

They

by Tara Laskowski

The breathing on the other end of the line gets incessantly louder with each of your irritated, "Hello?"s You hang up, disgusted, on your way to work or to the gym or some other place that you have to get to in a hurry. Eating your bowl of Cheerios standing up next to the kitchen counter, you check your watch, hoping you have enough gas in your car to make it through the day.

You don't think anything of it then, just a stupid phone call, a wrong number or a high school prank, just another annoying thing to add to the list of annoying things you deal with every single day. The long traffic lights as soon as you hit the city, the way your hair always frizzes up when it rains, the static electric shock you get every time you unlock your car door. It seems like someone you know is always having a birthday you have to remember, that endless string of things that make up a life you have no time for.

But there are more calls after that—late calls, after dark, right after your roommate leaves for her part-time job at the grocery store. You rush to the phone before the answering machine picks up and there's just that heavy breathing again, then a low laugh, almost childlike in its sinister-ness. And you hang up and turn on more lights, making the television louder, mad at yourself for letting it get to you.

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This morning you thought about the mail guy. He comes in every morning around 10, hovers in the entrance to your cubicle until you look up from typing. He smiles at you, awkwardly, the frames on his glasses make his eyes look like swollen olives in a shot glass. You always feel bad for him. He's a nice guy, also in his mid-twenties and you suspect he has no friends.

"Hi Shelly," he says to you every morning. "What's up, besides the ceiling, today?"

You always laugh, it's automatic now, and take the pile of envelopes he has for your department. One day you will not be in

charge of opening the mail, but you've only been there for five months and you're still at the bottom of the ladder. You are embarrassed that you can never remember his name—it is something with an "L"—Luke, or Lou or Len. You notice the sweat marks under his beige dress shirt, the way he leans awkwardly against the cubicle wall, shuffling his feet and breathing out.

On the city bus you rest your head up against the cool window, willing the traffic to stop. It has been a tiring day. The woman across from you won't stop her incessant chattering, chattering about the city, about raising the taxes, about her sister-in-law's greed. You stare at her, her dull blond hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, her sagging chin, like cottage cheese, hanging off her face. Your eyes drift down to her feet, she is scratching the right one. They are vein-infested, bulging purple, with open sores and red, bloody pimples, and you close your eyes, willing yourself not to puke. The bus is hot, crowded and people keep bumping into you so you have to keep your purse close, one hand shielding it. When it is your stop you get up, carefully passing the woman, who is still scratching at her feet, itching them like she forgot what they were supposed to do.

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You tell your roommate about the phone calls. She shrugs. "Some asshole, trying to scare you. Don't let it get to you. It's probably some punk twelve-year-old who gets a hard-on breathing into the phone." You are annoyed with her flippancy, with her French-manicured wave of the hand, dismissing you. You had to clean out her clog of hair again this morning from the bathtub drain and it clung to your hand like moss.

Your boyfriend comes over, his T-shirt tucked into faded jeans, slapping you on the ass as a greeting. You order pizza and watch television, which makes you wonder if you'll ever date a man who likes wine. You watch an action movie but can't really follow the plot. There is a scene where someone kills someone else by stabbing an icicle through his eye. Your boyfriend leans forward. "Cool!" he says.

When it is late enough you wander into your bedroom and close your door. He lowers you on the bed and you kiss, your hands positioning themselves on his back. It occurs to you how routine all of this is. He is on top of you and he is brushing your hair away from your face and you think you love him, you really do. Your hand goes lower, where you know he wants it to go and he begins breathing heavy, panting, reminding you of the voice and you realize you've forgotten to close the blinds in your bedroom. You think, dammit, and you push him off and close them, knocking over some perfume bottles on your dresser.

"What's wrong?" he asks, adjusting his twisted pants and you shrug, and come back to the bed, pressing your face against his chest.

"Nothing. I just don't want anyone looking in," you say and he laughs slowly, caressing your hair.

After you have sex, he gets up to leave, fumbling in the dark for his clothes. You lay on your back, naked, listening to him struggle. You hate this part of the night, his leaving, wishing he could just stay for once. But you know he can't, that he would have to drive an hour to work in the morning and would never make it, that he already has to drive a good thirty minutes back to his apartment and you wonder how the hell he will do it so late at night, when you feel exhausted enough to pass out for the winter.

He curses and there's a loud bumping noise and so you roll over and flick on your nightlight, next to the bed. He's silhouetted in the soft light, you are both squinting, but he finds his clothes. He looks vulnerable when he's naked, like a secret. He sits on the edge of the bed, dresses, puts on shoes and socks, then leans over to kiss you goodbye.

"Don't get up," he tells you, but you do anyway, slipping on a large T-shirt to walk him to the door. You don't know what makes you look up at the ceiling but you see it then, above your bed—a black spider dangling from its web, about the size of a quarter.

"Oh, Christ," you say, pointing, and your boyfriend picks up one of the books lying on your desk.

He stands awkwardly on the bed, bracing himself with the ceiling and positions the book just below the spider. It is moving now, almost as if it knows, and you are chilled by how quickly it moves, skittering towards the wall, down, down, down, towards the bed. Your boyfriend aims, slamming the book loudly against the wall, but he misses his target and the spider falls down the wall, disappearing somewhere in the mass of tangled sheets on your bed.

"It's okay, I think I killed it," he tells you. He pulls the bed from the wall, peers downward. "It's gone. Don't worry," he tells you and walks over to hug you.

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There's a guy leaning up against his car on the other side of the parking lot watching you. You think you've seen him before in that same spot, as you walk to your car to go home for the day. It's an old car, a light blue, very long like the kind grandfathers drive in '60s movies, but you don't know much about cars so you can't place it with a name or a make. He doesn't look threatening—just kind of lounging against the side of his car, smoking a cigarette, wearing those reflective sunglasses that you hate because you can see yourself when you talk to the person wearing them and it disarms you, the way your face squinches up and you look so fake, like you're trying too hard. He's wearing jeans tucked into leather working boots and a faded checked shirt. He's doing nothing wrong but you can feel him watching you and it makes you concerned. The parking lot is pretty empty on Thursdays because you stay an hour later than usual and everyone else has gone home by now. Flashes of bad horror movies run through your mind—how they always have those scenes in the concrete parking lots, women's high heels slapping, echoing loudly, squeals of tires on the pavement.

There was a call the night before. It was different than the others. Your roommate had answered the phone. She repeated "hello" twice. You looked up from your crossword puzzle to watch her face. "Uh, sure, hold on," she said and handed the phone to you, looking puzzled.

"Hello?" you said into the phone as your roommate shrugged and went back to the kitchen to make dinner. The voice was metallic, low, gritty. It sounded like it was coming through electricity.

"You're pretty."

"Hello?" You said again, your voice rising.

"You're pretty. Can I come over and play?"

You felt something suck out of you, down through your toes.

There was panic, but even deeper an anger, like a tiger you'd seen on the Discovery Channel, lunging for its prey, ripping the skin at its throat and blood, lots of blood everywhere. "Listen, you fucking sicko," you said into the phone, your voice surprisingly low and controlled. "We have caller ID and I'm going to call the police if you don't stop calling here. Get a fucking life, you asshole."

You heard the beginning of a laugh before you hit the off button. Your hands shook as your roommate took the phone from you.

"Those people calling again?" She looked concerned.

"Did he ask for me?"

She shook her head, examining the phone as if she was waiting for it leap out of her hand and attack. "No, well, not really. He asked if he could speak to my roommate."

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It is fear, that overwhelming urge to run, the power of the mind to conjure up things that push you over the edge, make you crazy with terror, keep you coming back for more. It's the reason why your mother always threw out the fruit from your Halloween bags at the end of the night, why you carry that tiny bottle of mace in your purse and why you won't ever take an apartment in a high rise building. It was watching Psycho when you were fifteen. It was the man who grabbed your breast during the U2 concert in college. It is that hollow feeling below your stomach, the ice that settles inside you late at night in the dark, the need to check behind the shower curtain every time you brush your teeth.

Yesterday you saw a child playing in a playground all alone, a little girl with curly brown hair swinging high, singing a song. Her face was smudged with dirt and her dress would billow with air as

she rose and descended in the arc of the swing, giggling. For a brief moment you remembered what it was like to feel the butterflies in your stomach, the metallic taste of your fingers after gripping the chain. But it was getting late, the darkness setting earlier with each cloudy day. Around the park, with so many trees and bushes, so many shadowed places to hide, you wondered how a parent could let their child alone, with bare, skinny legs and such tiny hands. You gathered your coat around you and walked briskly past, the little girl's laughter fading into the cold air, leaving her to the monsters.

