of the knee cap. At first I had no idea what had knocked me to the floor, but when I tried to stand up I saw a silver flash of pain stream behind my eyeballs. I cupped my knee with both hands. I'd broken myself.

I lay down on the floor which felt nice and cool against my sweaty body. I couldn't remember the last time I hurt that much. My cheek pressed against the linoleum, my body curled in a fetal position. It hurt too much to think about anything other than how much it hurt, so I let myself go with the pain and remained where I was for a long while.

I don't know if I woke up or if my mind had simply returned to the present. I wasn't sure how long I'd been laying there but it must've been a while. All the comforting sounds were gone and so was the light from the moon. The walls seemed so impenetrable and so far away. A hard dull ache resonated from my kneecap. My hands were sticky from my blood. I knew I should get up and go to the hospital but I was afraid to stand up. So I compromised by turning onto my back.

As I moved I felt the faintest of somethings run across my upper body. It was a mouse, I told myself as I held my body in a frozen position. I lay there in that awkward way for several moments, half on my side and half on my back. My strained muscles and knee screamed at me for release.

Then I heard something else. Forgetting the pain, I whipped around onto my back, readying myself for anything, facing the direction I thought the sound had come from. For a brief moment I saw nothing but the dark outlines of the kitchen. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I began to see clearly that there was nothing there.

With a shaky exhale I calmed down and sat up to check my knee. I touched it gently and felt wetness. I still couldn't see well enough to know the full extent of the damage. I turned my head to the closest light switch that seemed impossibly far away. I knew there was no point in trying for it. My best move would be to get back to the truck and drive to the hospital, to my family, to safety. But then I remembered the lighter I'd brought. I pulled out the aerosol can and fished the lighter out of my front pocket flicking the bic. Instantly the area around me was illuminated in a soft glow, and just as instantly I began to feel relief. I focused on my knee. I could see some red staining on my hands. My jeans were stiff from the hardened blood.. There was a small tear in the fabric of my pants where I'd hit myself. Still alight, I set the bic down and gently pulled the tear further apart to expose the wound. It was too dark to see much of anything without having the flame in my hand so I picked it up again, allowing my eyes to adjust to the light. I squinted, screamed and dropping the lighter..

Again in the darkness I sobbed and hoped that what I just saw wasn't real. My knee was completely numb, but didn't hurt as much as earlier. I tried to remember when the pain started to go away. I was shaking uncontrollably as my mind replayed the last thing it had seen – my bloody swollen knee sticking out through torn jeans and a spider the size of a baseball sitting on top. But I knew it wasn't just sitting there. I forced myself to pick up the lighter. With eyes closed I flicked and then looked. It was still there. I grabbed at my mouth with my other hand to stop from screaming again. I watched as its hairy legs kneaded at my skin like a kitten on a tit, feeding more blood with its mouth placed firmly around my flesh. I looked closely and saw that one of its front legs was missing.

'Get off me,' I whispered. 'Get off me or I will kill you.'

I brought the lighter up closer to my knee, hoping the heat would make it move. I bent forward, bringing my face as close to the spider as I could stand and shouted, 'Get off me!'

The spider didn't flinch, but its companion on the other side of my bloody knee did. I hadn't seen it before as it was hidden under the fabric. I tore at my jeans, exposing the whole leg. Four more crammed on the top of my knee and three lined up the side of my leg, which I realized no longer had feeling.

I cannot say how badly I wanted to smash at them with my fists, but at the same time I didn't want to touch them at all. I felt myself grow weaker and was surprised to find t I wanted desperately to sleep despite what was happening. I was sure that if I stayed where I was, the spiders would poison me then drain me dry. Who knew how many more there were around, watching and waiting for their turn.

I closed the lid of the lighter and sat in the darkness. I was sure of what had to be done. It both calmed and excited me. Madness took over as I felt around for the aerosol can. The can seemed heavy for my tired arm as I raised it behind the flickering flame and pushed down. The whole room lit up, and I felt the heat and smelt the burning flesh but there was no pain.

As quickly as I'd started, I lifted my finger off the can. The spiders were gone. My leg looked like a charred piece of meat, black and crispy in places and raw and white in others. I let the lighter drop.

'Get to your truck' I screamed to myself. 'Get to your truck!' 'Move your body!'

I tried to lift myself up on my good leg but couldn't find the strength. I started to crawl toward the patio door while desperately trying to ignore the sensation of weightless creatures with many legs crawl all over me. Just like the nightmare, I wasn't sure if I would make it.

END

A RESPONSE

To the 'Owner' of the House,

It has come to my attention that I've only recently come to yours. You can hardly be blamed for this - in fact it's a testament to my superior skills that I've remained unseen for such a period of time. I hope you can forgive me for not making myself known to you sooner. I can see how that could be taken as rude if I were human or some other easily offendable creature. However, in my defense, we don't normally do this sort of thing - *pleasantries*, I mean. We like to come and go as we please. We mean no harm and as such see no offense in crawling in and making ourselves comfortable for a spell, maybe even a lifetime if it's a particularly short span.

It wasn't our first encounter when you spied me on the wall, although I realise it was for you. I apologize for disturbing you while you hammered away at your keyboard, but you see there was a tasty looking beetle wandering around the stacks of papers on your desk and I hadn't eaten in a few days. You're a meticulous cleaner, so I was more or less forced out of hiding. I hope you can understand, I only wished to spy where the beetle would settle and then afterwards when you'd left your desk I was going to find it and suck it dry. But then you began talking and I lost sight of the beetle. Don't worry though - I got it later.

I never meant for you to see. Yet I was extremely surprised to find you engaging in a conversation with me, however one sided it was. I may be unable to speak, but I was nonetheless touched. So much so that I was able to look past your obvious ignorance and disgust over my kind.

Still I must ask, have you seen the jumping spider? They're quite beautiful and may change your opinion on our aesthetic value. I must say, you're wrong to assume that I find your species disagreeable; surely I wouldn't decide to live amongst something I despised. If this was the case, you certainly wouldn't find our species dwelling in your homes as often as you do. Still,

I was touched further by your broacher for an agreement of sorts, a living arrangement. Although I'm unable to speak I hope you did not take my silence as an obligatory agreement to your terms. I'm not saying I don't wish to find a common ground - in fact I'm always excited at the prospect of engaging in a long overdue interspecies agreement. As I see it, the world is only getting more and more cramped, so we should probably start bridging the gaps now before things get really desperate. I was glad to hear that you agreed.

Yes, you were right to say that my species has been here longer than yours. Much, much longer in fact - you'd probably be surprised to find out that the arachnids have been around for 200 million years. We're part of the arthropod family which stretches back to 600 million years ago. Surely you're aware of how little time your species, Homo Sapiens, have been around. Not even a million years! *Ha*, I say! And your ancestors, Homo Erectus, and even further back Homo Habilis, only date back 2 million years!

Impressive, I know. I read a lot. I made my home once amongst a stale stack of National Geographic. I learned a lot about where I come from, but more importantly I learned about where some of the other creatures come from. Learned some valuable weaknesses. For example, do you know that 50% of your species, has a fear of mine? It's called arachnophobia. I think you might have it, despite your valour attempts at camaraderie. Did you also know that with the exception of one family of spiders, all the rest are venomous?

I hope I'm not coming off as an intellectual prude. I've been told I do that at times. I'm only trying to establish a base line between us. I don't want you to get the wrong idea - spiders are no fools. I know I could stay here if I wanted, whether it pleased you or not. We're not bound by the same rules_ I can do as I please. You can try to kill me but it won't be with the ease that you think.

I'll try to keep the number of webs I make to a minimum and I'll also try to watch where I put them. I'm not one to leave cobwebs around; I tend to eat my webs when I'm finished with them. You may be happy to know that I plan to cut back on my web making as I'm trying to

move away from the conventional ways of catching prey, give myself more of an edge. I heard the jumping spider rarely goes hungry. However, I'd appreciate that you don't destroy the webs as lot of work goes into making them. If you see one that's low hanging or in the way simply let me know. You should know I have an affinity for windows that get the most sun. I noticed a nice sunny spot in your kitchen by the window. I was thinking of setting up shop there. I hope that's agreeable to you.

Of course, I always steer clear of anything that's a thousand times my size, so you don't need to worry about me coming anywhere near you intentionally. However, and I don't mean to upset you, but your habitat has recently been infested with *Cimex Lectularius* Linnaeus, or bed bugs as they're more commonly known. I'm sure you're just as surprised by this information as I was. I wouldn't take it personal though - these things do happen. It's as simple as sitting on the wrong chair. From what I can tell, the infestation seems to be limited to the area of your bed, for now at least.

But fear not! Like the beetle I'll do my best to rid you of these annoying pests. Bed bugs aren't a usual meal for spiders - it's actually more of a centipede thing but I don't mind slumming it every now and then. Plus it'll be great jumping practice. I say this so that you won't be alarmed if you spot me in your bedroom area. Just carry on about your business and I'll do the same. There is the off chance, if the infestation is bad enough, that I will from time to time have to crawl to catch the bed bugs, as they'll most likely be feasting on you. But I'm light as a Daddy Long Leg and as fast as a Wolf Spider. You won't even know I'm there.

Aside from that, I think we should be in agreement. How exciting! Oh! I almost forgot to mention, I'm terribly sensitive to human shouting. It's the vibrations. I don't want to go into it but suffice to say, not all of your species is as kind as you. As such, I get very defensive and am easily spooked. I lose track of myself in those moments of blind panic.

I'm sure we will get on fine. I apologize for the lengthy letter, it was torturous to write out, even with all 8 of my legs typing away.

See you around!

-Your new roommate

END

BLONDI

My plan was to (for lack of a better word) *create* the largest living tarantula. Probably not for any reason you'd expect, like fame or scientific discovery. It was something much simpler. I wasn't satisfied with the current known size of tarantulas as prescribed by Mother Nature and I felt that they could be bigger, should be bigger, even if only as a one-time occurrence. I wasn't looking to *create* a new species, just allow for one to grow impressively and maybe even terrifyingly large. If successful I'd planned on sharing my success to the world; it seemed selfish to keep it all quiet. But I shouldn't get ahead of myself.

To be clear, when I say large I didn't mean *impossibly*. I'm not talking about a tarantula the size of a car. What I mean is, and what I meant was, something achievable. I knew this endeavor would take years at the very least, and could possibly take decades to come into fruition. Tarantulas, especially the larger species, can take up to a decade to reach maturity. I was willing to wait.

In our own species there are those of us who grow, for one reason or another, significantly larger than the rest. Excluding diseases like Gigantism, I'm referring to largeness through genetics and / or naturally through happenstance. And of course we've seen the same abnormalities in other earthly species as well. Since I had no intention or capability (financially or intellectually) of increasing a tarantula's size through genetic modification, I was more or less left with chance. Fortunately for my endeavour, chance was something that could be modified. I planned on tipping the scales in my favour through aggressive breeding coupled with a high protein diet. The speed and size of a tarantula's growth can be directly influenced by their diet. The more they eat the faster and bigger they grow. There was no guarantee that I'd be successful, but there never is.

The largest species of tarantula is the *Theraphosa Blondi*, also known as the Goliath Birdeater. On average their circumference can equal that of a large dinner plate, about 12 inches/30 cm in diameter. Impressive to many, but not to me. Most of that size is all limbs and

can only be properly appreciated when the legs are completely stretched out. This cannot be accurately measured unless the tarantula is dead. However, as it's the largest of all the tarantulas it was through this species that I hoped to have my success.

Tarantulas have been a passion of mine since I was quite young. I've been an avid owner, collector, and breeder for more than two decades. I've housed and handled the rarest and most deadly of the world's known tarantula species. Although I have no formal education, I've published articles on various topics surrounding captive tarantulas such as behaviour, life span, and diet. I'm most renowned for my Green Bottle Blue - Betsy I called her - keeping her alive for over twelve years on a strictly vegetarian diet. It's an unheard of act in the world of arachnology as tarantulas are ferociously carnivorous and solitary creatures. Every part of their bodies is designed for seeking out prey, killing it, and ingesting it. They will eat anything; mice, scorpions, insects, other tarantulas, and even their mates. I did the unlikely with Betsy and I wanted to do it again.

Via the wonders of the internet I was able to procure twenty-four mature Goliath Birdeaters - twelve males and twelve females, none of which were captive bred. They were the biggest I could get my hands on and they were not cheap. Bigger is always better and better is always expensive. I would have gotten more had I the space and funds. Each of the twenty-four were placed in larger than required enclosures with the hopes of encouraging growth, and were fed constantly, every day if they'd take it. A captive tarantula would normally be fed about once a week, usually less, but I wanted them to grow, so I fed them the best and plumpest and liveliest of mice, mealworms, and scorpions. Of course I removed the stingers and claws of the scorpions before placing them inside the habitats. The last thing I wanted to do was unnecessarily risk injury to one of the tarantulas. Yet I felt it was important that they stay healthy and active to promote vitality and muscle building. There were moments when I worried over their health, the ethics of what I was doing, but that's all it ever was: worry.

A tarantula's body is comprised of two major parts; the cephalothorax, where the eyes, mouth, fangs, pedipalps (arms) and eight legs reside on the body. The second part is the abdomen where the major organs reside, and where silk is produced and extracted through the spinnerets. Tarantulas have sturdy exoskeletons, but they are still very fragile, a fall from even a few inches could be serious or fatal.

For 36 weeks I aggressively fed my twenty-four specimens, randomly injecting their prey with antibodies and additional protein and vitamins. And eventually, one by one they began to molt. Within the first year all the tarantulas had molted at least once and increasing their size and weight. One day, one of the females died during her molt. This occurs when either the tarantula is too old or weak to push itself out of the old exoskeleton, or when the new exoskeleton that has grown underneath has become too big too quickly and has left no wiggle room to squeeze out of. The humane thing to do is euthanasia. I freeze all my wounded. Although this sort of thing does happen, I believe it was brought on by the excessive feeding. She was unable to push off her exoskeleton because it was too tight. I expected there to be losses.

By preserving the exuviums from the surviving twenty-three I was able to measure their growth rates. Not surprising, all of the tarantulas slightly increased in size, as to be expected after a molt. However, after weighing each of them and cross referencing it with their age/sex and via comparison I discovered a serious increase in body mass. In fact, upon visual inspection it was quite clear that most appeared to have bulked up significantly. Their abdomens were quite round and full, and their limbs were almost as wide as my little finger. I was so impressed with their girth that I naively felt successful so early on. All I could see was my success; I ignored signs of anything else. In addition to this physical observation, I also noticed a heightened level of aggression in many of the specimens, some more severe than others and to the point where feeding became much less enjoyable. Feeding time is where all the action is. The stillness of the tarantula as the prey enters the habitat, followed by a lightning fast attack and subsequent

sound of puncturing fangs, ending with stillness. Attempting to do anything within their habitats proved quite difficult, and almost dangerous. I'd been forced to wear thick gloves, not that they'd do much to prevent the inch and a half long fangs from puncturing my flesh, but they brought some comfort and protection for my hands from their urticating hairs. An interesting fact about the Goliath Birdeater, as well as other species of tarantulas deriving from the New World, is that when provoked or threatened they flick the urticating hairs off their abdomen and into the air (preferably into the face of their antagonist). These hairs are similar to tiny pieces of fiber glass -they work their way into your skin. It's much worse if they get into your eyes, and inhaling them into your lungs could cause infection.

Nonetheless, I pushed forward and having all recently molted I felt it was a good time to really begin the more difficult and effective process of breeding. The hope was to subsequently produce slings that would eventually develop into larger varieties of their parents and continue the whole process again. I'd bred tarantulas in the past, although never a Goliath Birdeater. As a species they can be quite aggressive, particularly during mating. As within all species of tarantulas, it's not unusual for the female to kill and eat the male after mating has ended or before it has even started. It's difficult to avoid these types of tragedies - there's little to prevent it from happening aside from ensuring the female is well fed before introducing the male into her habitat, lessening the chances of her viewing the male as a potential food source once they've finished their dance.

Numbered one through twenty-four, the males were given odd numbers and the females even ones. Number Four was the only one to have successfully mated. One easy way to distinguish a male tarantula from a female, aside from the size, are two small hook-like appendages that extend from the males. These hooks allow the male to essentially pin the female's front legs back preventing her from being able to overtake him. The female tarantula specimens were roughly of equal size and temperament, so to be safe I had to pair one of them

with the larger, more aggressive males to match. Sadly, there were only two males that I felt could hold their own against their female counterparts.

The first attempt at mating went as bad as it could have. I transported the male, Number One, into the cage of the female, Number Ten. It was an ambush right from the start. The female was in full threat pose as soon as I approached her habitat. The male walked right into her open arms where she fanged him repeatedly and then wrapped him up into a silky twitching mass of broken and distorted appendages. He never had a chance. I watched as she made a silken table for her new meal and my biggest male specimen. Hell bent on succeeding I collected the second largest specimen, Number Three, and deposited him in a habitat with a different female, Number Four. This time I was ready with a spatula to act as a barrier between the two in case it went sour. To my delight it was a successful mating, but before I could remove the male the female charged at him faster than you can probably imagine. There was nothing I could do at that point. I was discouraged and hopeful. Two of my largest male specimens were dead, but if I was lucky the one successful mating would produce a viable batch of slings. Only time would tell. I attempted to mate the rest of the specimens with one another, already sure of the outcome of the male's fate, but hoping that perhaps there could be another successful mating. Unfortunately there was none. I was left with twelve female specimens, only one of which was fertilized, and zero males.

Needless to say I focused all of my attention on the single pregnant female. I kept up the feeding regiment with the rest of the specimens in case I later desired to procure a second batch of males. Although at the time the idea seemed exhausting and unlikely to bear fruit. The incubation period for a Goliath Birdeater is around 3 months. I watched with anticipation throughout the construction of Number Four's freshly spun and perfectly white silken nursery that securely hung from the top half of her terrarium. I would have preferred her to have built it closer to the bottom, but as I reassured myself, who was I to question millions and millions of

years of tarantula instincts? The structure itself, although placed higher up, looked unshakeable, like the cave of a bear after a heavy snowfall. She birthed her eggs with a perfectly engineered sway of her abdomen, seemingly effortless. She wrapped the eggs up in a “hand” made basket, cover included, and carried it up to their nursery, placing herself at the front entrance and all eight of her black eyeballs staring out. She never moved once from that spot. I worried over how difficult it would be to remove that egg sac when the time came, before the spiderlings hatched from their sacs.

I watched and waited. There was no way I could’ve known. I was sure I had more time, at least another month. Poor Number Four - it must’ve been a terrible way to go. It was the end of week seven, the eggs remained secure and safe, although I could never see them, guarded by their mother who I tried numerous times to move so I could get a peek at the sacs.. A tarantula usually lays about a hundred eggs, but some simply don’t develop properly and die, turning black all over, a stark contrast next to their healthy translucent siblings. I tempted her first with food, fat wiggling mealworms and juicy bouncing crickets, but she wasn’t interested. Afterwards I tried suggesting that she move by poking at her back legs with the bristle end of a paintbrush. The slightest touch and she span round, savagely attacking the paintbrush, fanging it over and over, then flicking her hairs after I’d managed to wrestle it from her grip. Immediately afterwards she turned back around and resumed her watch. The next day I found what was left of her in that same spot, completely hollowed out and drained of all fluids. Behind her dozens and dozens and dozens of empty sacs, not a single black one in the bunch. And not a single one left in the terrarium.

END

