

The Cobwebs

It was Kevin Mulligan's first time cleaning up the cobwebs, and he was scared shitless. He was twelve now. Twelve was the age you started cleaning the cobwebs.

Kevin had grown up hearing stories about the spiders. There was always a spooky tale for campfires or sleepovers. One time, at Tim Rollins' house—just before his dad came in to say lights out—a boy named Ben Watson told one of these stories.

“There were four kids,” he said. He held a flashlight up under his nose in that time-honored tradition of spooky-tale-tellers. “And they were out there cleaning up the webs, just like we'll have to do next year. One of them tripped on a egg and cracked it. Cob spiders are supposedly real big, so they lay *real* big eggs. When it cracked, a hundred baby cob spiders poured out and ate them all alive.”

All the boys made icky faces—grimaces that shifted to morbid grins and sick giggles. Kevin didn't giggle. His lips twitched into a frown, and he swallowed hard. He didn't like the stories about the cob spiders and their webs. It was bad enough that kids had to clean them up once they turned twelve. He didn't like hearing about the kids that didn't make it. For all he knew, one of them was the next victims of the spiders.

Another kid, Asher Tomlin, told a story about how all eight of the kids that had been chosen for web-duty that month went out on a foggy day and were never heard from again. Apparently, the group supervisor—a man by the name of Harold Loomis—listened to the kids'

screams through the fog and then just ran the other way. Kevin actually shivered after that story was told, and he found that he had to pee badly.

When he came back from the bathroom, the boys were all sliding into their sleeping bags, and Tim Rollins' dad was turning out the light.

"Hey, Mr. Rollins," a kid named Will Sanders said. He was snuggled so far into his bag that all David Rollins could see were two eyes peering from a slit near the top.

"Yeah?" David Rollins asked.

"Is it true that you and the other old people didn't have to clean cobwebs when you were kids?"

David was thirty-three. He chuckled at that.

"Correct," he replied. "None of us *old* people had to deal with the cobwebs when we were younger."

"How come?" another boy piped up from somewhere.

"We just didn't," David said.

"Where'd they come from, Mr. Rollins?" Will Sanders asked.

"They've always been here," David explained. "They just weren't so big before. We've always had cob spiders lurking in the dark places, though. Over the decades they just evolved, I guess. Adapted. Now they're bigger, and there are more of them. That's all."

"What do they look like?" Kevin asked. His voice was hoarse and shaky, and his throat was dry.

"All right, that's enough for tonight, boys," David said and started to close the door. "Y'all need to get your sleep. Mrs. Rollins is making you pancakes and sausage and flaky biscuits in the morning."

The boys all cheered—except for Kevin. A part of him was glad that Mr. Rollins had stopped question-time with him. Still, his morbid curiosity was making his imagination run wild.

What did they look like? What did they look like?

He felt a knot in his stomach. A nervous roiling there in his intestines like he might have to poop. It was still a year out, but his body was having an adverse reaction to the stories—as if the task of cleaning webs was the very next day.

He dreamed about them that night. His mind constructed them, built them mandible by mandible. In his nightmare, they were as big as cars, and their legs were fat and hairy. Their eyes were almonds—human irises stared at him in all different colors. The spider’s fangs were long daggers that dripped with sizzling acid, and between the fangs were rows and rows of humanoid canines. The nightmare ended with a spider galloping toward him, emitting a multi-tonal blood-thirsty screech.

It never happened in the same place twice, like lightning.

That’s what Kevin’s supervisor, Sarah Fletcher, told his group the next year. Of course, this wasn’t fact. Lightning could strike wherever it pleased, and so could the cob spiders. The fact was, the section of town that Kevin and his group were to clean up had already been hit twice since the cobwebs had started ten years ago.

“All right,” Sarah Fletcher said. “Gather round, everyone.”

She held her hand up so that all fifteen kids could see her, and they gathered around her.

“I want you all in groups of three,” she said. “Everyone take a scraper and a pair of gloves. You’re to scrape up the cobwebs from the street surface and sidewalks and storefronts.

Basically, if you see cobweb, scrape it into a pile in the middle of the street. Another group will come and torch those piles later. Everyone understand?”

Everyone nodded silently. Everyone was scared. Everyone felt hot snakes writhing in their bellies. Everyone except for one boy, that is. He was bigger than most of the other kids there, and he was wide-eyed and bouncing up and down. Mr. Excitement.

“All right, good,” Sarah said. “Now group up. You’ll head out in ten minutes.”

Everyone seemed to find groups within a couple of minutes. Kevin’s group consisted of Kevin, a girl named Anna Fairbanks, and Mr. Excitement—whose name was actually Jeffrey Driskel.

“You fuckers ready for this?” Jeffrey asked Kevin and Anna.

Anna’s bottom lip was trembling, and she was close to tears. She didn’t want to clean cobwebs. She didn’t want to go out there where it was empty and quiet and full of big bad spiders. Kevin felt the same way, but he tried hard to be brave—to keep from crying.

“I know *I* am.” Jeffrey smiled wickedly.

Ten minutes went by in a flash, and the groups of three were standing on the last bit of clean asphalt, a thick blanket of cobwebs spread out ahead of them.

“Okay, teams,” Sarah said. “Each group has been given a flare gun. If you get in any trouble, just shoot the flare directly up in the air. Also, just a reminder: cob spiders don’t attack unless provoked. If you provoke a cob spider, there is nothing we can do to prevent it from attacking. So, if you see one avoid it, and everything will be A-OK. Got it?”

They all nodded.

“Good. Now get out there and get to cleaning.”

Kevin had been handed his group's flare gun. He held it on his palms like it was some kind of alien artifact. Jeffrey shoved him and snatched the flare gun from his hands. He stuffed it in his pocket.

"Better let me have that, kid," he said. "I'm older and bigger. Besides, I know how to use it."

Kevin didn't say anything, he just let Jeffrey have it.

Kevin's group took Hemlock Street in what the protestants called the Potato District.

A lot of Irish pubs and Irish businesses and catholic churches in the Potato District.

It was completely covered in a blanket of cobwebs. Like a fleet of helicopters had flown over, pulling the cobwebs as they went, tucking the street in and putting it to bed. Webs hung in curtains from the rooftops. Cars that had been left during the evacuation looked as if they had been shrink-wrapped.

They began scraping the cobwebs into piles on the street.

"My mom and dad are in the army," Jeffrey said as he put his shoulder into the handle of his scraper and pushed hard on it, tearing a large patch of web away from the pavement. "That's why I couldn't do this last year. We were living in Germany."

Kevin marveled at how unfazed Jeffrey was, how much he was enjoying this. Mr. Excitement. Kevin couldn't go more than ten seconds without swiveling his head around at any little sound. Anna was right behind Kevin. So close that she kept stepping on the backs of his shoes.

"I'm sorry," she'd whimper.

Anna held her arms tight to her body. Afraid to touch anything around her, afraid to have her arms out—all dangly and vulnerable. Her whole body was tensed up, and she walked like a crappy robot from a 50s B-movie. She would stop when they would and scrape a little here and there, and when Kevin and Jeffrey moved on, she would scamper to catch back up with them.

Kevin heard noises, rapid little taps all around them. He didn't like hearing noises, not out on Hemlock Street. Not out in the Potato District when it was blanketed in cobwebs. Not when it was so empty and quiet, and they were all alone.

(shhhhhhhh)

No, Kevin didn't like hearing noises.

There was a clanging sound in an alley just up ahead. Anna yelped and ran up as close as she could to Kevin. He was shaking, Anna was shaking. Jeffrey just cracked his knuckles and smiled brightly. They all stood perfectly still, watching the alley when it appeared.

The cob spider wasn't nearly the size of the one in his nightmares, but it was still enormous. Roughly the size of a basketball. The hot snakes in his stomach coiled so tightly that he thought he might shit his pants. The spider was round and white with black flecks. Its spindly legs were dark brown. Its eyes were small, Kevin couldn't make them out, but he did see the syringe-like fangs hanging where its maw was. The spider made a terrible skittering sound as it moved out of the alley—those rapid little taps.

It crawled around, investigating its surroundings. It knocked into a metal trash can, which went crashing to the ground, its contents spilling out across the web-covered road. The spider jumped a foot in the air and turned toward the noise. It let out a squealing hiss and reared its two front legs in the air—a defensive posture.

“We should get outta here,” Kevin whispered in a crackling voice.

Anna nodded her agreement. Jeffrey moved closer toward the spider, his grin one of a kid who'd just gotten everything he'd asked for on Christmas.

“What’s he doing?” Anna whispered to Kevin, terror gripping her. “What’s he doing? What are you *DOING?*”

“Shut up,” Jeffrey hissed back at her. He reached into the waist of his pants and pulled out a black pistol. Kevin could see death glinting off its barrel in the sunlight. It was going to kill something that day. It was going to have its way.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Kevin asked.

“I’m gonna get me one,” he said, wagging the pistol in the air. “Dad gave me this last year as a present. I’m gonna kill me a cob spider.”

Kevin looked back at Anna, and they both understood without speaking. They needed to leave now.

(run)

Kevin whisper-yelled at Jeffrey. “Stop, we need to leave them alone! You heard the supervisor, she said to leave them be!”

Jeffrey didn’t listen to Kevin. He was older, he knew better. He walked carefully toward the alley and the spider. Holding the gun in the air like some television cop on a Friday night primetime show. Kevin turned to look at Anna again. That’s when he heard the shots. Five of them. *Crack crack ting crack ting!* Apparently, his dad hadn’t shown him how to *use* the gun. His shots were erratic. He hit the walls of the building behind the spider and the garbage can.

Mr. Excitement.

“Stop!” Kevin shouted. Too late. The spider in the alley turned in their direction, gave a high-pitched screech, and skittered quickly toward them.

Anna covered her ears and started sobbing. “I wanna go home, I wanna go home, I wanna go home!”

Jeffrey turned and ran to them, his face pale—the ghost of Mr. Excitement. Then they heard the commotion from the other streets. The sound echoed from the alleyways all down Hemlock Street. The terrible skittering,

(running)

and the scrambling footfalls. They were running. The other groups of kids were

(running)

screaming. Kevin’s hands started shaking as he heard the screams and the clamor and the screeching and the skittering from all directions. The kid’s screams ran down his spine, and he started crying. He wanted his mother. He wanted to be with his mom eating popcorn on the couch. A pool of urine was forming by his right shoe and *the screams. Make them stop! Make the screams stop!* Then it was quiet.

(shhhhhhhhh)

The only thing he could hear was the skittering of the cob spider coming toward them, bumbling blindly into cars, hissing, trying to find the source of the gunfire. Only the skittering, and then...

(RUN!)

all at once, they burst from the alleys and intersections. Dozens of them, hundreds. The cob spiders poured forth like water from a spigot on a hot July day. A day like that day. Any other year, Kevin would be drinking from one of those spigots. He would be splashing around Pine Creek, picking up rocks to look for crawdads. He would be catching salamanders, or playing stick wars—he would be doing anything but running from cob spiders.

Kevin could hear them giving chase. *The skittering! God, the skittering!* Jeffrey had shoved past both Kevin and Anna, a tactic known in the Driskel household as the every-man-for-himself maneuver. Jeffrey still held the pistol in his hand, though Kevin didn't know if he had any ammunition left. He was six or seven strides ahead when he turned and fired again. More shots rang out whizzing past Kevin and Anna. He fired that gun like a madman, yelling wildly.

Kevin put his hands over his head and hit the ground as the bullets flew. Somewhere behind him, Anna screamed. It was a scream of agony. She was lying on the ground, holding her stomach and wailing. Her white shirt quickly dyeing red.

“Shit!” Jeffrey said before hurling the gun toward the coming storm of spiders and booking it again.

Kevin stared for what seemed like hours as poor Anna Fairbanks writhed and squealed and begged for help from God or anyone. In reality, it was only five seconds, but in those seconds, he realized with all too much clarity, that this was it for her.

(time)

There was no time. She was six feet away, and the spiders...

Anna started crawling in his direction, reaching out to him—screaming, crying, calling for her mother. Tears were pouring down Kevin's face. He wanted to help her, he really wanted to help her, but all he could do was whisper, “I'm sorry.”

Kevin turned and ran. A couple of seconds later, he heard her last horrified scream and then the undeniable sound of ripping and feasting. Kevin puked. He continued to run, but he was yakking the whole way. He ran and ran. Kevin couldn't remember a time he'd ever run this hard or this fast. His chest heaved, and he felt his lungs complaining. He could hear the skittering closing in behind him.

He was grunting and panting, sweat falling into his mouth, mingling with the taste of snot and puke. He was sprinting as hard as he could, and then he saw it—the edge of the cobwebs. He was almost out, almost there, almost free, and then he could have his summer like a kid should. His face twisted in a half-grin, half-grimace as he pushed himself harder than ever to reach the rest of his childhood. He noticed adults gathered at the edge of the webs. They were rushing here and there—firefighters and police. Then he saw something was blocking the road, a barricade. He had just noticed it when he stepped in a pile of web and went tumbling to the pavement.

It hurt.

It hurt badly. Kevin's ankle was throbbing, and his wrist was shooting knives, and his head was bleeding. He tried to get up, but the pain in his ankle sent him collapsing. He was covered in sticky web, and it was wrapped around his other ankle like an anchor, gripping him, holding him there for the spider's dinner. The blow to his head had made him foggy—out of it. For a second, he'd forgotten he was being chased by cob spiders. Only for a second. Then panic got his brain

(move)

moving. Kevin began scrambling on his hands and knees, pulling and ripping and stripping the web from around his leg. He made one last heaving effort to pull off the last of it. He howled in pain from his broken wrist, but he was free. One of the adults running around behind the barrier turned toward the sound. Kevin saw her and he

(get up!)

hobbled up onto his good ankle.

“Help!” he shouted to them as he hopped toward the barricade. A few more adults stopped their scurrying and looked in his direction. “Please! Help me! I don’t wanna die I want my mommy please I don’t wanna die I don’t wanna—”

That’s when he felt it.

(death)

The terrible weight of the spider as it lunged into his back. He fell face first, his nose bursting like a cherry against the pavement. He screamed and screamed as he felt the weight of them grow, then he felt the sharp little razors jabbing into his flesh, ripping and tearing their way out again. He felt them feasting, cleaning the meat off his shoulder blades. He let out one more terrified mewl, and then little Kevin Mulligan was consumed.

The adults beyond the barricade let out heavy sighs and shook their heads solemnly. *Our condolences, little Kevin Mulligan, signed The Adults.* After a final moment of silence for the poor boy, they continued shoring up the barricades and yelling to one another. Trying to keep the cob spiders at bay for another year.