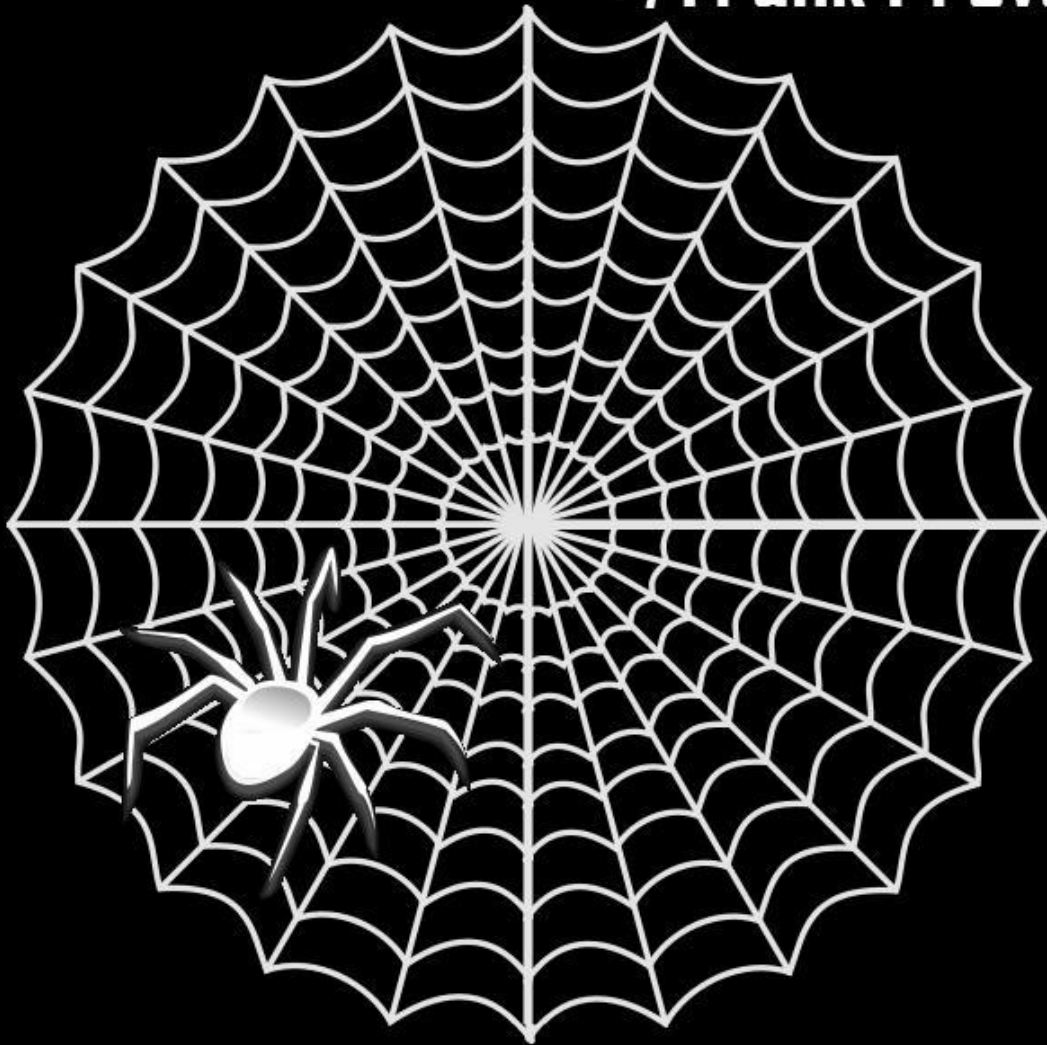


# Spiders

A  
Cautionary  
Halloween  
Tale

by Frank Provo



Illustrations by Samantha Hernandez

**Spiders**  
**~A Cautionary Halloween Tale~**

Written by Frank Provo  
Illustrations by Samantha Hernandez

Dedicated to Edward "Lynn" Ware, Jr.  
Thank you for helping to kindle my creativity.  
May you rest in peace.

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## 1—Yesterday

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!—\*Smack!\*

Ten minutes passed.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!—\*Smack!\*

Ten more minutes passed.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!—

“Julie!” a voice yelled from downstairs. “It’s time to get up for school!”

Fifteen-year-old Julie Swanson vaguely registered the sound of her mom’s voice calling out to her. Groggy, she reached out for the alarm clock she had been snoozing and slid the switch to the [OFF] position.

“Mmmph,” she mumbled into her pillow.

Julie planted her hands into the mattress and struggled mightily to sit up. She wondered what sort of cruel joke life was playing on her this time.

She had just been having a marvelous dream about Chip Jackson, the cute boy in her gym class. He was the only reason she hadn’t begged out of the class this year with a headache or some other “get out of jail free” excuse. Not once.

Now, her alarm had jarred her awake and her mom was yelling at her to go to school. Could it have been Monday already?

She reached out to the nightstand and checked her cell phone. Yep—Monday.

“Ugh,” she sighed. She peeled away the covers and slid her legs over the side of the bed. Her body shivered when her feet touched the carpet.

“So much for shag carpeting,” she murmured while dragging her five-foot-four-inch, 135 pound frame over to the closet.

*What to wear? What to wear?*

She opened the closet’s folding door and a small, brown object fell onto the carpet. Julie saw it out of the corner of her eye, but her brain needed a second to register it. After a slight pause, she let out a blood curdling scream that shook the house.

“Yaaaaaaaaaargh!!!”

Julie fell onto her butt and scooted backward as fast as her arms and legs could drag her.

The small, brown object crawled toward her on eight stick-like legs. It was a spider of some kind.

“Go away. Go away. Go away!! No, no, no,” she cried.

And she very nearly was crying. Her eyes welled up. Her voice developed a fearful timbre. To cut right to the heart of the matter: Julie Swanson was deathly afraid of spiders.

It all started when she was a little girl. Her mom had left her at an aunt’s house for the day so she could go job hunting. Julie must’ve been seven at the time.

Her aunt had a son a year older than Julie, named Zack. As you can imagine, the two kids found trouble in short order. Zack thought it would be fun to go out into the woods and throw rocks at squirrels. Julie didn’t want to hurt the cute, fuzzy squirrels, but she idolized Zack—so she went with him anyway.

Not very deep into the woods, they came across the husk of a fallen tree that had been long since hollowed out by the elements. When Julie stared into the tree, she voiced concern that it was pitch black inside. Zack, of course, picked up on this and dared her to crawl through to the other side.

He double-dog dared her.

She was paralyzed with fear, but crawled into the dark log regardless.

Zack waited on the other side.

And waited.

Julie didn't come out.

He called to her a few times and, just as he was about to run back and tell his mom, he heard a faint voice call out, "I'm stuck... help."

Zack had been carrying around a small flashlight on his keychain. With his head packed full of good intentions, he pressed the button on the pen-sized light and shined it into the other end of the log.

He saw them at the exact moment she did. Four or five goodly-sized spiders were crawling around in there, inches from Julie's face and hands.

She screamed.

She wet herself.

And she was still stuck.

Zack had to run back to get help. Eventually, a man from the volunteer fire department came with a hatchet and split the log enough so that Julie could get free.

Unfortunately, it had taken the man a half-hour to respond to the call and reach Julie's aunt's house. For thirty minutes, the spiders, with their pointy legs and furry feet, crawled all over her hands, her arms, her face, and her neck.

She didn't stop shaking for weeks. The nightmares continued for a solid year. Ever since, each time she saw a spider, her mind would instantly be drawn back to that fateful spring day when she was seven.



Cowering there against her bedroom wall, she felt like she was back inside the log again.

The little brown bugger continued crawling towards her.

Desperate, Julie reached up to grab something, anything to swat the spider with. Her fingers brushed across a familiar swatch of leather and nylon. She stretched upward to grab it.

"Eww! Eww!" she exclaimed, grabbing the shoe off the dresser. In one catlike motion, she tucked forward into a crawl and raised high the tennis shoe she held. The spider continued its charge and she responded by slamming the shoe down onto it.

"Eww, Eww, Eww," she echoed as she repeatedly slammed her size 8 into the carpeting. After a good nine or ten

wallops, she pulled the sneaker away and peered down at the dark spot now marring the peach colored carpeting. The spider no longer looked like a spider anymore.

Satisfied, she chucked the shoe behind her and started rifling through her clothes to find the perfect outfit to wear.

Julie could almost hear her mom's voice inside her head. "Don't kill it. Let it out," mom would argue. Easy for her to say—she wasn't the one with creepy critters leaping out at her. She wasn't the one that had been stuck in a log with them when she was seven.

Sometimes, to make her mom happy, Julie might make a half-hearted effort to let one go, if she saw it from across the room and there was a cup or something nearby to scoop it up in. More often than not though, Mr. Spider met his end at the bottom of Mr. Shoe in the heat of the moment.

Julie stood up, steadied herself, and looked at the bottom of her shoe.

*Gross, she thought.*

*I've been seeing these things a lot lately. Is it the rainy, fall weather that's bringing them out?*

As she picked through the litany of sweatshirts, blouses, and t-shirts—all emblazoned with some company's logo or a trendy slogan—she heard someone jogging up the stairs.

Her mom called out to her from the hallway: "What was that scream all about? You OK?"

Julie made up an excuse to avoid telling her mom about the spider entrails she was currently wiping onto a disheveled towel.

"I woke up confused, tripped on my shoes! Sorry, mom," she called out, loudly.

"OK, sweetie," her mom said as she started her way back down the stairs. "Now hurry up and get ready. The bus will be here in twenty minutes."

*Twenty minutes?! Julie's eyes grew wide.*

*I need to shower. I can't go to school looking like this.*

"Oh man, Oh man, Oh man," she repeated over and over, dashing through the doorway and into the bathroom down the hall.

She showered and dressed in record time. At two minutes past seven, she crashed out the front door with her mom yelling behind her: "Have a good day at school!"

"I doubt it," she mumbled quietly.

She hated school and she most assuredly hated Mondays. Who in their right mind could have a good day with five days of school to look forward to?

At the end of the block, she fell in behind the other poor saps waiting to be dragged to Granholm High School on this particular chilly fall morning. Her best friend, Sarah Shepard, wouldn't be among them. Sarah's mom usually drove her to and from school, except on days when she had a board meeting.

Julie peered down the street to see if she could make out anyone at the stop two blocks down. Her other friend, Aimee Chu was probably standing down there. Julie couldn't wait to grab a seat next to her and gab about their plans for tonight.

*Halloween. Yes! I just need to get through the day...*

Julie's thoughts drifted to all of the fun she and her friends were going to have that night. They were going to dress up and go trick-or-treating. Many of their peers had given up the practice, forsaking it as "childish," but Julie and her friends still relished the thought of receiving free candy. They were going to throw on plastic cat ears and

rubber cat noses, dab a little make up on their cheeks, and get the parents in the neighborhood to give them candy.

Then, they were going to toilet paper Nina Johnson's house. That was the part Julie was most looking forward to.

*It's going to be so much fun.*

Standing at the bust stop, her eyes glanced back at the thick bushes bordering the walk in front of old man Samuels's place. A gray haze was mixed in among the leaves. On closer inspection, the haze revealed itself to be a thick mass of spider webs.

"Gross", she said, backing away.

Mercifully, the bus arrived just seconds later.

She stepped onto the bus, walked to the back, and took the open spot next to Aimee Chu.

"Hey Chewie," Julie said to her friend. "Some morning huh?"

Aimee Chu looked up and nodded.

"Yeah. . . and don't call me that. You know I hate that!"

Aimee was, of course, referring to the nickname—*Chewie*—that their other friend, Sarah Shepard, had given to her in fifth grade. You'd think she'd earned it because her last name sounded like "chew." In fact, Sarah dinged her with it when she caught Aimee absentmindedly chewing on her long, black hair while reading in the library. The nickname stuck.

"Oh, don't be that way," Julie admonished her. "Are you looking forward to tonight?"

For the next fifteen minutes, the girls compared notes about their plans for the night and traded gossip about their classmates.



## 2—Math

Aimee and Julie stepped off the bus at seven thirty-five. The three story face of Granholm High School loomed in front of them. Its ninety-year-old architecture gives the impression that you're going into a hospital, or a prison. It certainly doesn't look like the sort of place you'd go to for happy thoughts and learning. Julie often wondered how they could make brick and concrete look so ugly.

The girls made their way up the front steps with the other students. However, as Julie took hold of the door, she noticed a cobweb had been spun inside one of the tiny window frames built into it. She recoiled and shoved the door open, nearly hitting Aimee with the door in the process.

"Watch it!" Aimee shouted.

"Sorry. Look," Julie said, pointing to the web-covered window as Aimee made her way through the door.

"Sick," Aimee replied. "But you didn't have to smash my face in! It's just cobwebs."

"Whatever... they're disgusting."

There were five minutes left to first bell, which left them no time to stop for breakfast in the cafeteria. So, the girls each just popped in to grab a bagel and hustled down the hall to their first class of the day: Math.

They shuffled into Room 108 with mere seconds to spare. Mr. Turk, the balding, overweight math teacher, was already at the whiteboard writing formulas. He scrawled something about "angle pair relationships." The whole year was going to involve geometry and proofs, which terrified Julie. Because of that, she always made sure to sit in the back corner, as far away as she could get from Mr. Turk, the board, and those evil formulas.

Instead of paying attention to Turk's lecture, Julie spent the first half of class staring at the ceiling. Her imagination was lost in the dot-like indentations and water stains in the tiles overhead.

Aimee tapped Julie's shoulder and pointed toward the corner near the door. There, near the ceiling, a goodly-sized spider of the two or three inch variety was camped out—just resting on the molding like it was some kind of couch or something.

Julie wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Jeez, look at that," she whispered to Aimee. "It's so big."

Aimee pulled her glasses down from her forehead to get a better look at the creature. Its body was brown with dark spots. There was a faint web behind it and its front legs were moving. She wondered if it was eating a fly or just working to make the web bigger.

"—and uugggggly," she said, finishing Julie's thought.

Julie opened her notepad to a blank page and scribbled on it. She quietly tore out the sheet and passed it to Aimee.

### ***Have you seen a lot of spiders lately too?***

Aimee leaned forward to shield the note from Mr. Turk's view. He was too caught up in a rant about A-squares and B-squares equaling C-squares, whatever that meant. She jotted a reply onto the paper and passed it back

***Yeah. We keep finding them in our basement.***

Julie's interest was stoked. She knew that changes in the weather would cause insects to retreat into homes and basements, but this many? She had been squashing one or two a day for weeks now. And they were never the same. Large, small, brown, black, short legs, long legs—she was becoming a regular Entomologist trying to keep track of all the varieties.

For the remainder of class, they passed the note back and forth. By the time the bell rang, they had amassed quite a conversation.

***J: Have you seen a lot of spiders lately too?***

***A: Yeah. We keep finding them in our basement.***

***J: OMG—same here! The brown ones with skinny legs are the worst!***

***A: I take them outside, but they come back.***

***J: Not me. I smash as many as I can.***

***A: Gross! I bet that annoys your mom.***

***J: It does, but that's just a perk. I HATE SPIDERS!!***

***A: Me too. When I was a little girl in China, I'd see some big ones. With fangs!***

***J: STOP! You are freaking me out!***

***A: Still, there weren't as many as I've seen here lately.***

***J: I know! It's creepy!***

At the bell, Mr. Turk reminded the students about their proofs homework that was due the next day. "Halloween is no excuse for slacking off," he told them.

Julie looked at Aimee and rolled her eyes. Homework wasn't in her plans for Halloween night.

On her way out the door, Julie tossed their note into the trash bin. She and Aimee parted ways until lunchtime and Julie began the grueling trek upstairs to her English class.

Halfway up the steps just past the second floor, Julie stopped to take a breather. She looked out one of the big latticed windows in the stairwell to survey the neighborhood outside. As her gaze moved downward, she noticed a large circle of webs padding one corner of the window.

*Seriously?! You have got to be kidding me. This whole town is turning into a house of horrors. At least there's no spider this time.*

### 3—English

Parked in Room 300, Julie felt happy that there weren't any cobwebs or spiders to be seen. No real ones, anyway. Plenty of fake webs and skeletons adorned the walls, courtesy of her English teacher, Mr. Ware—but nothing of insect origin.

*Sick buggers probably can't climb that high. Good!*

With nothing to distract her, she'd be able to focus on her English class, or as she liked to call it, the anti-Math. Mr. Turk's nasally math lessons made her want to hide under her desk, but Mr. Ware's English lessons had the habit of energizing her.

Keats, Kipling, Koontz—it didn't matter who the author was. Mr. Ware made them all seem exciting.

He had the students do raucous readalouds during the week and he'd act along with them. On Fridays, he'd show the class the TV or movie version of whatever book they were reading. In a month, they were going to take a field trip to the playhouse to see ***The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*** performed.

Talk around the school was that Mr. Ware had been the saxophone player in some regionally relevant rock-and-roll band in the early seventies. Julie thought that was cool.

"Alright now, alright now. Let's settle," Mr. Ware told the class. "We're going to take a break from Ayn Rand today and do something in the spirit of Halloween."

The class erupted in cheers, Julie included.

They had been reading ***The Fountainhead*** for what felt like weeks. It would be refreshing to have a break from the bickering of "Howard Roarke" and "Dominique Francon" for one day.

"Today, my doggies, we're going to read a spooky poem by Mary Howitt: *The Spider and the Fly*."

Julie lowered her head and exhaled a defeated breath.

*Wonderful. I get away from those things for 45 minutes and we're still going to talk about them.*

Mr. Ware passed photocopies of the poem down each aisle and told the class, "Alright, we're each going to read a few lines. I'll start."

He cleared his throat and started to sing, badly.

*"Why's everybody always kicking my dog around? Don't they know he's just a—"*

He stopped himself mid-song.

"Heh heh. Just kidding. That's not it."

The class laughed, out of pity.

Once the class settled down, he cleared his throat and read the first stanza of the **actual** poem in drawn out, melodramatic fashion:

*"Will you walk into my parlor?" said the Spider to the Fly,  
"Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy;  
The way into my parlor is up a winding stair,  
And I have many curious things to show you when you are there."  
"Oh no, no," said the Fly, "to ask me is in vain;  
For who goes up your winding stair can ne'er come down again."*

Julie clenched her teeth in frustration.

*Am I going to get no peace from those things today?!*

The students each read a few lines. Julie became more and more tense after each verse. So much so, that when it came time for her to read her portion, she could barely speak.

“*At last—*” she coughed, clearing her throat. She took a deep breath and began again.

*“At last—  
Up jumped the cunning spider, and fiercely held her fast;  
He dragged her up his winding stair, into the dismal den -  
Within his little parlor - but she ne'er came out again!”*

Her lines escaped her throat like a whisper. Lucky for her, the class didn't realize she was afraid. Instead of sensing her anxiety and frustration, the class thought she was just acting.

After finishing her part of the poem, Julie folded the paper and let it fall to her desk. The other students clapped for her. They actually clapped!

“Bravo, Miss Swanson—you really captured the spirit of the poem,” Mr. Ware told her.

She wanted to tell him where he could go, but instead cracked a halfhearted smile and said “thank you.”

For the first time since the semester began, she found herself watching the clock, wishing for English class to be over.

## 4—Gym

After English class, Julie stuffed her books into her locker and grabbed her gym bag. If she could get through the next forty-five minutes without so much as a mention of spiders, she'd consider herself lucky.

During the walk from the main building to the athletic complex across the street, she didn't notice a single spider or any sort of web.

She entered the athletic building and made a beeline to the girls' locker room. She could already hear the loud chatter of her classmates' gossip echoing down the hall. In terms of sheer volume, Julie was certain the girls' locker room had the cafeteria beat, even when it was pizza day.

Stepping inside and rounding the privacy barrier, Julie saw the usual suspects. Melanie Jones and Sherelle Landis were sitting on a bench half-dressed, bickering over something. They always claimed to be best friends, but they fought constantly. Tomeka Smith straddled the bench next to them, facing away from them and generally trying to ignore their current argument.

Other voices the next row over suggested that the cheerleaders were once again bragging to each other about which member of the football team they had done this or that with.

"Hey guys, B-R-B," Julie said to Melanie, Sherelle, and Tomeka. For some reason, she hadn't asked to be excused to the bathroom during either of her first two classes, and now she really had to go.

As she passed through the doorway leading to the lavatory area, she paused to look around.

*No spiders? Check.*

*No webs? Check.*

"Good, no creepy-crawlies in here to scare me out of my wits while I'm most vulnerable."

She used the toilet and washed her hands without incident. However, as she was about to walk back through the doorway, she noticed a now-familiar shape attached just above it.

"Eek!" she screamed.

The sound of her voice caused the spider to scurry and then fall to the floor. It moved a few inches toward Julie before turning tail and scrambling off in the other direction.

In a tantrum, Julie stomped on the ground with her right foot and threw her hands up in the air. "I can't believe it," she said to the empty room.

"I just can't believe it," she said again as she re-entered the changing area where the other girls were waiting.

"Believe what?" Sherelle asked.

"The spiders," Julie answered. "I keep



seeing them around school. Isn't there some law that says they have to get rid of these things?"

"I don't know," Melanie replied. "But you're right, they're everywhere. One of them jumped out of my locker this morning. I ruined a perfectly good book cover when I smashed it."

Tomeka, the quiet one of the bunch, turned to face the girls and added her two-cents: "I've seen a few big ones in my garage. Dad says it's the weather..."

Julie told them about her morning—the spider in her closet, the one on the entry door, the one in the bathroom. "Whatever it is, it's creeping me out. I hope we don't see any out on the gym floor. I need a break."

The other girls nodded in agreement.

A few minutes later, Coach Shoales led the girls to the running track outside. Julie got her break—the coach made them run laps.

Julie knew there were spiders around the track too, probably hiding in the grass or dangling from the football uprights—but it didn't bother her. She wouldn't stumble across any of them while jogging the quarter mile on the track, and she had no intention of going anywhere near the uprights.

Midway into her second lap, a voice called out to her from behind, "hey gorgeous, how's it going?"

The comment startled her.

Julie stopped and looked back to locate the source of the question. Coming up behind her, out of breath, was Jonathan "Chip" Jackson, a fullback on the football team and the boy she currently had a crush on.

"Hi Chip!" she beamed.

He rarely spoke to her. *What's going on*, she wondered.

Huffing and puffing, it took him a while to reveal his intentions: "Hey, Julie... I was... I was wondering... Sarah told me you were going trick-or-treating... I think that sounds fun... can I come?"

She couldn't believe it. They had shared maybe 100 words since the school year began eight weeks ago, and now he'd invited himself to go trick-or-treating with her.

"Uh, OK... sure!" she told him, trying to play it cool. "—But that's not all we're doing..."

"Sarah told me about toilet papering Nina Johnson's house too," he said, smiling. "I can be down for that. You're going to need a lookout."

"Sweet!" she told him. "Uh, it's a... date, I guess!"

Chip smiled and waved at her to continue running.

"Yeah, I'll get your number from Sarah," he said to her, adding "you go on ahead. I'm not used to long distance running."

Julie debated cutting the run short and devoting the remaining time to more conversation with Chip, but she decided better of it after remembering what coach made her do the last time she slacked off: Squat-thrusts. One hundred of them. Leaving Chip behind, she set off to finish the run.

"See you tonight," he shouted to her, hoarsely.

Sitting in the locker room four laps later, Julie was all smiles. She also felt relief to see that no spiders had setup camp on the ceiling or benches while she was out running the track. When she went to shower to get clean after the grueling run, she didn't see so

much as a single web—not even in the stall that’s been “out of order” since September of last year.

*Gym wasn’t bad. Maybe I’ll get through the rest of this day bug-free after all.*

## 5—Lunch & Bio (Not!)

Lunch at Granholm High is complete chaos. Instead of splitting the student body into two lunch periods, like some schools do, Granholm sends all 1,100 of its kids to the cafeteria at the same time. School rules state that only seniors are allowed to leave school grounds during lunch. Because of those rules, the two city blocks the Granholm campus occupies sound like a rock concert between 11:40 and 12:30.

“Hi guys,” Julie called out, taking a seat at the table occupied by Aimee Chu and Sarah Shepard, a.k.a. her very best friends in the world.

“Hey punk,” Sarah said right back. “Thanks for keeping us waiting.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Aimee said, sticking out her tongue.

Julie rarely made it to the cafeteria on-time after gym class. The walk alone killed a few minutes. And if she chose to shower—well, her friends were used to seeing her saunter in at 11:50 or even noon.

This was one of those noon days.

“Sorry, guys. Coach made us run laps. I had to take a shower or you wouldn’t let me sit with you.”

“You’re right about that,” Sarah replied, poking her in the arm.

Sarah always poked people in the arm—and she knew exactly where to poke so it would still hurt five minutes after she did it.

Julie had a number of theories as to why Sarah bossed around and poked her friends, but she always found herself unable to say them out loud for fear of Sarah punching her lights out. Sarah was two inches taller and had an extra thirty pounds over her, after all.

“OK, enough giving me a hard time,” Julie begged. “Let’s go get our food.”

Sarah and Aimee went through the line first while Julie kept watch over the table. In a cafeteria that packed, you didn’t want to lose your seat. Soon, they returned and Julie had her chance to grab her choice of chicken casserole or a hamburger. The casserole looked like it just fell off the medical waste truck, so she opted for the hamburger. Returning to the table, she saw that Aimee and Sarah had done the same.

“Oh, hey Sarah,” Julie said as she returned to her seat. “Chip Jackson asked me if he could join us tonight. He said you mentioned it to him.”

“Yeah?” Sarah asked, trying to jog her memory. “Oh, yeah... I did! He came over to hang out with my brother the other day, and I kind of got to talking about you and our plans. He seemed... interested.”

Julie turned five shades of red.

“Um, uh... thanks Sarah, I think,” Julie squeaked. “But, um, your mom won’t mind him going out with us later?”

“Oh, don’t worry about her,” Sarah said confidently. “She won’t pay him any attention anyway. He’s not coming to see me.”

Julie blushed again.

“I know he’s your crush. Why do you think I tried to set you two up?”

Julie smiled wide.

“Thanks, Sarah. If this works out, I’ll owe you big time.”

The girls traded gossip and gobbled down their burgers-and-fries in record time, leaving them just ten minutes left of lunch period to unwind.

“Julie,” Sarah began with an inquisitive tone, “how do you feel about biology?”



“I’m dreading it,” Julie said. “I haven’t done my homework.”

Sarah shook her head.

“No, silly. What I meant to say was, how would you feel about skipping bio today? They just opened that new Hot Topic knockoff in the strip mall down the street. I want to check it out.”

Julie looked at the clock and considered the request. At this point, her day could go either way. Health and Spanish were practically guaranteed to go well, but she had to get through Biology first. She hated biology.

Spending some allowance on a piece of cute jewelry or a new top might be just the thing to put the day back on the right track, she reasoned.

“I’m in,” she finally replied.

“How about you, Chewy?” Sarah asked.

“Don’t call me that!” Aimee shouted in response. “And... no, I can’t. I can’t skip chem today. We have a test.”

“OK, well, I guess it’s just me and Jules here,” Sarah said. “No big—just make sure to call me tonight, so my mom can give you a ride over. We don’t want to miss out on our Halloween plans.”

“I know, I know,” Aimee said, as she pushed her chair back and headed off to her chemistry class on the third floor.

“—Catch you guys later. Bye, Julie!”

When Aimee was out of sight, Sarah tapped Julie on the shoulder and pointed toward the exit.

“Let’s get going before the teachers come back,” she said. “If we aren’t out past the gym in five minutes, we’re not going anywhere but detention.”

The two girls hotfooted it toward the door.

Fifteen minutes later, they were standing in the parking lot of the Wilson Avenue shopping plaza, mouths agape. Zeitgeist, the store they’d hoped to shop at, was closed, and so were the other six tenants of the strip mall. There was a sign on the door:

### ***Danger—Fumigation in Progress***

“Great!” Julie shouted. “Just great! I skip school to get away from those darn bugs and I come to a store that’s full of them.”

Sarah looked around.

“What are you talking about, J?”

“The spiders, Sarah. Haven’t you seen them?”

For the next ten minutes, Julie told Sarah the same story she had told Tomeka and the other girls in gym class. Sarah’s eyes grew wide as she listened to Julie talk about the spider that had chased her earlier in the morning, the big one on the wall in math class, and the one that tried to jump on her in the locker room.

When Julie finished, Sarah replied with a story of her own—and it was a doozy.

“My dad was out in the garage, right? Yeah, so he’s out there moving some boxes around. And mom and I are in the house doing whatever. All of the sudden, we hear this yell—it’s him screaming. Mom runs past me with the first aid kit in her hand. I follow her...”

Sarah kicked a pebble across the parking lot. Neither she nor Julie noticed the tiny, dark shapes scurrying away from the pile of leaves it landed in.

“We get in there and we see dad. He’s huddled in the corner with a plunger in his hand. In the other corner, oh man, it was the biggest spider I’ve ever seen.”

Sarah held her hands one-foot apart and made a circle shape with them.

“It musta been this big.”

She shook her hands for emphasis.

“And its skin looked like chicken skin! Oh my gosh, I was so scared.”

Julie’s jaw dropped. She shook with fear. It took her a few seconds to consider a reply.

“What did you do?” she finally asked.

“After mom calmed him down,” Sarah continued, “dad went at it with a baseball bat. There’s a hole in the wall and mom refuses to clean up the mess.”

“Oh man, that’s so gross!” Julie cried out, gagging.

“Yeah. Dad looked it up online later and said it was called a camel spider. They’re supposed to be in the desert; not here where it gets cold!”

“That’s insane,” Julie said. “I wish I knew what was up with all of these spiders appearing lately.”

“Yeah... I’m just glad I haven’t seen any all day,” Sarah said. “—And you haven’t seen any since gym, right?”

Julie nodded and shrugged her shoulders. “Right.”

“Well, there you go,” Sarah said, trying to further reassure her. “We’re in the clear. Out of sight, out of mind.”



She regretted the words almost immediately. Just as they left her mouth, the two girls both noticed a metallic tapping noise coming from their right, near the strip mall’s dumpster. They took a few steps toward it and stopped cold.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of spiders were crawling all over the dumpster and the bags of trash sitting next to it.

The girls screamed in unison and start running. Julie, the lighter of the two, pulled ahead and blazed a route back to campus. She waited at one of the side entrances for Sarah to catch up. When she had, the two piled through the door and hightailed it to the girls’ bathroom a little ways down the hall.

For the next twenty minutes, they laid low in the bathroom. They discussed the dumpster and spiders, and they promised each other that they were never going to that strip mall again.

“Seriously, it’s dead to me,” Julie insisted.

“Yeah,” Sarah agreed. “I’ll just spend my money at Hot Topic.”

When the bell rang, the two headed to their different fifth period classes—Julie to Health, Sarah to Math.

## 6—Health

Julie sauntered into Room 227 as if she hadn't just skipped class or fled from a swarm of arachnids. She passed Mrs. Lewinsky's desk and took a seat on the right side of the room where all the girls sat during health class.

Have you ever noticed that? In most classes, boys and girls sit just about anywhere, or pair up with their friends. But, for health and gym, the boys always gather on one half of the room and the girls gather on the other. Julie had pondered the question herself on a few occasions, but never bothered to think too hard about it. After all, none of her friends were taking health with her.

Sarah and Aimee were putting it off until next year. She couldn't blame them. Over the course of the past eight weeks, Mrs. Lewinsky had taught them all about the horrors of foodborne illnesses, about the nasty bacteria that you pass on if you don't wash your hands, and about the various ways cuts and injuries can become infected.

In a week, they were going to start on the human reproduction unit. The boys were looking forward to it. The girls dreaded it, especially the part where they'd have to go to another room to watch "the video."

Julie had been enjoying the current unit, though: "Things to know about household pets and other common animals."

Friday's class had been about raccoons and opossums. Julie hoped Monday's topic would involve birds, squirrels, or something equally harmless. Anything to take her mind off the insect infestation she had been witnessing. As Mrs. Lewinsky wrote Monday's topic on the whiteboard, Julie realized her ordeal wasn't over yet.

### ***SPIDERS AND ARACHNIDS HAPPY HALLOWEEN!***

Julie looked up at the whiteboard in horror. Defeated, deflated, and dejected, she let out a big sigh and slumped in her seat.

"I don't believe it," she muttered under her breath.

*Why me? What did I do to deserve this?*

Mrs. Lewinsky called to the class to settle down and began her lecture.

"Today, in the spirit of Halloween, we're going to talk about spiders, arachnids, and other creepy-crawly insects that roam around our homes and gardens. The thing to keep in mind, class, is that most of these creatures are harmless and just want to be left alone. But not all—"

As the teacher continued her statement, she tossed a floppy rubber spider toward the girls' side of the room. It bounced off Jenny Koeckner's shoulder and landed on Julie's desktop.

"Eek!" Julie screamed, leaping out of her desk. She went sprawling on the floor. The rest of the class laughed as Julie struggled to catch her breath.

"Not funny!" she cried out, pulling herself back into her seat.

An apologetic Mrs. Lewinsky rushed over.

"Oh gosh, Julie—I am so sorry! I didn't mean for that to happen. Are you OK?"

"Yes," Julie told her. "Just caught me by surprise is all. I'm alright."

Mrs. Lewinsky picked up the fake spider and walked back up to the front of the class. She made an obvious display of dropping it into her desk drawer.

“Spiders often catch us by surprise, don’t they? Sorry Julie.”

She shifted into the lecture without skipping a beat.

“And, as is often the case with spiders, those surprises usually turn out to be harmless. We jump, we shoo them away, and we go back to what we’re doing. But, not all encounters with spiders turn out so well—”

For the next ten minutes, Mrs. Lewinsky told them about how spiders usually live in dark corners and eat other insects. “That makes them beneficial to have around if you have a pesky housefly you can’t get rid of,” she said. She described how they tend to run away from humans and are more scared of us than we are of them. And, like Julie’s mom had done on so many occasions, she advised the class to relocate spiders whenever possible, instead of squashing them, because of the work they do to control the insect population.

*If this is all we’re going to talk about, maybe it won’t be so bad.*

Then, Mrs. Lewinsky changed the subject to touch on the encounters that “didn’t turn out so well.”

For the rest of the class, Julie squirmed and shivered as she learned about spiders that jump and spiders that bite, spiders that are poisonous and spiders that eat things larger than insects—such as mice and cats. Mrs. Lewinsky repeatedly reassured the class that these more dangerous members of the spider family were rarely seen here in the city.

Mrs. Lewinsky described ten, maybe a dozen different species to the class. Julie immediately forgot most of them, but three stood out in her mind:

**Northern Black Widow (*Latrodectus variolus*):** Found throughout the United States, especially in wet climates. Black body with red markings. Females usually grow to be two inches in diameter. Will bite if provoked. Male bites are harmless, but the female’s bite can deliver a venom that causes muscle pain, seizures, and heart attacks in humans.

**Brown Recluse (*Loxosceles reclusa*):** Also called the “violin spider,” due to the violin-like color pattern on its back. Found throughout the United States, usually in warmer weather. Small body with long legs. Can run quickly and even jump, but generally ignores humans unless attacked. Its bite injects a venom that seems harmless at first, but later leads to blistering and open sores at the injection site. In rare cases, the venom can lead to excess bleeding and cause flesh throughout the body to die.

**Bold Jumping Spider (*Phidippus audax*):** A black spider with furry stripes common to North America. Possesses excellent hunting skills. Instead of catching its prey in a web, it chases and jumps on its victims. When provoked, the jumping behavior is uncontrolled and often causes the spider to jump towards the aggressor. Bites are rarely fatal but can cause redness, itching, and swelling around the site of the bite.

Her thoughts were going a mile a minute.

*The Brown Recluse? That fits the description of the spider in my closet this morning.*

*Black Widow? Did the spider on the door this morning have red markings on it? I think it was a Black Widow!*

*And the jumping spider, I'm pretty sure that's what Sarah and I saw swarming the dumpster next to Zeitgeist. Why am I seeing so many of these different spiders now?! It doesn't make sense!*

Now absolutely freaked out, Julie wondered how she would make it to the end of the day without breaking down. She found herself hoping for a test in Spanish, or maybe fifty minutes of conjugating verbs and practicing vocabulary. Dull—that'd be just fine.

## 7—Spanish

Spanish class went fine for the first thirty-five minutes. Mrs. Joselow, the teacher, had given a unit on “Dia De Los Muertos,” the Mexican holiday that comes the day after Halloween.

For Dia De Los Muertos, or “the day of the dead,” family and friends gather together to remember loved ones who have died. Part of the celebration involves decorating small dioramas with skeletons and skulls. The living place sacramental offerings of food and drink near the altars, so their departed loved ones can enjoy a taste of their old life one more time.

The way she described it, Mrs. Joselow made Dia De Los Muertos sound like a spooky Mexican version of Memorial Day.

Toward the end of the teacher’s rousing explanation of the holiday, another classmate asked how her people back home celebrated it. As it turns out, their celebrations match the overall Mexican traditions, with one big addition: Teotihuacan, the “Great Goddess of Spiders.”

Julie looked up at the clock.

*Thirty-five minutes!* she screamed in her head. *I was so close!*

Mrs. Joselow told the class how Teotihuacan is believed to act as a spirit guide between the living world and the underworld for soldiers that die in battle.

Teotihuacan’s most identifying trait is the headdress of living spiders that she wears.

“Ick,” Julie mumbled aloud upon hearing of Teotihuacan’s choice of headgear.

“Teotihuacan has to take good care of the spiders,” the teacher continued, “because they are the key to opening the door between the two worlds, the key to everything—”

Mrs. Joselow walked past Julie. As she did, she went on to explain, “that’s why my people only catch-and-release spiders, and don’t kill them. We don’t want to get lost on the way to the afterlife when the time comes.”

*Oh give me a break,* Julie thought, rolling her eyes. *Now she’s lecturing me on stomping a couple teensy little spiders? How could she know?!*

For Julie, Mrs. Joselow’s nostalgic spider rant was the final nail in her mood’s coffin. She had woken up that morning with so much hope for the day, and now she was crabby. She considered bailing on trick-or-treating and just barricading herself in her room the rest of the night.

Mercifully, the bell eventually rang, signaling the end of the school day.

On the bus, Aimee and Sarah talked excitedly about the night’s possibilities while Julie remained silent. Usually, she and Sarah compete to see who can be the chattiest. That’s what the bus driver keeps telling Julie’s mom anyway.

“Hey, Jules,” Sarah asked. “Is something wrong?”

“No, I’m fine,” Julie explained. “I just... I don’t know if I want to go trick-or-treating tonight after all. It’s been a heck of a day.”

“Whaaaat?!” Aimee exclaimed.

“Yeah, turd,” Sarah shot back. “You’ve been looking forward to this for days. You can’t ditch us now.”

“I’m not going if you’re not going,” Aimee added.

Sarah played the guilt card.

“See? If you don’t come, we’re all just going to stay home. We won’t get any candy and we won’t TP Nina Johnson’s house. You do want to get back at her for pantsing you in gym class last month, don’t you?”

She did. She most certainly did.

“I do... yeah.”

“—And, Chip said he’d borrow his dad’s car to take us out in. If you don’t come along, maybe I’ll go with him by myself. How would you like that?”

“You wouldn’t!” Julie cried.

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t,” Sarah said in return. “Just come with us and you won’t have to worry about it.”

Julie shrugged her shoulders.

“OK, whatever, you win. But you better be nice to me tonight.”

“Deal!” Sarah promised.

In the back of her mind, Julie knew Sarah would have a tough time keeping that promise. But, maybe Sarah was right. Chip did invite himself to join them, and she probably wouldn’t get a better opportunity to get close to him.

*Maybe I’ll take a nap when I get home. Put some space between me and this horrible day. I don’t need to be at Sarah’s until six or so. Yeah, that’s not a bad plan.*

## 8—Anxiety

“Begging for candy is boring,” Sarah said to the group. “I collected enough chocolate bars to last me a year a half an hour ago. Why don’t we just go to Nina’s and get it over with?”

Aimee, the logical thinker of the group, unstrapped her watch and waved it in front of Sarah. “Because, doof, if we go now, they’ll still have their lights on for trick-or-treaters. We have to wait an hour or so until they shut off the porch light.”

“Hah, yeah,” Chip Jackson, the newest member of the group said. “If the light’s on, they’ll catch us for sure.”

Julie yanked the fake kitty cat nose off of her face and turned to look at her three friends.

“Sarah, please don’t whine,” she chastised. “You know the day I’ve had. I took a nap to take the edge off, but I’m still this close to snapping thanks to those darn awful spiders.”

Julie waved her orange, pumpkin-shaped bucket in the air, pointing up the street in the general direction of Nina Johnson’s house.

“And you know I, more than anybody, want to get even with Nina Johnson.”

No one could deny that. A month earlier, during gym—the same gym class that Julie shared with Chip Jackson—Nina Johnson had done the unforgivable.

They had been playing volleyball, boys against the girls. Julie had made a half-hearted attempt to return a volley. When she landed, she realized her gym shorts were resting around her ankles. Nina Johnson had grabbed onto the legs when Julie jumped to strike the ball. She had made Julie jump out of her own shorts.

Julie stood there in shock, embarrassed, as sixty other students from two combined gym groups got a good look at her new polka dotted underwear. What if she had worn an older pair that day?

Thinking about it again made Julie’s blood boil.

“We know, Jules,” Sarah said to her. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I shouldn’t complain. I do have a bag full of candy, after all.”

Chip cleared his throat to catch their attention.

“Ladies, I have an idea,” he said. “Why don’t we go back to the car? I know a great place where we can hang out and kill an hour before it’s time to TP Nina’s place.”

The three girls looked at him, excited. In truth, it wasn’t the thought of a different destination that excited them. They were excited because this older boy was spending time with them—and driving them around in his dad’s car no less.

“Ooh,” Julie said excitedly. “What do you have in mind?”

Chip told them about an abandoned, red-tagged house he saw during the drive to their neighborhood.

“There’s this place, out near mile marker 81. Most of those houses are vacant. This one, though, it looks like it was taken right out of the *Thriller* video: Busted windows, a hole in the roof, overgrown lawn—the whole nine yards.”

Aimee tried to talk some sense into the group. “What good’s that going to do us?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Sarah agreed, belligerently.

Chip spelled out more of his master plan: “Well, ladies, first off, we can go in there... break stuff, maybe find some stuff to keep.”



“That’s stealing,” Aimee moaned.

“You can’t steal from an abandoned house,” he argued. “And besides, we’re also going to need a place to lay low for an hour or so after we hit the Johnson place. No one will find us there.”

A light bulb lit up in Julie’s head.

“Chip’s right,” she said. “If we aren’t home, our parents can’t badger us into confessing to anything.”

“Man, Julie,” Aimee said. “You must really want to get back at Nina Johnson.”

Julie nodded. She wore a dead serious look on her face.

“I’d love to be able to do to her what she did to me, but she always wears those spandex shorts in gym, so that’s not gonna happen. I need to do something, Aimee. Half the school saw me in my underwear!”

“It wasn’t even half,” Sarah reminded her.

“Yeah,” Chip said, “And um... I thought they were cute.”

Julie blushed.

Sarah smacked his arm. “Toad!”

“Oww,” Chip yelped. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Alright, alright,” Sarah said, taking charge.

“—Let’s go back to the car, count the candy, and go check out this place Chip thinks is so spooky. I don’t want to stand around here all night.”

Back in the car, they each dumped their bags and buckets of candy into a larger duffel bag sitting on the back seat. Sarah dumped her bag—it was mostly chocolate bars. Aimee dumped her bag—she had a 50/50 mix of chocolate candy and chewy gummies. Chip, who hadn’t worn a costume, not even a cheap fake nose, contributed a few paltry pieces of chocolate to the pile.

After Julie dumped her bucket into the duffel, she noticed a larger piece of candy was still stuck somehow.

*Maybe it melted? Maybe it’s one of those taffy candies.*

She turned the bucket’s opening toward her and made to reach into it when she suddenly stopped cold. Skittering about inside the bucket was a black, two-inch long spider with red markings on its back: a Black Widow.

Julie screamed and pushed the button to roll down the electric-powered windows. After what felt like an eternity, the window had rolled down enough for her to toss the pumpkin-shaped bucket into the street.

“Oh gosh, oh my gosh,” Julie said hysterically. “Nobody go get that—there was a black widow in there!”

Chip opened his door, stepped out of the driver’s seat, and walked up to the bucket. He kicked it into a yard on the other side of the street.

Julie jumped out of the car to thank him. She hugged him tight.



“Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you,” she repeated.

“Oh, t’weren’t nothin’,” he said in a fake country bumpkin voice. “Besides, how else am I going to get you to like me?”

Julie smiled wide.

“OK, Romeo and Julie,” Sarah said in a sarcastic tone. “Let’s go check out that house on Mile 81 before you two get married and have kids on me.”

They piled back into the car. Aimee and Sarah cleaned out the back seat in no time flat. Julie sat up front, next to Chip. He tapped the radio pre-set to bring up the 80’s and 90’s station, and the quartet headed off to see what was in store for them at the abandoned house on Mile 81.

## 9—Fear

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” Julie said, grasping Chip’s hand tightly. The four were parked across the street from an old, abandoned house that had been rotting out near mile marker 81 for the better part of ten years. Supposedly, the city had made an attempt to clean up the place a few years ago, but you sure couldn’t tell from looking at it.

Most houses have four straight, vertical walls and a solid roof on top. Somehow, the walls of this house were bent inward and the roof was bowing in the middle. There was a large hole to the right of the peak of the roof. It really was a miracle that the house hadn’t collapsed.



Over time, the original bright yellow paint had faded to more of a dirty tan. Windows were either cracked or outright smashed. Some had boards over them. The ones on the first floor all had cast iron bars mounted in front of them.

Ugly, unkempt, and uninviting: This wasn’t the sort of house you’d want to end up at in the dark of night, especially not on Halloween.

“Cooooool,” Sarah said, popping open the car door.

“You think it’s cool?” Aimee asked. “I think it’s easily the dumpiest, most frightening house I’ve ever seen.”

Chip attempted to be the voice of reason: “Aww, c’mon—it’s just falling apart is all.”

Julie grabbed the bag with the flashlights in it and stepped out of the car. Just then, the radio station started playing a ghastly song by Rob Zombie.

Sarah groaned.

“Chip,” Julie said. “I know you want to keep the motor running, just in case, but seriously: turn the radio off. That song is giving us the willies!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Chip said as he jogged to car and switched off the radio.

They stood there, gawking at the house.

“I don’t like the looks of this place,” Aimee said.

Sarah led the group to the front gate. Overgrown sticker bushes poked through the fence. On the other side, the grass had grown to be nearly a foot tall. Bottles, cans, and other trash littered the yard.

“Come on guys,” she beckoned to them. “Let’s check out this *haunted* house!”

She reached out to push open the rusty, cast iron gate. It didn’t budge. She grabbed it with both hands and shook it, hoping to jostle it open.

Sarah’s shaking caused a small black object to fall from the cobweb-filled tree above her head. She felt a tickle on her hand, looked down, and saw a black and yellow garden spider, *Argiope aurantia*, tapping its legs against her skin.

“Eeeek!” she screamed. “Get it off, get it off, get it off!”

She slapped the spider away and it went scurrying across the sidewalk. Chip, in an act of male bravado, stepped on it with his foot.

\*CRUNCH!\*

“There you are, my lady—your knight has slain the dragon,” he said confidently.

Sarah ignored him. She was too busy trying to catch her breath.

“I’m really starting to hate these spiders,” Julie said. “First, they harass me at school. Now, they’re stalking me here.”

Chip laughed.

“Julie, Julie—don’t be that way,” he told her. “Isn’t this the one place you’d expect to see at least a spider or two?”

“Yeah, creep... I guess,” she said. She smacked him on the shoulder. “But you’re the one that brought us here.”

Chip stepped toward the gate to get a closer look. He surveyed the frame, the hinges, and finally the lock.

“Aww, it’s just a little rusty. Here—” he said as he gave the gate a swift kick and sent it flying open.

They stood there dumbstruck, not moving. The path to the house was clear, but no one wanted to take the lead. A good two minutes passed before someone made a move.

“Losers,” Sarah said to the group.

“—I’ll go first.”

She stepped forward and walked the length of the concrete walkway leading to the front steps. Chip, Aimee, and Julie followed behind.

“Jeez, this yard is big,” Chip said.

“And overgrown,” Aimee replied.

Julie, bringing up the rear, marveled at the amount of trash piled up in the yard. Cans, bottles, candy wrappers, batteries, chip bags—you name it and the container for it was probably resting in the grass or stuck in a bush somewhere.

As she neared the steps to join her friends, Julie noticed that the bushes in front of the porch pillars were covered in cobwebs, absolutely thick with them.

“Yeck,” she wretched. “I don’t even want to know what’s in those bushes.”

She picked up the pace and bumped into Chip.

“Hey now, darlin’,” he joked. “Save that for later.”

“Very funny, lame-o,” she shot back.

The four stared up at the front door. In its original state, some nine or ten years ago, it was probably a bright shade of red that paired well with the house’s primary yellow tone—inviting, cheerful even. Now, faded a dark umber and caked with mud and who-knows-what, it looked like a warning. There was no sign attached to the door, but the door itself clearly said “keep out.”

“Alright, here goes,” Sarah said as she climbed the steps and grasped the doorknob.

She turned the knob and was surprised to face no resistance. The latch gave way and the door opened. Sarah, Chip, Aimee, and Julie filed individually through the doorway and found themselves standing in the entry foyer.

“Flashlights on, everybody,” Chip commanded.

With their eyes adjusting, they were overcome by the awesome spectacle of the house.

“Wow,” Aimee said breathlessly.

“That’s an understatement,” Julie said. “This place is a total dump.”

Julie wasn’t kidding. Off to her left, a large doorway led to some sort of sitting area. A couch of some sort was half-visible from the group’s vantage point. Standing there, she could already tell it was covered in cobwebs. Directly in front of them, a large staircase led up to the second floor. A small chandelier that had been dangling from the ceiling now sat at the foot of the steps. Two small hallways, cloaked in darkness, led back from either side of the steps.

To the group’s right, a boarded up door, slightly askew on its hinges, hinted at a study or library shuttered away behind it.

“This place is massive,” Aimee said with a tone of awe in her voice.

“Yeah,” Chip said.

“—It’s like it’s bigger on the inside than the outside.”

Sarah twirled in front of them and outstretched her arms in a welcoming gesture.

“So,” she said in a spooky voice. “Where do we go first? Into the dusty living room? Upstairs? Down one of the dark hallways? OoooOOOoooh.”

They bickered amongst themselves for five minutes until, finally, Julie broke the silence.

“Upstairs,” Julie said, not wanting any part of the dark hallways or the musty room filled with cobwebs.

Julie walked past Sarah and slowly tiptoed up the first few stairs. She sidled past the crumpled chandelier and waved for the others to follow her.

At the top of the steps, the four made a decision that would shape the rest of the night.

“There are so many rooms up here,” Aimee explained. “We should split up, so we can explore faster.”

“Split up?” Chip asked.

“Yeah, see, most of these rooms are going to be boring, right? Right. So, we split up, and if somebody finds something cool, they yell out to the others. Got it?”

“I don’t know if we should go alone,” Julie said, nervously standing on her tiptoes.

Chip came to her rescue: “She’s right.”

“We should use the buddy system,” he explained. “Pair up. That way, we have a buddy to watch our back just in case something happens.”

Sarah looked at him quizzically and asked, “What could happen?”

“I don’t know,” Chip said to her sheepishly. “Something.”

“So how do we pair up?” Aimee asked.

Just then, a brown, furry animal of some sort scurried across the hardwood floor in front of Julie. She let out a deafening squeal and slammed her foot down on top of it. When she pulled her foot away, blood and guts fell from the bottom of her shoe. It was another spider, possibly a Tarantula judging by the hair on its legs.

~Nooooo...~ a whispery voice groaned.

Aimee jumped. The others looked around, eyes wide.

Sarah asked, “did anyone else just hear something?”

They looked at each other. To the last, they each shook their heads and claimed not to have heard anything.

“Definitely just the wind,” Aimee said.

Julie put the conversation back on track: “Anyway... Chip’s right, we should pair up. I’ll go with him down this hallway. You two can go that way.”

Sarah felt the urge to make a snarky comment about Julie's choice of partner, but decided better of it. *She might throw me over the stairs*, she thought to herself.

Aimee and Sarah wandered down the hallway. Julie and Chip went to investigate one of the rooms near the staircase, figuring if anything did happen, they could hightail it out of there.

Their room appeared to be a sitting room of some kind. Two large mirrors adorned the far wall. Between the mirrors, a stand with a dusty imprint on its surface suggested there was once a record player or stereo in the room. Two large sleigh style sofas with no backs were angled in a V shape in the middle of the room. Everything was covered in dust.

"Not many cobwebs, thankfully," Chip said to Julie.

Nodding, Julie agreed: "After the day I've had, I'm thankful for that."

They picked and pattered around the room, opening drawers and peering into closets. They didn't see a single spider. Julie felt very relieved by that.

Feeling relaxed, she struck up a conversation with Chip.

"So, umm, Chip—Sarah told me she, uh, told you to ask me out," Julie said, stammering her words.

"Yeah, she did," he explained.

A frown began to cross Julie's face.

He stepped closer and clarified his words: "Aww man, no. Don't take it like that. She told me to ask you out because she saw I was always, umm, staring at you in the hallway when you two were heading to bio class."

Julie's expression brightened at this new revelation.

"Oh," she said, "So, does that mean you've liked me for a while?"

Sheepishly, Chip confirmed her suspicion: "Yeah, I guess. You were in my typing class last year. You kept making me laugh. And I thought you were cute."

There was a brief pause, during which Chip reconsidered his last statement.

"Wait, no—you are cute!"

Julie laughed.

"Dude, you should've said something," she said, chastising him.

He smiled and answered back, "I guess I was too chicken. But, hey, we can make up for lost time!"

"Calm down, Romeo," she said. "I think you're pretty awesome too. Let's just leave it at that for now."

Chip smiled and opened his mouth to speak. He managed to utter "De—," the first syllable of what may have been an attempt to say 'Deal' or 'Definitely,' but was cut off when a terrible scream cut through the air.

"Aaaaahhhhhh!!!"

The scream echoed down the hall. It came from the direction that Sarah and Aimee were supposed to be exploring.

"Oh my gosh," Julie uttered with a start.

Chip bolted out of the room and took off running down the hall with Julie close on his heels. At the end of the hallway, they came to an open doorway and peered in. A sick feeling overtook both of them as they surveyed the room.

Sarah was huddled on the bed, shaking. A pair of brown, furry spiders scurried down the mattress. Aimee was nowhere to be seen.

Across from the bed, the closet door was open. Cobwebs dangled out of its doorframe, blowing in the wind. Inside the closet, there was a large hole where the floor should've been. A handful of smaller spiders skittered about near the hole.

Julie stood in the doorway, paralyzed with fear.

Regaining his composure, Chip dashed over to Sarah's side and swatted the spiders—possibly more tarantulas—off the bed. He smashed one of them beneath his sneaker. Then, he rushed over to the closet and started slamming his foot down onto the tinier crawlers surrounding the hole.

~Nooooooooo!!~ A voice cried out, louder this time.

The voice, though deep, was barely above a whisper. It sounded raspy, forced—inhuman.

Chip turned around and realized one of the group was missing. He looked toward Sarah and asked about Aimee, but she didn't hear him.

"Sarah?!" he asked again, louder this time. "Where's Aimee?"

Sarah struggled to find her words. She started to cry, but forced herself to describe what she had just witnessed.

"We... we... we were just exploring this cool bedroom... and, Aimee was over there... she opened the closet and... and... PLEASE! Don't make me say it—"

Chip sat next to her on the bed and waved Julie over. Julie took a seat on the other side of the bed, careful to avoid the spider guts on the floor.

"It's OK, Sarah," Chip said reassuringly. "We're here now."

"We... we, umm... they attacked," Sarah explained. "They attacked us! She opened the closet and hundreds of them fell on her!"

Chip and Julie listened to her with their eyes wide.

"This big one, I kid you not—it came up through the hole in the floor and grabbed her. It grabbed her! That's when she screamed."

She paused for a moment to catch her breath.

"I... I ran over and grabbed her arm, tried to pull her back..."

Sarah stopped talking and nervously surveyed the room. She gave the closet a lengthy stare and continued. "And a bunch of the brown fuzzy ones jumped on me. They jumped on me! I was so scared."

Chip looked at her and asked, "So how did you end up on the bed?"

Her face turned red with embarrassment. "I, um, I ran face first into the wall and fell onto it. Then you guys came in."

## 10—Terror

Minutes passed before Julie felt her wits returning to her. She let go of Sarah's hand and slowly stood up from the bed. Cautiously, she stepped toward the closet while keeping her eyes focused on the dark hole in the floor. She had watched Chip stomp the remaining spiders to bits, but she sure didn't relish the thought of encountering whatever it was that had pulled Aimee through the floor.

"So, where did Aimee go?" she asked, peering into the hole.

Briefly, they debated going to get help. But what would they say? Breaking into an abandoned house would land them all in juvie, or worse.

"Let's look for Aimee first before bringing grown-ups into the mix," Chip suggested. "Just based on what we know about the house, my guess is the hole here is situated above one of the downstairs rooms."

Sarah nodded her head in agreement. "At the end of the dark hallways downstairs," she said.

"Right," Chip confirmed.

Julie shook her head.

"No way," she countered. "It's behind the living room. There must be a room attached to it."

After a heated round of bickering, they decided to split up again. Sarah and Chip would take the flashlights and explore the dark hallway, while Julie would search the brightly-lit living room.

"Don't worry, Julie," Chip said. "Spiders like the dark. The living room has all that glare from the outside shining into it. You'll be fine."

Julie didn't like the idea of being alone, but she knew Chip was right. The streetlamps shined so brightly into the living room that no spider would be able to sneak up on her. She appreciated that Chip had taken into account the horrific day she'd had. A few more spiders and she would freak out for good.

She watched Sarah and Chip retreat down the hall. They walked with their backs to one another like the SWAT team officers do in those police shows you see on TV.

When they were finally out of view, she mulled over searching the living room.

*Option one: Explore the living room.*

*Option two: Stay here and wait for them to come back.*

*Option three: Run out the front door and get help.*

Running away was an appealing option, but she didn't want to desert her friends.

*Even if I did run to get help, what would they say? Who's going to believe a hysterical teenager that's rambling on about monster spiders?*

Julie peered through the doorway leading into the living room.

*Hmmm, a few cobwebs in there, but looks safe.*

She turned her head the other way and gave the boarded-up door a furtive glance.

*Something about that door bothers me. Who boards up a door that's barely attached to its hinges?*

Different thoughts kept racing through her head. Her nerves were so on-edge that she could hardly move. She considered just staying put and waiting for Chip and Sarah to return.

*But then we might not find Aimee. And I don't know if I can stare at that creepy boarded up door for much longer.*



Resigned to do what she said she would, Julie slowly stepped toward the living room. She couldn't stop her body from shaking.

*No spiders that I can see. Good.*

She walked forward until she was just under the entryway and craned her head upward.

*Nothing waiting to jump down at me from the ceiling.*

After taking a deep breath, she steeled her resolve and walked into the living room.

"This isn't so bad," she said out loud, surveying the room.

Large, multi-paned windows allowed a good amount of the light in from the streetlamps outside. An old, burgundy colored couch sat in the middle of the room. Its wood accents reminded her of the furniture she saw when she would watch one of those TV antique shows with her mom. Portraits of strange people hung against the back and entry-side walls: an older man, a woman, and a young child.

The old owners?

She stared at the pictures until a noise from down the hall broke the silence.

*~Respect us~* a quiet voice whispered. It was the same voice from before.

Julie felt a shiver crawl down her spine, but she chose to ignore the voice.

*It's just the wind.*

She looked down at the couch, uncertain of what surprises it might hold. It was covered in dust and cobwebs. She bent down to peer underneath and didn't notice anything out-of-the-ordinary. There didn't appear to be any spiders under there.

*It looks safe, but is it?*

She kicked it as a test.

Aside from the dust that was cast into the air, nothing happened. More importantly, no spiders came rushing out.

From one side to the other, from top to bottom, the living room appeared to be just a plain old living room.

Julie walked over to a table sitting beneath one of the windows. The table had a single drawer built into it.

"I wonder if anything is in there," she said aloud to the empty room.

Slowly, she grasped the knob and pulled the drawer open.

Inside the drawer, covered in dust, was a single tarot card. The card depicted a king of some kind, sitting on a throne, holding a set of scales in one hand and a sword in the other. At the bottom of the card, in calligraphic script, the word "Justice" was written.

Julie stared at the card, entranced.

A shrill scream broke the silence and brought Julie back to Earth.

"Aaaaaaaarrrrggghh!!"

She rushed into the foyer and took a few cautious steps down the hallway. She saw Chip sprawled out on the floor at the end of the hall. His flashlight had fallen a few feet away from him and was pointed directly at him. Julie saw that he was covered in thousands of creepy-crawly critters. His feet were hidden behind a doorframe, but she thought she saw a pair of thin, multi-jointed arms trying to drag him back into the room. Sarah had hold of one of his arms and was struggling frantically to pull him free.

Julie tentatively took a few more steps down the hall and realized that the creepy-crawlies were spiders. Chip appeared to be writhing in pain.

"Oh no, they're biting him!" she screamed.

Her mind raced.

*What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?*

She saw a pair of the furry, tarantula-like spiders leap out of the doorway toward Sarah. Sarah flailed her arms and slapped at them. They just kept coming. A skeleton-like tan spider snuck up behind her and burrowed its fangs into her leg. She shrieked, looked back at Julie, and then crumpled to the floor.

*My friends are going to be dragged away by spiders!*

Julie was scared out of her mind, but now she was angry too. Enraged, she summoned the courage to rush to where Chip and Sarah lay, intent on stomping the spiders with every last ounce of her energy.

However, about five feet from where Sarah and Chip lay motionless, the floor gave way. Julie fell through it and, unable to grab onto anything, she disappeared into the darkness below.

Minutes later, she awoke in a strange room. She was seated in a chair of some kind and couldn't move. When her eyes regained focus, she realized that she was tied up in a mass of strong webbing. Aimee, Chip, and Sarah were in the room as well, tied up in similar fashion.

"Where am I," she wondered out loud.

*~You are in my parlor, young Julie~* the strange voice said, louder this time.

Spiders? A parlor? Julie started to think the house was Mary Howitt's "The Spider and the Fly" brought to life.

She looked around, but didn't see anyone. To her left, she noticed the door to the room was falling off its hinges. It appeared to be held on from the other side by boards that had been nailed in.

*This is the boarded up room near the entryway. I fell into a hole. How did I get back up here?*

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?!" she begged.

*~Respect!~* the voice bellowed.

Julie pleaded with the voice: "Come out, show yourself so we can talk. This is all a big mistake!"

Just then, an army of tarantulas and garden spiders came pouring out of the fireplace. She recoiled in horror, certain that they were going to eat her.

The spiders stopped short and gathered in a thick group a few feet in front of her.

Debris began spilling out of the fireplace. A large creature with giant arms—or rather, legs—stepped through and slowly made its way toward Julie. It was easily two feet wide and more than a foot tall. Its legs stretched out even further as it walked.

*~We want respect~* the voice said.

Julie's eyes grew wide as she realized the throaty voice was coming from the creature. It appeared to have a mouth, nose, and eyes similar to what you'd find on a human head. The lips were moving.

*~You will stop killing us, Juuuuulie.~* it whispered.

*It knows I've been stomping on spiders?! How?!*

As if it had read her mind, the voice said, *~We know many things, Juuuuulie.~*

The creature stopped in front of her. The other spiders crowded around it.

"No, no, no, no, no—you're not real. I know you're not real. There's no way you're real!"

*~We are real, Juuuulie, and you will listen to us!~*

Two identical creatures emerged from the chimney and took their places on either side of the first one.

*~We are the spider kingssss~*

*~Humans have hunted us and hurt us for toooooo long~*

*~We have come back to reclaim this planet. We were here firsssssst.~*

*~We left you alone. You repaid ussss by killing ussss. It stopssss.~*

“No, no, no,” she begged. “It’s all a big mistake! I’m sorry! I didn’t know. I won’t do it again!”

The Spider Kings relaxed and looked at Julie with some interest. Though they had each been alive more than one-thousand years, they hadn’t had many opportunities to see humans up close, on their terms.

*~We’ve seen what you have done. What the boy hassss done. How can we believe you won’t do it again?~*

Julie cleared her throat and explained to the Spider Kings that she had no idea spiders were intelligent, reasonable creatures. She explained about the incident in the woods when she was young, about how she had grown to fear them from a young age, and how she felt really guilty for all of the pain and suffering she had inflicted.

The three Spider Kings chattered amongst themselves for a few moments. Eventually, the ringleader in the middle turned to face Julie.

*~Julieeee... you have given us much to think about... we will consider sparing your friends.~*

Julie breathed a sigh of relief.

*~Butttt, not you. You have been judged.~*

“Judged? What do you mean by judged,” she asked, her voice cracking.

*~At your home, at your school, in this house, you killed ussss.~*

Julie began to sob uncontrollably.

“No, no, please,” she begged.

*~You have been judged!~*

The ringleader in the middle reared up on his haunches. Julie saw that his human-like mouth was full of razor sharp teeth.

He leaped towards her.

Everything went black.



## 11—Good Morning, Julie

Julie wakes up the next morning—not strapped into a chair, but in her bed. Her eyes snap open when she realizes she is no longer in that decaying old house. She sits up in bed and throws the covers off of her.

She's not wearing the black pants and shirt of her makeshift Halloween costume, but her pink Zeitgeist PJs with the kittens printed on them.

Cautiously, she gets out of bed and makes her way into the hall.

"Mom?" she calls out.

"Yes, honey," her mom replies while organizing the towels in the linen closet. "Glad to see you're still alive. You slept the night away."

"Whaaaat?" Julie asks.

"Yeah, it's five-thirty a.m. Up a little early for school, but then you did go to bed at around four-thirty yesterday."

*I slept through it? Was last night all just a dream?*

"Awwww, mom," Julie whines. "Why didn't you wake me? Sarah and Aimee and I were going to go trick-or-treating."

"I tried, really," her mom insists.

"I couldn't wake you. I tried once when Sarah's mom called and sent your dad up there a second time around eight. We figured dinner would wake you up. You were out like a light."

"Urgh!" Julie screams half-heartedly. "I missed it. I can't believe I missed it."

She trudges back to her bedroom and looks at the clock.

"An hour before I have to leave for the bus—may as well stay up."

She steps in front of the mirror.

"I'm fine."

She examines her arms, face, and neck—looking for the tiniest blemish that might look like a spider bite.

"Nothing?" she whispers.

*Was it all a dream?*

"Wait... that means," she mumbles. "Yes! Chip, Sarah, and Aimee are probably OK!"

She sits on the bed and breathes a sigh of relief.

*They're going to give me a hard time about ditching them last night. I'll have to apologize to Chip.*

For a moment, she runs through all of the possible ways to explain sleeping through an entire night—Halloween, no less.

"Oh well, I can live with it, I guess."

She steps over to the closet to pick out her clothes for the day. While opening the door, a familiar brown object falls onto the plush carpeting.

*Not this time.*

Without shrieking, and with only a slight twinge of fear, she grabs an empty plastic cup off of her dresser and sets it in front of the brown spider with the long legs. The spider ambles into it and, once she sees it's near the bottom of the cup, she raises it into the air.

Julie goes to the window next to her bed and sets the cup down on the nightstand. She lifts the window, grabs the cup, and reaches out with it toward the thick tree branch that sits barely a foot from her bedroom.

Upending the cup, she taps its bottom lightly and watches as the spider lands on the thick branch, unharmed.

It raises one of its eight legs and shakes it at her.

*Is it waving at me?*

Julie waves back and the spider scurries down the branch toward the body of the tree.



~ **THE END** ~

## About This Story

Thank you for choosing to devote some of your valuable free time to reading this short-story (or novelette, if you prefer), ***Spiders: A Cautionary Halloween Tale***. If you enjoyed the story, I hope you will share it with your friends, children, loved ones, or anyone else that you think will enjoy the lesson Julie Swanson learned that fateful Halloween night.

I'd like to say that I came up with the story after much soul searching and introspection over the positive role spiders play in our lives. In truth, I just wanted to write a fun Halloween story to take my mind off of the grittier, mature-themed short stories I had been writing for weeks without a break. I thought about the sorts of things that freak me out the most and latched onto the spider theme.

The character of Julie Swanson is basically a female version of myself. I'm a spider-squisher. Like Julie, I was always late to lunch after running laps in gym class. I would skip my high school classes to go check out the shops at local strip malls or to play video games at my friends' houses. Adults always say you should try to be a good role model for children. Let's face it, kids do naughty things. What fun is childhood if you don't break a few "little" rules?

One goal I had when writing the story was to aim it at the 8 to 13 age group and adjust the reading difficulty to match. There are literally thousands of books out there that are supposedly aimed at "middle readers," but the vocabulary is often too challenging for the intended age group. I'm proud to say that all of the reading ease measures I applied to the text of this story placed it at a reading level appropriate for ages 8 and up.

I also ran the story past the toughest editor of them all: my wife. She's an elementary / middle-school teacher and has first-hand knowledge of the issues that hamper reading for students. Thank you, honey, for all of your gracious help.

If you enjoyed this PDF version of ***Spiders: A Cautionary Halloween Tale*** and want to share it with others, you have my permission to distribute it to others for free. You may download free copies from my personal website at:

<http://www.frankprovo.com/spiders>

This eBook is also for sale on the *Barnes & Noble Nook* and *Amazon Kindle* bookstores.

Thank you for reading!

-Frank Provo, October 2011

## About The Author

Frank Provo lives in the Midwest with his wife, two obnoxious finches, and an occasional guinea pig (rodents, not people).

He grew up in Seattle, Washington during the 1980's and 1990's, taking delight in the writings of Stephen King, Douglas Adams, C.S. Lewis, and various pulp science-fiction writers.

For eight years, he worked as a freelance writer covering the electronic gaming industry. That's right—he was paid to play and write about video games. If you search the Internet, you can still find some of his old articles out there on sites such as GameSpot and GamesRadar.

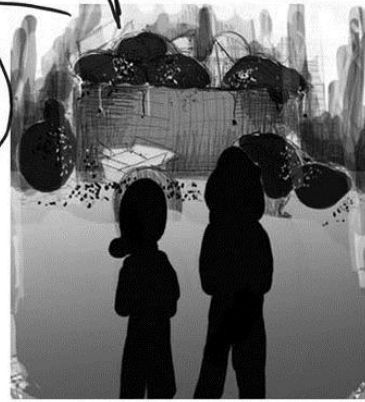
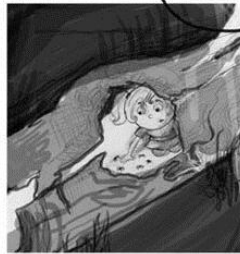
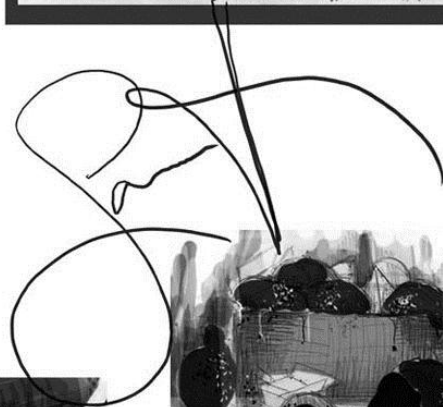
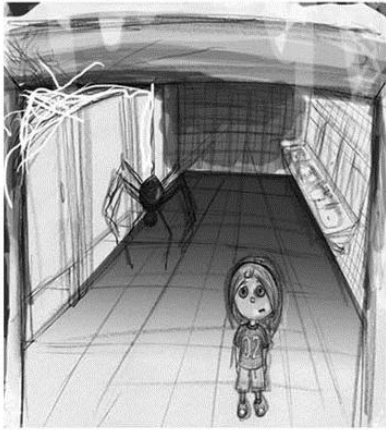
His main body of work consists of short stories, many of which tackle subjects that may prove too intense for young or sensitive readers. However, he has been known to pen an all-ages adventure caper from time to time, such as ***Spiders: A Cautionary Halloween Tale.***

## About The Illustrator

Samantha Hernandez is an avid reader, eater, doodler, texter, and dog walker, who is constantly evolving (her hair color anyway).

More relevantly, she is a New York-based freelance illustrator with a few years of experience under her belt. Typical to being a New Yorker; she was raised there, attended college there and has stayed there. A Fashion Institute of Technology graduate, she consequently holds a Bachelors degree in Illustration, as well as knows the best place to get the cheapest burger in Manhattan.

She has formally and informally been a part of a number of projects that can be both found on store bookshelves and in your iPhone. To see her constant labor of love and her slow growth in the knowledge of all things html-coding visit her website <http://www.samsketches.com>.



**That's it!**  
**Thanks for reading!**