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Silk Will Hold Her Bones Together

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Silk Will Hold Her Bones Together

Ivan drove her to the hospital again because she wouldn't stop shouting and he'd had enough of her shouting over new imagined injuries and the bruises from nowhere that she might have done to herself. This time it was a spider in her heart and he told her that was impossible but she insisted it was in there and now they were in the car and Tillie's frail frame was crumpled against the door of the car barely held erect by the tension of the seatbelt but at least she wore the seatbelt.

Ivan was angry but he did not want to be. They didn't have the money for the hospital bills and he knew his insurance would be searching for signs of Tillie's abuse of the system; he could not take another prying phone call, finding new words to insist that she did not care for drugs, she was just scared, always scared when she wasn't painting, and she hadn't finished a painting in weeks. Her illustrations for that picture book were already overdue which would be another phone call and he could get another extension maybe a couple of weeks, enough to get over these thoughts of spiders but not enough to let her finish the project. There were sketches in the studio. He could send those while she came back to herself. She really was ill and he was being unkind, hyperbolic; she did stop her shouting just as soon as he put her in the car.

He slid his hand down from the stick shift to rest it on her thigh and Ivan hoped she could see he still loved her even though there was no spider in her heart. She wasn't lying to him on purpose; something, not spiders, was wrong. She was pale and her pulse was fast. Her eyes flitted under heavy lids and she locked his eyes to hers at the stoplight even though she hadn't the strength to turn her head. He saw that she understood the meaning of his hand upon her thigh and he squeezed her thigh because she still loved him back through this madness.

"Thank you," she whispered and her eyes drifted down, glazing over because of a spider in her heart of all things. Last month she was growing scales on her legs until the dermatologist recommended a moisturizer.

"It's going to be nothing," he warned her in the car and he was right. The doctors found no cause for her arrhythmic heart. They kept her overnight and looked at the heart from every angle but they did not find a spider or a problem and finally the doctors told him she was doing it to herself. She believed there was a spider in her heart and that belief was

killing her. And Ivan told her this, gently, the way he helped to remove the scales from her legs one by one and brought her back to Tillie from the brink of Scaly Monster with just the warmth of his hands and a fragrance-free hypoallergenic lotion.

“It’s all in your head, Tillie.”

“No,” she croaked. “The spider’s in my heart.”

And there was nothing more he could say so he called her older sister Mavis. The problem was in her head, psychosomatic, heart shutting down, and Tillie was never arachnophobic before. Mavis hung up the phone before Ivan found the courage to beg Please, Mavis, do not be embarrassing in the hospital. He could have pleaded all night on the phone, but still she would arrive with hawkish yellow eye shadow and a thick embroidery thread of the same color knotted around her left wrist. He swallowed his heart and offered his hand to the woman and tried not to see where she had embroidered the thread into the palm around the thumb to stitch the pinky and ring together. They shook as if she weren’t insane and his knees shook but he held fiercely onto his normality in the face of this difficult and frightening older sister for Tillie’s sake. Mavis muttered a hello because she knew that she scared him and she did not want the good husband to be scared. But for all Ivan’s goodness, he was full of mistakes. His shirt was improperly buttoned and Mavis gripped his hand tight and barked at him to take out the top button of his shirt, how dare he keep an even number with his dear wife in such a fragile state and he corrected his buttons thanking God that at least she’d combed her hair.

Mavis ejected his hand from hers and walked quickly with stiff shoulders to the room where her little sister slept. He followed after, striding longer than his legs cared to. He should have led the woman to Tillie’s room, but Mavis was ten years Tillie’s senior and like a mother and sister both. Her duality left him forever shadowed behind her, and when she paused at the door to tell him she’d see Tillie alone and he’d had enough time sitting at her bedside, he had no choice but to drift back to the waiting room and stare at the wall.

“Little dove,” said Mavis as she latched the door. Tillie stirred under the white sheets and smiled when she recognized her visitor. Her sister had come to save her again. Amidst the gloom of the hospital room she saw yellow wrapped around Mavis’s wrist and yellow painted on her eyelids and that was exciting because it must mean something magic, for Mavis was always steeped in meaning. “You’re scaring your husband. He says you’ve got a spider.”

“Ivan doesn’t believe me...”

"It's no wonder. Spiders don't belong in hearts." Mavis fingered the embroidery thread where it was sewn into the skin. Yellow cast illumination; it let her see the terrible little creature inside her sister's heart, patching up the holes it ate with spider silk. The silk was weak and the holes were killing her. Nothing can fix a spider in the heart.

"He thinks I'm crazy."

"We are crazy," said Mavis. "There's no fixing this, little dove."

Tillie frowned, and she sat up in the bed. "I can't leave Ivan alone," she said. "We need each other. It isn't fair to leave him alone."

Mavis could fix any problem she had. Always for a price, for Mavis was no magician, but Tillie floated through her youth without worry or care because her elder sister always neatly tucked in the flyaway pieces that Tillie's breezy nature left behind. And Mavis did her duty without complaint; she had a focus for her incessant need to order and sort until Ivan came like a lighthouse into Tillie's life, and Mavis drifted north to order something else.

"I can't fix death, Clothilde." Mavis turned Tillie's hand over, fingering the heart monitor on the end of Tillie's finger as if she were about to pluck it like a grape. "Let me take you home."

Tillie chewed her lip and the spider chewed the aortic valve. The girl winced, tears in her eyes. "I'm dying."

Mavis nodded. "You don't want to die in this place, Clothilde. Let's get you out of here."

"I don't want to die at all! Please, Mavis. Fix it."

Mavis plunged her cold hand down the hospital gown and pressed the embroidered palm to Tillie's heart. The spider's legs scuttled inside her breast and Mavis could feel them move against the skin. Tillie gasped. She knew it was there, but never had she felt it so close to the surface. Mavis gave a small grunt; it was a very big spider.

"You've killed my sister," whispered Mavis. "And you're almost dead yourself."

The spider drew back under Mavis's palm then turned and leaned its fat body against the inside of Tillie's skin so Mavis could feel its bulk. Mavis's eyes went wide.

"She's pregnant," whispered Mavis. "She'll die before the eggs hatch. You'll die with her."

Tillie pulled Mavis's arm out of the gown and pressed hands against her own heart to feel the spider, but the creature had already gone back to its chewing and weaving. "Make the babies live on for me. Ivan shouldn't be alone. Please, Mavis."

And Mavis could refuse her sister nothing, so she spoke to Tillie's heart and ordered the wretched pregnant spider to lay a spindle of eggs, one thousand exactly, inside of Tillie's skull.

The hospital released Tillie into her husband's care, and Ivan drove the sisters home and made the studio a bedroom. There was a guest room upstairs for Mavis, who would stay until the spiders hatched and perhaps a little after, and the studio was for Tillie, who had trouble with the stairs. Her heart was improving, she told Ivan, now that she knew it was all in her mind, but still she shuffled from studio to kitchen to bath and her feeble cough worried him. Mavis was in the house like a sinister cloud and Mavis took care of all her sister's ails and the two women would exchange their secret glances and Tillie would pull at her bangs until they swept down to her eyes. The egg sac gestated just under her brow, trembling with her thoughts. Mavis told her the eggs didn't show through her skull, the spider couldn't eat the bone, but still she felt them and she was so close to Ivan that surely he could see anything she could feel.

Ivan saw a sick woman doing her best to be brave. In her shadow, though, was the woman he fell in love with, who would be strong for him when he couldn't be, who was funny at all the right moments. It was better to have her home, even with the strange and imagined illness that persisted after her sister came to stay.

The spider died as Ivan kissed his wife goodnight. He tucked her into the studio's sickbed and Tillie slumped against the pillow. He hovered over her, afraid that her own convictions had finally killed her, but she breathed deeply with her own strength and held him close, knowing it was the last time she'd see him as herself and she whispered all the things she loved best about him.

"Now go to bed, honey. I'll be fine down here, and I'll see you in the morning," she said with a bright and healthy smile as she squeezed his hand enough to hurt. He kissed her head and went upstairs.

Tillie died just after two that morning, and the spider's sac broke open inside her skull. One thousand spiders spilled out, clambering on top of each other with their fangs gnashing against spider sister and brother, but some gauzy memory, the distant thunder of Mavis's voice directed the tiny specks to find food not in the weakest of their ranks, but in the brain they were born upon. The spiders devoured Tillie's cooling brain and as they ate up her consciousness, it joined them fast to each other and the spiders found themselves wanting all of Tillie's wants. Mavis woke as the spindle picked clean the inside of Tillie's skull, and she

ran downstairs to find the spiders working at the lungs, pressing them to discover speech, and the corpse lay moaning softly in its emptied bowels.

“Oh, God,” said Mavis and she rushed to the creature’s side. Its hands stirred to touch her as Mavis scooped the body into her arms. “I was asleep I meant to move you to the bathtub...”

The head lolled as the spiders tied their silk and cinched the threaded muscles to bring the neck back to its place, and a clutch of them pulled at the muscles in the face, garbling until they found the proper shapes for sound and together they spoke.

“Mavis?” asked the spiders with her sister’s hollow voice and Mavis clinched her fingers so hard that she might have bruised Tillie’s skin were the body still living.

“S-sorry,” said Mavis. Her eyes focused forward to avoid seeing the body in her arms. The spiders in Tillie’s neck found their strands and pulled the head to let the two specks sitting on sticky eyeballs see their rescuer; the brilliant and beautiful Mavis who let both sister and spider live. The spiders saw through the two on the eyes that Mavis would not let go, and one thousand spiders sighed out of joy and love.

“We made a mess of the bedding when she died. It’s ruined, isn’t it?” asked the spiders as Mavis laid her sister’s still-clothed body into the bathtub.

“It is,” she said, and she lifted the nightshirt over Tillie’s head. The spiders wrenched the arms to try and help but the hands flopped up to smack Mavis on the nose. Mavis squinted, fighting down the tears that ran up hot, and the spiders if they’d had tears would have cried to see her hurt.

“We didn’t mean to!”

The older woman shushed the wheezy corpse and ran the bathwater. She directed the spiders to eat up her sister’s blood before it started pooling in her feet and buttocks and ruin Tillie’s color. Mavis would take care of the bedding, and she did so by hosing it off in the backyard and disposing of the sheets in the garbage bin. The mattress was horrible. She drowned it in bleach. Mavis came back inside to find the spiders using Tillie’s hands to twist the faucet handle, shutting off the water that flowed around her in spirals of brown and black.

“You’re learning fast,” said Mavis and the corpse smiled at her and nodded. Mavis let the body soak, then bid it stand so she could hose off the poor thing with the showerhead, but the spiders could not bring the body to stand.

“We can get the hands right...the legs might take time.”

“Pull the stopper, then,” said Mavis. “We’ll run another bath.”

“Tillie thought a lot about hands. We could use them almost immediately, but there’s just something about the legs....” The spiders presented Mavis with the left hand while using the right to reach through the soiled brown water and pull the stopper. Through the skin Mavis saw spiders working the tendons. They scuttled around to pull the webs, fluttering a friendly wave. “Hello, Mavis.”

Mavis grasped the fingers and placed them into the new clear bathwater and she worked up a lather in her hands to run over her sister’s filthy skin. The spiders lowered Tillie’s head and two watched as sixteen in each hand ran fingers across the skin of Tillie’s legs. A swarm was running through her thighs, rushing to eat the blood before it pooled.

“It was very kind of you to give us a chance,” said the spiders.

“He shouldn’t have to live without her,” said Mavis. “Not for some fool notion committed by your mother.” She tutted to think of a spider living in a heart and turned the body around to tilt the chin and clean around the neck.

“I love you, Mavis.”

Mavis focused on the tiny spiders in her sister’s eyes, each no bigger than the head of a pin, and although she could not read them she knew the spiders told the truth. They were fed on Tillie’s brain, her mind, and her soul, and Tillie was so full of love for everyone that Mavis always felt like a ghost around her. And here Mavis sat with Tillie emptied of herself, full up again with spiders, and Mavis still felt ghostly as she rinsed the soap from her little sister’s breast. The light hit an imperfection in Tillie’s skin as the water ran down her chest, and Mavis placed her hand over the inert body of the spider that curled inside her dead sister’s heart.

“May I have this?” asked Mavis.

The spiders moved Tillie’s hands up to guard their mother.

“Do you love me back?”

Mavis turned away from her so that the spiders would not see her cry.

The spiders, being minutes old, had never seen Mavis cry, but in all of Tillie’s devoured memories they had no reference for the moment. It was as if the ground had turned to jelly. Tillie’s hands fell away from the bump of the spider. Twelve spiders crawled out of Tillie’s open mouth, the venturesome members of the spindle who wondered bravely if they ought to leap down into the bathwater and drown themselves to let the dead truly die.

"I miss her," said Mavis, who had calmed enough to speak and the twelve venturous spiders crawled back inside Tillie's mouth because they could abandon a corpse but they could never abandon Mavis.

"Here, take it. There's a knife in the cupboard." Tillie had left it there with the pill bottles. Nothing else could take the paint out from under her fingernails. The spiders pulled Tillie's arm up and tapped over the fat heart spider with two outstretched fingers. "We only want to be like her, Mavis. We're sorry to have made you cry. Tillie never would have made you cry."

Tillie's head tipped up, away from the heart, and Mavis slit open the bloodless skin. It fell away from a shiny black abdomen and Mavis could not will herself to reach inside the corpse. The spiders stuck Tillie's fingers into the incision and plucked out their mother's body. Its long bent legs curled in toward its belly and it looked itself like a fossilized heart. Mavis watched as the spiders pulsed under the cut, tumbling over each other until a few seamstresses rose up and nicked the skin, then threaded the incision together with silk and sewed it from the backside with such fine stitches that the cut may have never been.

Mavis took the spider's body, too light for the damage she'd made, and slipped it in her bathrobe pocket so she'd have something to bury while her sister's body still walked. Then she rinsed the soap from Tillie's skin and helped her out of the tub. She sat the body against the sink with legs extended out. The spiders rested Tillie's hands on the floor, locked the arms in place, and together the thousand spiders enjoyed a smile on Tillie's face.

"It's all right if you can't love me, Mavis. You know we aren't her. But I think we're getting the hang of this... Ivan will love me. I already love him so much."

Mavis brushed the tears from her eyes and breathed deep enough to cover her sorrow and focused on the smiling creature on the floor. "Let's get you dried and dressed, then," and she bit her tongue before she could accidentally utter the words "little dove."

Ivan woke to the smell of pancakes wafting from downstairs that covered the lingering smell of death. Mavis was cooking and Tillie waved cheerily at him from the table. She pointed to a bottle. "Did you know we have blackberry syrup? I forgot we had this!"

And Ivan swept it off the table to scrutinize its date of production. "You probably shouldn't eat this," he said as Tillie held a bit of pancake to her mouth and a flood of spiders poured from around her teeth to devour their first taste of breakfast. Ivan flinched, slightly, but he could

not have seen anything so horrid in their bright happy kitchen so he placed the bottle back down and saw nothing but the bottle. "I'll throw it out after today."

Mavis placed a stack of pancakes in front of him and turned her head to stifle a yawn.

"Mavis is going back home today," said Tillie. She sounded so happy. He'd not heard that tone in her voice in years.

"Been too long away from work," muttered Mavis as she inspected a misshapen pancake, then ate it plain while she poured more batter onto the skillet.

"I should get back to work, too," said the spiders. "I've got those paintings to finish and I'm feeling so much better today. Aside from the legs, of course."

"What's happened with your legs?" asked Ivan.

"Paralyzed," said Mavis.

"Temporarily." Tillie held up her hands, smiled at her husband, and wrested the conversation away from medical concerns. She could not be rushed to the doctor. The spiders could never see a doctor. "All the stress of the past few weeks, I'm sure. It's psychosomatic, isn't it, Mavis? She bought us a wheelchair for the meantime and I'll be fine in a few days." Tillie pushed her plate aside and reached across the table to take Ivan's beautiful hands. He held hers, they were so cold and dry, and her eyes were milky, but she squeezed him tight and toyed with his fingers and he'd never felt more loved.

"All right, Tills. But I'm taking you to the doctor if it doesn't go away."
"Deal."

Mavis flipped the last of the cakes onto a plate and turned off the stove. "Cab will be here in a few minutes. I've already packed." She glided past Ivan and leaned down close to her little sister's body and looked into the murky eyes, meeting the black spiders disguised against her pupils. "Be good, Clothilde," she said, and pressed a small box into the cold hands. The spiders cinched the fingers tight around it.

"What is this?"

"A gift." The spiders would need it soon.

Tillie's face pulled up to grin widely at Mavis. "I'll be a good Clothilde," said the spiders and already they had managed to figure out laughter. "The best I can be."

Ivan rolled his eyes, but he chuckled because it had been too long since his wife last made a bad joke. Mavis went rigid at the spiders' daring, but she was comforted to know that there was not a single creature

of malice within the spindle of spiders. Mavis bent and kissed Tillie's head, then left to find her suitcase and to wait out by the curb.

"Go with her, Ivan," said the spiders. "At least help her with the bags."

"She doesn't want my help," said Ivan.

"Mavis never needs help, dear. That's why she deserves it."

He could have swept her out of the chair and kissed her on the table. Instead he kissed Tillie's too-cold, too-hard fingers and went to find Mavis's luggage. She had already carried most of it to the curb. Ivan found her keys on the coffee table and ran out to meet her.

"Thank you, Mavis," he said, because she had given him back his wife. It might have worried him that Mavis looked so sad if he could have ever remembered her as happy.

"She still loves you, Ivan," said Mavis and she meant the spiders who had eaten through Tillie's brain loved him just as much as Tillie ever had, but Ivan heard only forgiveness for his beastly temper about the medical bills and forgiveness for ever thinking Tillie could not love him through her fits of madness. He was faithless. He did not deserve the woman who was inside wrapping up pancakes from her wheelchair.

"I love you, too," said Mavis, because she did, and she had never told him before, and because the cab had arrived and she would not have to stay to explain herself. He was a good man; he'd been good to her sister. The spiders would be good to him. Poor man.

There were eyeballs in the box that Mavis gave her sister. Carved from wood, hollow at the back with the pupils carved out to give the spiders a place to see. Mavis had painted them and polished them and lacquered them until they had the same wet gleam of Tillie's eyes, and the spiders held them to their human face in the mirror, astonished at their complexity; their irises were inlaid with shimmery threads taken from a sweater Ivan had bought to match her eyes. The spiders pushed the wheelchair back to close the bathroom door. They turned the lock, then cupped their hands under Tillie's chin. The spiders that stood on the eyes crawled up to rest on the brows and the others in her face nibbled at the nerves, building upon themselves, crowding the sockets until the tendons severed and the eyes popped into her awaiting hands.

The eyes were clouded, dying, and the spiders devoured them while the hands fit Mavis's gift into their sockets. The spiders gave a cautious blink to test the position, and once satisfied they wound the wooden eyes into the web operating Tillie's face and the swarm scurried back inside her mouth.

Ivan knocked on the door. "Do you need any help?"

She flushed the toilet and ran the faucet. "Just finishing, love!" She rinsed the hands and wished she could tell her husband of Mavis's cleverness. For all the years she'd been Tillie, artistic talent had belonged more to the younger sister, and Mavis never let on that she could craft. But if she spoke of the eyes, she'd have to speak of the spiders, and as Ivan helped her with the door she pushed herself up in the chair to give him a kiss. He leaned down and the lips stuck slightly on his stubble and the skin tore as he pulled away. The spiders worked the skin back together when Tillie discretely turned her head.

"Mavis said she loved me," said Ivan. He wasn't sure what to make of it but the spiders understood.

"She always has. She's just terrible with words."

"She made me undo a button in the hospital," he said and he was unsure if Mavis was either loopy or a witch in control of some strange cosmic balance. Whatever she'd done, it seemed to have worked on all but Tillie's legs.

The spiders practiced legs when Ivan left for work. They pushed and pried the toes until a nail came off, but no matter how they stretched the feet, the spindle found no purchase in the ground, nor could they balance the ungainly torso upon two unsteady stems. They stood, bracing the hands between the wall and the heavy drafting desk, but the legs could not be properly spaced without tearing out the tendons, and there weren't enough feet to stay upright. A few spun webs throughout the studio to keep Tillie still, but the poor puppet just hung from the rafters like the dead thing she was. Hours passed without progress and the spider in Tillie's left eye knew that they would never walk on two legs. The spiders unpinned her from the web and let the corpse collapse back into her wheelchair.

"We'll paint instead," thought one and the rest agreed because if Tillie could still paint she would be happy. They painted all evening and were still at the drafting desk when Ivan came home and he would have been happy to see her at the watercolors again were it not for all the spiderwebs that he refused to see drifting overhead.

"How are your legs?" he asked and the spiders frowned. They didn't want to lie.

"They'll be better in a week, I'm sure."

But they were not, and during the week the spiders ate everything in the house. The spiders were new, they ate like the young do, first devouring all but the mummified lungs inside Tillie's chest, replacing muscle and skin with cord and cloth made of spider silk. And once the

body could not sustain their hunger, the spindle turned to the pantry. Ivan came home to find Tillie sitting on the counter shoveling handfuls of dry oatmeal to her mouth where a clutch of spiders scurried over one another to eat what the hands were offering. They ran back inside the corpse's mouth too late not to be seen, but Ivan did not see because spiders were all in her head, and we are past that now, there is no spider there is only Tillie who is curiously hungry.

"Honey, get down from there, please," said Ivan and he ran to help her off the counter before she hurt herself. He grabbed around her chest, under the arms, and lifted the sack of spiders back down into the chair. She was light for all the food she'd been eating, and her skin too springy. The muscle had been replaced with cord and fluff.

"Sorry, sweetie," said Tillie as the spiders rushed back down to take their place among the bones. "I didn't know when you'd be home. I haven't started on dinner."

"I'm not hungry," said Ivan. He hadn't been since Mavis left. Both he and Tillie were coming apart but Tillie didn't seem to notice, not even when her hair had fallen out in the shower. He watched it come away in clumps because he helped her in the shower so she wouldn't slip and bash her skull and the hair was filling in quickly but not brown the way it was before. Tillie's new hair was soft and fine and translucent as spider silk and there were shadows moving under her skin, scuttling, big as beans.

"I'll put the stew on, anyway," said the spiders. "You'll be hungry later."

But he hardly ate and the spiders finished off the pot. It worried them to see him growing thin. He moved listlessly through the house, avoiding her wheelchair and he slept upstairs while she took the new mattress in the studio under webs and paints and him. She was lonely, so was Ivan, so she wheeled over to the stairs one night and called up to their bedroom.

"Ivan?"

He drifted downstairs with circles under his eyes.

"Can I come up to bed with you?"

"The stairs," he muttered, but she lifted herself off the chair and began to pull herself backward up the stairs, lifting her whole body with her arms. The spiders were strong and the body was light, but Ivan hated to see his wife put so much effort out for him. He bent down to lift her and the spiders held their breath, so still while he had the body draped over his arms and he carried her upstairs to the bedroom, but he did not sleep. The body sharing his bed was cold, it was too light,

and the flesh was lumpy under the flawless white skin. The spiders were outgrowing their body.

“I’ve missed you, Ivan,” said the spiders. The face was turned to him, the useless legs bent back to give him space.

“I’m tired, Tills,” he said. He shifted away and closed his eyes.

The left eye crawled out of Tillie’s open mouth to rest on Ivan’s pillow. She bowed her head and stroked a single hair of his beautiful enormous head with her claw and she looked down to where the corpse sprawled on his bed. It was bulging at the belly from the spindle’s girth and its skin was writhing from the ceaseless shifting of eight thousand legs. The left eye brushed her poison fangs against the hair in her claw and she wished that she could hold him but he was so big and not even a thousand spiders could be enough for him, so she buried her legs in the pillow and tried to cozy in the heat from his head, but he shot to the edge of the bed and ran his hands over his hair to be rid of the horrid crawling nightmares that plagued him whenever his wife was near. The left eye scurried back inside and directed the spiders to vacate Tillie’s corpse. No more than could fit Tillie’s frame would stay inside her at any time. The rest would stock the corners of the house and wait for their turn among the intimate bones. The spindle silently carried the body down to the studio where it belonged, so that Ivan could sleep without fear.

Tillie was the proper shape again, but Ivan was afraid of his sweet and caring wife who insisted she did not see the spiders stalking the corners of their house, getting bigger day by day, much too big for a thousand to fit inside a corpse, no more than a hundred could fit inside her now, and they moved under her skin as big as beetles. He saw their nubby bodies protruding from the knuckles and underneath the sad imitation of Tillie’s perfect ears. She cooked for him, cared for him, surely he’d need to eat something and when she brought him dinner one day he caught the cold dead hand and pulled her wheelchair close.

“Who are you?” Ivan asked the spiders while he stared into the painted eyes.

The spiders pulled up at Tillie’s mouth, they wheezed a little chuckle out of the dry lungs, and the spider in her mouth who wore soft leather over his legs to act as a tongue clucked against the corpse’s teeth and asked, “Whatever do you mean?”

Ivan caught the jaw in his hand and stared where the pupil was not a pupil but just a hole with glimmering red eyes behind. “Spiders,” he whispered, and the left eye gave up Tillie’s ghost. Its leg protruded from the pupil, and Ivan backed away, spilling a plate of something

on the floor while he leapt back so fast that a piece of Tillie's soul was crushed under his foot. The spiders together flinched and the wooden eye popped out to roll across the floor.

"Ivan, wait!" they said, and those who couldn't fit among the bones rose up underneath the corpse, propping the useless legs as they scurried forward to take him up and embrace him and explain that they were a gift from Tillie so he'd never be alone.

He was cornered, surrounded by the horde, and with no place else to turn he put his face in the corner so at least he could not see. And Tillie placed her hand on his shoulder and the spiders let her down to the floor so she was just shorter than him, and they whispered gently, "Ivan I'm so sorry it was a terrible prank. I'll stop this foolish spider talk."

It was all just in her head. He turned around and saw his wife standing before him in a dark and glittering skirt and Tillie's hair had always been white and the pupils were black, any red behind the pupil was a trick of the light. He embraced his fragile, lovely wife, and she held him back, and his love for her was ecstatic and wild like eight thousand legs racing up and down his skin.