

The Glass Spider

1

She started collecting the spiders after Peter died. Filling up the empty space of their two-bedroom apartment, she hung them from the drop ceiling, standing on a step-stool to lift up two neighboring fibrous tiles and toss the thin, strong twine she'd bought at the hardware store across the metal channel of the grid. She then tied the ends to the bodies of two of her crystal spiders, their legs clinking together like toasting champagne glasses, and sometimes they remained intertwined like lovers' knotted hands. While on the stool, head still poking up into the plenum of the ceiling, she would look around at the dusty wires and pipes, and sometimes she'd hear her neighbor flush the toilet and would close her eyes, listening to the whoosh of water as it rumbled through the plumbing right next to her. She would sigh, then lower herself down, reposition the ceiling tiles, and admire her babes, dangling there arm-in-arm.

2

I began to worry about Aunt Mary after my Uncle Peter ran off with another woman. For a while she was all right, as all right as anyone in her position could be. Because she had no one else—my mother had died six months earlier, and Mary didn't really have any friends, at least none she spoke of with me—I would come over a few times a week after work to cook her dinner. She would smile and gather peas onto her fork and eat in silence, looking around the room. She'd already removed all signs of him: photographs had disappeared from the book case by the door; the note about their anniversary later that month had been scratched off the calendar hanging on the refrigerator; the pair of house shoes he wore was poking out of the trash can under the sink when I went to scrape off my plate.

Then she started buying the spiders, glassy magnified replicas of tarantulas and black widows, wolf spiders and brown recluses, even a large, translucent daddy long legs that hung by itself over the table in the breakfast nook like some large, arachnid chandelier. Most of them were a clear, bluish color, but a few reflected green or yellow when you stared at them through the lights. A rare handful were round, made up of colored ovular jewels, meant, I suppose, to imitate the hairy, thicker variety of spiders, close-up photographs of which—often zoomed-in on the opaque, phantasmal eyes—always made me shiver.

The first time I came over after she strung two of them up, she poked one with a finger, bumping it into the one next to it, and the contact caused a tiny pinging noise. I watched as the spiders clung together, rocking back and forth like a many-legged pendulum.

“Would you look at that,” she said, smiling and staring at them as they swayed.

3

The apartment was so much fuller with them dangling there, and it never bothered her that she had to duck and weave around them to avoid hitting her head. But she wasn't worried about running into one and clipping off a leg or two; even if she did, they had eight, so what was it to lose one or two? A spider could afford an extra limb.

She loved the clinking noise they made, reminding her of wind chimes. She'd never had any because Peter couldn't stand the sound of them in the morning, or the afternoon, or ever, rattling on the porch with every gust of air. He said it drove him crazy, how the sounds went on and on, little thumps of noise, and just when you thought they would stop, another breeze would shuffle by and start the whole cacophony of sound all over again. But she didn't get a wind chime, because even though she knew he couldn't come back, she wondered if Peter might not just appear one day, ask her about the wind chimes and what the hell she was thinking getting one.

So instead she just watched her spiders dangling there from the ceiling in all of their colors, looking at them from different angles, catching the light in different ways, watching the patterns of sunshine dancing on the bare white walls.

I took her out to eat, finally, when there were so many spiders hanging so low from the ceiling that I could barely see the other side of the living room when Aunt Mary opened the door.

“Why should we go out, Noah? We have perfectly good food here,” she said. Her voice was small, squeaky, unused. I wondered if she had spoken to anyone beside me since Peter had left. I had wondered how she’d been paying her rent, and when I called her landlord and found out she hadn’t turned in this month’s yet, I paid it for her. She never mentioned it to me.

When we sat down at the restaurant, I noticed dark circles under her eyes and asked if she’d been having trouble sleeping.

“The spiders keep me up sometimes, that’s all.”

I asked her what she meant.

“The clicking noises. I can hear them when I’m in bed. I think they’re alive.”

“The spiders?”

“They don’t act alive when I’m watching them, but if I close my bedroom door at night I can hear them.”

She didn’t say much else about them. She didn’t say much of anything else, and I wasn’t sure what I could say. I wanted to speak with Uncle Peter, make him know what he was doing to his wife, but my calls always went to voicemail. He never called me back.

When the waitress brought the check, I paid. Aunt Mary didn’t acknowledge the gesture, and I wasn’t surprised.

She began losing sleep. When she closed her eyes, she thought of the spiders and she heard them, but when she went to check on them, they were silent, little sharp clouds of condensation hovering in her bit of sky.

Instead of lying in her large bed, the one so big the blankets smothered her, the mattress swallowing her up, she took to the couch. The decorative pillows didn’t give her much support, and she woke up with an aching neck and back, but at least the space was snug and didn’t feel so empty, not so big you could lose yourself in it. When she moved around the living room—

she wouldn't even go in the bedroom anymore, except to get handfuls of clothes, which started to pile up in the corner of the living room where the two sofas met—she had to bend over, a sharp pain shooting through her pelvis and lower back.

Once, she leaned up to alleviate the pressure on her spine and her head smacked into one of the spiders, the large glass daddy long legs. She felt the pinch of the glass ends of its spindly legs, as if someone had tapped her skull with a nail. The contact made the daddy long legs start to swing and it pinged against the spiders next to it, a little xylophone of noise erupting. To her the noise was angry, ruffled, echoing as the energy passed from one spider to the next. They became tangled, legs hooking around one another, a large web of stiff, inflexible spider parts. She looked up at them and felt their anger, their desire to twine themselves together and leave her down below.

6

She called me in the middle of the night, and when I answered on the third ring with a groggy hello, she started speaking faster than I'd heard her talk in a long time.

“They're alive, Noah, and they're after me, and if I sleep they'll crawl all over me.”

“Who? What? Aunt Mary?”

The woman who lived in the house next door, whom I had just started seeing, groaned, rolled over, and pulled my pillow from under me and pressed it over her head, the warmth of her body turning away from me.

“The spiders, Noah. They're alive, I know it. Please help.” She hung up.

I couldn't fall back asleep. I kept thinking about the spiders glaring down at her as she perhaps wept on the hardwood floor, the phone cord stretched out at her side, her own curlicued, plastic webbing, as she stared up at them, imagining them moving. When I shut my eyes and tried to sleep, I kept seeing her, and guilt rumbled in my stomach, but I didn't get up. Instead I wrapped my arm across the warm body next to me.

Still, I wondered if she thought of my Uncle Peter and what he was doing, dead to her, carving out a new life somewhere else, somewhere she could no longer touch him.

I can't let them have me, she thought, and so she crawled to the tiny closet across from the bathroom, the one with the water heater and air furnace in it, and grabbed the broom Peter managed to stuff in there only a few days before he died. Gripping it like a sword, she turned toward the living room and held back a scream: they were all wriggling from their strings, some legs reaching up toward the dangling threads, others beckoning at her, little tentacles flirting with her, trying to draw her near.

She watched, horrified, as they cut through their strings and then fell to the floor, some of them chipped, the thinnest ones shattering completely, others thick and strong and intact. They scuttled toward her and she held onto the broom, shut her eyes, and began swinging. She heard the first one crunch against the wall and she opened her eyes, and as they came toward her she pushed them back, sweeping them against the walls, the side of the micro suede couch, some of her broom thrusts sending them into the air where they connected with table or chair legs or smashed against the bookshelves. She started swinging the broom in the air to catch them before they could fall to the ground so she didn't have to hear their scuttling noises, the little tap-tap of their spiked legs on the particle board flooring.

When she finally stopped, the floor was caked with glass shards, a multi-colored snowfall of spider parts. They were all dead, pulverized into a river of tiny pieces, and she fell to her knees, the brittle, sharp glass cutting into her skin. She thought of Peter, her beloved Peter, gone from this, her life, and she cried, falling to the floor where she rolled over and over, covering herself in glass and cuts and blood, wondering how to tell the difference between life and death.

I went to her the night she destroyed the spiders. I found her lying on the floor bleeding from hundreds of tiny gashes, sobbing as she wallowed in the destroyed mess of glass and jewels on the floor. I tried to speak to her, to get her to get up so I could take her to the hospital, but she wouldn't move.

So I made her sit up and she collapsed against me, and I felt blood and bits of glass get caught in the fabric of my shirt. I hugged my Aunt Mary then, and she buried her head in my shoulder, her hot tears seeping

through my shirt and into my skin. When her arms and legs rubbed mine, I felt small slivers of glass embed themselves in me, but I just winced and ignored them.

She kept sobbing, and I told her everything would be all right. I looked around the room and knew that I had lied to her. But I didn't say so. I remained still, twisted up with her until the crying and heaving of her chest subsided and she was finally asleep, but I didn't move her, didn't wake her. I knew she needed to rest. We sat intertwined, arms and legs covered in shimmering, reflective glass.