

SPIDER LEGS

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something is wrong. i've never felt like this before. my friends are maybe a little drunk and are singing karaoke like it's what god set them on this earth to do. everything is some shade of flashing purple. my one constant friend leaves me for the stage and i suddenly feel the need to be alone.

i walk quickly, not knowing where i'm going. i find an empty hallway.

i am confused. my body is seizing. it's much too hard to breathe. my friend finds me and sits with me, grabs my hand and squeezes it whenever the shaking won't stop.

i don't know what's happening, and i don't know what to say to my friend who keeps asking me what is wrong. i don't know what's wrong. i don't know. i don't know. i wish i knew.

someone is cleaning the building and finds us like this. is she ok?

yes, says my friend. she'll be ok.

i find it hard to walk. we try to leave, to go home, but i have to keep stopping. my body is not ready to give up its control over me.

PARKING GARAGE

paranoia. 2 am. i keep looking over my shoulder for something that is not here. something inside me snaps. i break into a run, every motion sensor light waking up to expose me. i grab the door open and hurdle into the front seat of my car, hitting the lock over and over again just to be sure.

no one is here.

i twist around, craning my neck, breathing fast and searching the empty parking garage, searching the empty car.
no one is here.

my eyes fixate on the middle seat in the back, on the short leather tab at the top. if you pull the tab, the seat folds down. there is a hard, plastic backing behind it. if you remove the plastic backing, there is a gaping dark hole. the trunk.

my breathing accelerates and turns into whimpers. there's a gaping dark hole just behind that seat. it flies open. an arm reaches out. a head comes through. a whole body squeezes out of the trunk and launches at me.

no one is here.

the sound of my own crying is too loud, and it terrifies me.
i am paralyzed.

he's going to get me.

no one is here.

some rational part of my brain takes over, and i pop the trunk, get out of the car.

my hands hesitate. with sudden resolution, i open the trunk.
no one is here.

i am terrified.

maybe he's in the car he's under the car he's hiding around the corner he's watching from the security camera he's somewhere he's somewhere i'm not safe he's somewhere

LILLY HALL

usually, i know what's wrong. not this time. cold dread settles into my chest, seeping into every empty space.

i'm locking up the office. i do it every night. check the back door. lock it. hit the lights. make my way to the front, hitting three more lights. toss the keys onto my boss's desk. grab my backpack. hit the two lights in the front and lock the front door. there's nothing out of the ordinary. i'm alone, but i'm always alone.

spider's legs creep into my chest and begin to tickle, then to squeeze. it's a nervous, clawing feeling. i put a hand over my chest.

breathe.

i fill my lungs with air and empty them back out. i need to breathe the spider legs out. i count to four as i inhale, eight as i exhale. four, eight. four, eight.

the spider legs only squeeze closer. four. i'm supposed to be exhaling, but i don't have enough air in my lungs yet. five. six. my lungs crave oxygen. i need to keep inhaling. i need to.

i suck in air through my mouth, one hand still pressed to my chest. not enough. the spider legs constrict and my heart pounds in my head. when i must exhale at last, it is only a fraction of an exhale before my brain notices there's space in my lungs that must be filled.

i need to breathe i need to breathe i need to breathe

i begin to think that if someone could see me like this, they might think i'm drowning.

i swam to the bottom of a pool once, and it took me too long to come back up. this is a one-second memory, frozen in time. my lungs were screaming for air and my eyelids were stretched as widely as possible. i could see the surface waiting for me, just out of reach. every muscle in my body was strained to the surface, to oxygen.

i feel the same way now, stretched toward an invisible surface, eyes too wide, not enough air in my lungs.

JORDAN HALL

sometimes, i wonder if i'm being overdramatic. maybe i'm faking it. maybe everything is fine. maybe i just let everything get out of control and if i really wanted to stop panicking, i would have no trouble.

my professor passes around papers and tells us we need to write down a timeline of our lives. nervousness builds as i watch the stack make its way towards me. when it reaches me, i grab one and devour it with my eyes.

i can do this.

i begin to feel calmer as i methodically draw my timeline. the professor asks for volunteers to read their timelines aloud. i don't volunteer.

there is another activity. the papers come around again, and the nervousness that has not yet completely subsided builds once more. again, i look at the paper.

i can do this.

it happens one last time. every time the stack of papers comes around, my anxiety climbs a little higher than it had previously, like sisyphus determined to push his cursed rock up the hill but failing every time.

by the end of class, the spider-leg feeling is in my chest again and all i want is somewhere to cry it out alone. but there is nowhere to go to be alone. i wander down halls and staircases, ducking into rooms when i can until someone enters and drives me out.

that's how i know i'm not faking it. i want to be alone, but the spider-legs feeling doesn't care who is watching. it demands to come out.

there's no air in my lungs again. i breathe and breathe and breathe until my head turns into a balloon and i'm sucking in helium. my feet start to prickle, then they're just not there anymore. my knees and spine stop working. everything goes dark. i crumple facedown to the tile like a marionette whose strings have been cut.

RALEIGH, NC

i only know one person out of the eight or nine. this one person is pretending i'm not there, only talking to the girl seated on his other side. once, i try to tell him a story, and before i reach the end, he has turned his back to me again. i try to talk to the others, to get to know them, but they are all friends and talk about people that i don't know. i begin to wish i had stayed alone in my room.

it starts in my left foot this time. i notice that my left leg is bouncing up and down. my heel doesn't even hit the ground. i didn't know my leg could bounce so quickly and so rhythmically.

it travels up into my knee. my whole leg tenses, releases, tenses.

it travels up to into my hips and stomach and lower back until my whole body is seizing.

if anyone notices, they don't say anything. maybe they think i am only cold. part of me thinks i am only cold.

i go through the checklist of symptoms in my head:

accelerated heart rate: check.

shaking: check.

does feeling extremely anxious count as a symptom?

i excuse myself and hide in the bathroom. maybe if i can cry for a second, it will release the pent-up whatever this is. but this time, i can't even cry. my body can only shudder. i want to cry. it feels like the moment just before you throw up, when all you want is to get it over with.

i can only ever remember the intensity.

i can never remember when it ends.

