

The spider bursts underfoot and its babies crawl over my boot, making it look like my shoe is alive and writhing, undulating and dissipating into a thousand particles.

What a way to meet the world, newborn from your mother's burst carcass, screaming and searching for a shadow to hide in, tearing away from your siblings, carbon copies of you who you know, in your blood, to run from. Solitary creatures, aren't they, spiders?

Sacrifice complete, I march on. These tunnels bore me. Renovating them into a slide would be an excellent idea. I laugh – yes, like the other night, when I slid down them by accident. It's hard to keep my footing, especially as the walls start to drip and small puddles of stinking water collect in holes in the ground, constantly absorbed by the permeable rock and replaced by the dripping from above, making my descent slick and dangerous.

But being forced to pick my steps carefully, the risk of another bump to the head looming, does nothing to allay the boredom. The thought recurs that She gets all the benefits and none (or very little) of the sheer, unadulterated, obliterating monotony of this climb into the deep that I take every night I can.

Sometimes, I let out a scream that comes from the well of my lungs and lurches out, bringing up phlegm and spit, then ricochets off these slimy walls and into the darkness ahead of and behind me. It feels good to scream.

I suppose you could scream anywhere, at any time, as free will technically allows. But where would that get me? Thrown in the corporate oubliette, fired. Locked up, the key nowhere to be found. Not exactly what I'm going for.

I don't have a watch, because She doesn't wear one, not a go-getter that one, doesn't know that time is money and each minute is a golden opportunity, she lets each one pass like a leaky tap, so I don't know what time it is or how long I've been walking. Sometimes, I remember to bring the phone with me, but not tonight.

Once, I timed my descent and it took me four hours. I think I could do it faster, but picking up the pace might mean another helter skelter down into the abyss and as funny as that was – imagine her face, waking up down there, *where am I? What's going on?* – the back of my head aches and I have bruises running down my legs that make me look mottled and reptilian.

And so I climb and I scream, I laugh at the jokes I tell myself and I imagine my future. God, is it bright.

The final part of my journey is a doozy. Like jumping into the deep end of the pool or off a high bridge, you stick your legs together, arms ramrod-straight by your side and jump. Into a deep, black hole that

looks like some kind of prehistoric, dagger-toothed, man-eating worm lives in it, lying in wait for some fool to dive in and give it its dinner. Yummy.

But there's no worm here. This is actually the entrance to hell.

Not as majestic as you might imagine. If the heavens have pearly gates, what would hell have? A flaming, gore-encrusted wrought-iron fence? One topped with barbed wire, that you have to maul yourself on to climb over, demons and goblins waiting on the other side to tear you down and gobble you up? Yes, that sounds about right.

My theory is that there are many entrances to hell. I mean, there must be. I know this workplace is cursed, but surely the only entry to hell in existence isn't located under the Erebus Melbourne office, Church Street, Melbourne, Victoria. The people here aren't significantly worse than anywhere else, right?

So, I'm thinking that this sneaky little entrance has cracked open in the earth right here, funnelling those smart enough to find it straight into the maw of hell. But it's not the main entrance, by any stretch. Perhaps my wrought-iron masterpiece does exist, somewhere. Perhaps one day, I'll get to see it.

Better get on with it. I tuck my limbs in tightly, and plummet.

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I sleep through my alarm, because Marcus turned it off. There's a text that's been patiently waiting for me since 7:30AM, when he left the house for work. Stomping down the street to the train station in loafers and chinos, wearing inadequate layers for the cold because God forbid he put a scarf on, shivering as he types to me:

*Hey babe. I switched your alarm off while you were sleeping and texted Cat you'd be off sick. I know that's a bit overbearing but you need to rest. Watch a movie or something. Please. See you tonight x*

I can't summon the emotion to be angry at him for unlocking my phone and texting my boss a generic sick note while I was unconscious. Or making sure I wouldn't wake up in time to make it for work. It's 10:00AM now and Cat's already replied. *Look after yourself girl, get some rest*, platitudes, platitudes, filler, filler, blah, blah, blah. There's no use fighting it. I reshuffle the pillows to form a nest, hugging me tightly from all sides, and pass out.

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A knock on the door, a ghostly fist tapping on my skull in tandem. I wrap myself in my sheets which now have the distinct odour of a long, dreamless, mouth-breathing nap and lurch downstairs to the front window.

Behind the fingerprint-embellished glass, there's Cat. Her car, yellow, barely big enough for two, is parked on the street behind her. I narrow my eyes. I just *know* she and Marcus are in cahoots. Did he send her here to check on me? She texted me like, four hours ago. I check my phone. Six hours ago.

I crack the door open, unwilling to reveal the full state of me. Unwashed, hair unbrushed, pyjamas creased and probably reeking.

"Hey!" She's bright, sunny, happy to see me – suspiciously so.

"Hey", I grumble.

Her arms are folded tightly and she's tensed, swaying forward and back on the balls of her feet. Like a runner, prepared to take off. It feels a little like she might tear the door open and bolt inside if I don't invite her in.

"I wanted to see how you're doing. It's ok you called in sick, obviously", she laughs. "I know this is a little strange ... I'm more here as a friend. I know it's hard to talk properly at work." She's stopped swaying, settling into her explanation.

After a few moments of loaded silence, I take the chain off the door and unveil myself like a magician dropping the curtain on his now sawn-in-half assistant. Pause for applause. Cat takes in my dishevelled appearance but doesn't drop her smile, her lips plastered in a mask of benevolence. *Just here as a friend. Just dropping by to see how you're doing.*

The house is clean, which I owe to Marcus. I've hardly been sharing the division of labour lately. If it were me alone this place would be coated in a furry layer of charcoal dust, the fridge bare aside from likely-expired condiments and sour milk. Instead, there is order, pillows artfully strewn across the couch, and a totally acceptable level of dust for two young people living together in domestic bliss with active social lives.

"Your place is so cute. Is that thanks to you or Marcus?" She asks, trailing me through to the kitchen. Pausing to admire the art and photography framed on the walls, most of it my own, and the record collection, most of it mine, a mix of old and new.

"It was me, originally. Marcus never really cared about interior design." I'm already bored of this conversation. Would rather be silent than respond to her falseness, her forcedness.

“And now?”

We arrive at the kitchen table and she pulls out a chair. I pour us both a glass of water. The coffee machine sits warm and expectant, probably left on by Marcus on the assumption I'd want to make myself one, but I don't offer. I'd rather be groggy and half asleep for this conversation. It's right that she should see me like this.

I shrug. “Now, all of a sudden, he cares about how the house looks.”

“That's nice.”

Is it? It feels like pressure to me.

At first, when the place was just mine, I decorated out of joy. I was accustomed to nesting in one room in a warped share house with dodgy plumbing, two to six forgettable housemates and black mould under the floorboards.

Then, for the first time, with my fancy Erebus salary, I could afford my own space. A petite, modest townhouse tucked down fruit tree-lined residential streets. I filled the cold white walls with renter-friendly adornments (thank you, inventor of command hooks), asymmetrical rugs, thrifted furniture and foliage. It was my paradise.

And then Marcus came along, and the whole thing was awfully convenient for him. He stepped right into my life and, expending no effort at all, had the coolest and most sophisticated home of all his thirty-something, single male friends. That was before he adopted all my friends as his own.

He was ambivalent about my décor at first, although I suppose he was quite keen to move in with me, and perhaps the Architectural Digest factor had something to do with it.

But over time it's become 'our' place – no longer just mine. Once every few weeks he gently, carefully dusts down my curation of vintage knick knacks. He mounted my cheap television on the wall to free up space for yet more displays of vases, candles and coffee table books. Every evening, he hurries around the house, pulling down the blinds and turning on a variety of lamps to create a warm and cosy ambience. He scoffs at his friends who actually use their downlights (way too bright, dude), and whose living spaces are primarily a shrine to their elaborate and expensive gaming PC set-ups.

Although I know intellectually that I should feel flattered by his enthusiasm for my lifestyle, my design choices and my friends, I can't help feeling that he's taken something away from me. That in the process of assimilating, he's absorbed some of my essence that I'll never get back. That now, I have to

change in turn, to stay ahead, to stay different, to avoid becoming one of those too-perfect, dual income, heterosexual hipster couples I see strolling down Sydney Road, complete with designer pram and snotty, doe-eyed infant.

“I know you’ve been having a hard time lately”, Cat starts, both hands wrapped around her water glass. Around her fingertips, the glass fogs. She’s sweating.

I tilt my head to the side and wait. She’s come to my house, in the middle of the day, after I’ve called in sick – she can be the one to tell me why she’s really here.

“I know you know”, she pauses to clear her throat, “that I’ve been talking to Marcus.”

Her smile turns shrewd as I roll my eyes in response.

“I know you might not see it now, maybe it seems like we don’t get it, or we’re out to get you. But we’re truly worried about you.”

I resist the urge to snap at her, letting her go on. She can think what she wants of my silence. I trail my thumb print around the edge of my own glass. The condensation on hers becomes more opaque, and water droplets form.

“I know you’ve been sleepwalking”, she dips her chin and raises her brows, looking out from under her lashes beseechingly, knowingly. *I know you. I know your problems*, her eyes say. No, Cat. You don’t know me at all. A laugh bubbles up in my chest and I push it down, keeping my poker face in place.

“And barely sleeping at all, when you’re not doing that.” Another pause. “I know your doctor suggested you do a sleep study.”

My mask of nonchalance slips and I narrow my eyes at her. So, Marcus is sharing my medical history with my colleagues now. I have to admit the betrayal cuts me. I knew he was concerned, knew he was talking about me behind my back. But medical shit is confidential, off-limits – and his sharing this with Cat shows just how little he trusts me now.

“Honestly, Marcus and I think it could be a great idea. It could be a circuit breaker for you. Of course, no one can make you do anything you don’t want to”, *until we have you carted off for being a danger to yourself and others*, “but I’ve looked into sleep studies and they’re really not invasive. They’re super common – it’s just one night in a facility”, *until we find a reason to keep you locked up forever*, “and then you meet up with your GP again and she’ll talk you through the results.”

She shrugs. No biggie. Just allow yourself to be hooked up and monitored. Just do what we say and everything will be ok. Submit.

But I want her out of my house. And the path of least resistance beckons. I pout a little and wring my hands, avoiding eye contact like a scolded child.

“You’re right, it has been hard.”

Cat reaches a hand out across the table. I concede, and give her one of mine to hold. Her palm is wet.

“I’ve been putting off booking the sleep study because I’m scared.”

“What are you scared of?”

My head twitches, but I keep my gaze planted in my lap.

“What they might find.”

“Oh, Nic.” Cat clasps my hand in both of hers now, squeezing in a gesture that I suppose is intended to comfort me. “I’m sure there’s nothing terrible going on. Look, from my reading, it seems like you could have a sleep disorder. There’s one that involves acting out your dreams – and it can be dangerous. I’m not a doctor, but it could be something like that. And if it is, it’ll be so much better once you get on top of it. You can start exploring different treatment options.”

A smirk threatens to expose me, so I tilt my head down even further.

“I’ll let you mull it over. But please, give it some serious thought. And take a couple more days off sick if you need, you’ve barely used your leave. I promise not to ask you for a doctor’s certificate.”

Hilarious. She gently releases my hand and pushes her chair out to stand. Finally, I look up and meet her eyes, and the look of pure pity on her face almost makes me gag. I smooth on a sweet, melancholy smile.

“I know I don’t say it enough, but thank you for looking out for me. I’m lucky to have a friend like you.”

Tears spring to her eye as she gives my hand one last squeeze and makes for the door.

After her miniature yellow clown car pulls away, I stay at the window for a while, my eyes fixed on the end of the street where her car disappeared from view, making sure she doesn’t come back.

Collapsed on the couch, dried drool caking my chin, my eyelids flutter open. I've got that feeling you get when you wake in the middle of the night and there's a spider on your pillow. Somehow, you know it's there. Then you bolt upright and start screaming, throw the pillow across the room, wake up everyone in the house ... you get the picture.

But there's no spider. Hot afternoon sunlight streams through the sheer curtains. I push myself off the couch and shuffle to the window.

I don't have to search long before I spot the source of my disturbance. Cat's standing there, across the street, leaned against a tree with her arms crossed. I freeze. My eyes dart about - her stupid yellow car isn't here. Did she park farther away and walk back?

Even though I know she can't see me behind the curtain, I move slowly as I back away from the window and go to the front door. My head spins with possibilities. I can't call Marcus, he's on her side.

I tread carefully towards the door in case any movement catches her attention. I'll go out there. I'll confront her. What does she think she's doing, watching my house?

In front of the door now, I clasp the handle and twist, push, step outside. Slow and calm, that's the way. I imagine myself reciting what happened to Marcus later. *She said she was leaving, but then she came back. I think she's obsessed with me. I think she might be stalking me.* Could this be the way I win him back over?

The sunlight pierces my retinas, blinding me for a second while I adjust.

She isn't there.

I stop and scan the street for a retreating figure but there's no one, nothing to indicate she was here. No sound of an ignition. She would have had moments. Moments where she shouldn't have been able to see what I was doing.

Maybe, on those occasions where you wake suddenly in the night but there's nothing there, the spider on your pillow had time to retreat before it was spotted. They can move pretty fast. All those legs.

It strikes me she's probably still around, hiding. There are cars parked on the street, summer trees flush with leaves for her to hide behind, rough bark tickling her skin as she presses against the trunk, peering out to watch me standing at my own doorstep. Staring blankly at the spot I know she was just moments ago.