

AND I ASK MYSELF THE SAME QUESTION

HADDAYR COPLEY-WOODS

WHEN I GOT THE CALL TELLING me he was dead, I didn't scream.

A scream would have been a natural reaction; two of my three little sisters did—he was only fifty-nine. But I didn't. I took a deep breath, pushed that wild furious keen into a soft, horrible place inside myself, and I swallowed.

I said: "What can I do?"

I am a mom and the oldest of four girls and thirty grandchildren. I do things. I scold, I plan, I boss, I nag, I clean, I comfort.

But when I got to my folks' house, I couldn't do anything.

I spent most of the time gritting my teeth as the others sobbed and wailed around me, unsure of where to put my hands, as I had no pockets. Through the shock of seeing his cold, stiff, blood-spattered face, the cremation, the memorial, no one turned to me for comfort or help. And I offered none.

Even months afterward, I was still off balance; I couldn't shake the thought that something was watching me, and stalking my sons. I thought I caught the sight of a dark and horrible presence with the corner of my eye several times, but I brushed it off. Nuts, I thought. The shock of grief.

Until the thing stepped through the frame of the Saturn as if it was butter, pinning us to the road, its eight black lidless eyes peering down through the window: fixing first on me, then on Arie and Éiden, trapped in

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their car seats behind me.

Although we'd stopped with tremendous force, I somehow managed to unlatch my seat belt and awkwardly fling myself into the back seat.

It was at least eight feet tall: a wild conglomeration of stainless steel, matted, black fur, and enormous segmented limbs—each ending in something more awful and dangerous: a Glock .45, a giant wrench, a steel hammer.

And one meaty simian paw, horrible against the steel limb, reaching down toward my sons through the window. I screamed then: the furious howl of a helpless mother. But Éiden was reaching up toward its clanking, razor teeth and enormous stainless steel jaws, laughing; and normally reserved Arie waved and smiled.

Before it touched them, the thing rose to its full height and turned to watch as the out-of-control tractor-trailer, its horn blaring, roared through the intersection inches from the Saturn's bumper—howling through the space we would have been if not for the creature's intervention.

In the stunned silence that followed the screeching of metal and shattering of glass, the monster turned with astonishing grace and speed. It was around the corner and out of sight in a few steps, leaving behind nothing but the inexplicable odor of an internal combustion engine mingled with bananas.

Then I realized where it came from.

When I was six, although I fought against them, Kelly Jasinski and Lizzie Fleming held me still and dropped a ladle full of mud down the back of my shorts. One of them swatted me hard so that the damp stain showed through, and they laughed and asked if I'd had an accident. My bare feet pounded the hot sidewalk as I ran home, sobbing and furious.

The next evening, just after sunset, I sat on the back stoop of our row house with my dad to catch a bit of the breeze as Park Forest cooled off for the evening. Lizzie walked down to our place and stopped: smiling, triumphant.

I avoided her eyes like the conquered foe I was and watched ants busily working to repair a damaged hill.

She dragged the edge of her sandals along the curb and swung one foot.

"Hi, Haddayr!" She hopped to the other foot to balance on the curb

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expertly.

I didn't answer.

My father busied himself tapping the old ash out of his pipe on the cement steps.

"Whatsa matter?" Lizzie was practically singing.

I still didn't answer.

Dad looked up from cleaning his pipe. He had this comic way of jumping backwards and feigning surprise that I would later miss very much.

He did it, then.

"Lizzie!" he said. "What are you doing here this late?"

Lizzie looked quizzical.

"You're a very brave girl," he said, taking out his tobacco pouch and unrolling it. "A very brave girl indeed."

"Why?" I snapped. She wasn't brave; she was a nasty bully who needed a talking-to, or maybe a vicious pinch on the back of her calf when she was hanging upside down on the monkey bars and couldn't tell who did it.

"Well," said my dad, "She's at least a block from home, and it's dusk. This is the worst time of day for gorilla spiders." He began pinching out tobacco and packing it into the bowl.

"Oh, please," I said.

"What are gorilla spiders?" asked Lizzie.

"Come now," he said, tamping with his thumb. "Don't tell me you've never heard of gorilla spiders."

Lizzie shook her head, eyes large in her pale face.

"Gorilla spiders," grunted my dad from around the stem of his pipe as he lit it, "are eight feet tall."

I rolled my eyes, but Lizzie took in a quick breath.

"They're eight feet tall," my dad repeated, "and covered in black fur. Each of their eight legs ends in a horrible, meaty gorilla paw, twice the size of my hand." He held up his own enormous blackened hand. He marveled at it for a moment, imagining the even greater majesty of the gorilla spider's strength.

"They walk around the neighborhood, looking for dinner," he said, getting to his feet and rocking back and forth like an old silverback: his arms dangling, his face a sneer. "They have long, sharp fangs dripping with

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venom. Their favorite food is, of course, bananas—which is how you can smell them coming. But they can't always find enough of those. When that happens, they especially like the taste of children." He leaned forward, baring magnificently crooked tobacco-stained teeth framed by his wild red beard.

Lizzie's eyes began to fill with tears.

"Don't listen to him," I said. I was always too soft. "He's just trying to scare you."

But the sun had set and our shadows were very long, and the linden tree was beginning to rustle ominously.

"I can't even count how many kids these gorilla spiders have gotten," said my dad. "The ones who couldn't run fast enough."

"Stop it," whispered Lizzie.

My father sat back down, tested the bowl of his pipe with a calloused finger, and re-lit it. "Haddayr," he said nervously, sitting up straight and sniffing the air. "Do you smell bananas?"

Lizzie, howling, took off like a shot for home.

He shook out the match and dropped it in the gravel.

"Dad." I said. "That was really mean."

"Was it?" he asked, sucking in his cheeks briefly. "Hmmm. Yes. I suppose it was."

I watched him as he smoked—watched his long, hard day changing brake pads and wrestling parts in and out of engines roll off of him in his triumph. He crossed his enormous forearms across his chest and looked peacefully out over the grease-stained parking lot and cracked pavement of Western Avenue as if surveying his kingdom.

We sat close together in the deepening twilight.

The night after the gorilla spider saved our lives, I had a dream.

I walked into Dad's study to turn off the stereo; someone had left Mozart's Sonata in C major playing.

And he was sitting in his chair in front of his customary mess of paper, automotive magazines, and service manuals, his blue work shirt rolled up to the elbows—leaning back and looking up at me, smiling. His blue eyes were alight and full of mischief. He was whole. Alive. Everything was good again.

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I moved toward him, and as fast as snapping your fingers his chair was empty. I was alone.

As I lay in bed listening to my boys' soft, even breathing across the hall, I thought of my odd, fearsome half-brother somewhere very close. Protecting us, just as he was created to do.

He lived for so many years in my father's imagination that the shock must have been horrifying: to be immediately alive, fierce, dangerous, and real, but to have the consciousness that had nurtured him so suddenly and irretrievably gone.

How would I hold a gorilla spider, anyway? Gingerly, I suppose, carefully avoiding the Glock. I would scratch him behind one eye. And I would say: I'm so sorry, and I remember, and there, there.



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