

Arachnophobia

Arachnophobia. It's one of those words that sounds as bad as that which it describes. The hard 'ack' at the end of the second syllable suggestive of the repulsive angles of a spider's legs; the soft sweep of the 'fo' like the awful wave of nausea that washes through your gut at the suggestion of a sudden movement across a wall or floor; the loud 'no' at its centre the sound of your brain screaming, in disgust, nononono.

Tallulah suffers from arachnophobia.

Tallulah is in the dark.

PART ONE

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The baby is starting to grumble. Kim sits still in her chair and holds her breath. It's taken her all night to get him to sleep. It's Friday, a sultry midsummer's night, and normally she'd be out with friends at this time. Eleven o'clock: she'd be at the bar getting in the last round for the road. But tonight she's in joggers and a T-shirt, her dark hair tied up in a bun, contacts out, glasses on and a glass of lukewarm wine on the coffee table that she poured herself earlier and hasn't had a chance to drink.

She clicks the volume down on the TV using the remote and listens again.

There it is, the very early outposts of crying, a kind of dry, ominous chirruping.

Kim has never really liked babies. She liked her own well enough, but did find the early years testing and ill-suited to her sensibilities. From the first night that both her children slept through the night, Kim has placed a very – possibly disproportionately – high value on an unbroken night. She had her kids young and easily had time enough and room in her heart for another one or two. But she could not face the prospect of sleepless nights again. For years she has protected her sleep vigilantly with the help of eye masks and earplugs and pillow sprays and huge tubs of melatonin that her friend brings back for her from the States.

And then, just over twelve months ago, her teenage daughter, Tallulah, had a baby. And now Kim is a grandmother at the age of thirty-nine and there is a crying baby in her house again, soon, it feels, so soon, after her own babies stopped crying.

For the most part, despite it happening ten years before she was ready for it, having a grandson has been blessing after blessing. His name is Noah and he has dark hair like Kim, like both of Kim's children (Kim only ever really liked babies with dark hair; blond-haired babies freak her out). Noah has eyes that oscillate between brown and amber depending on the light and he has solid legs and solid arms with circlets of fat at the wrists. He's quick to smile and laugh and he's happy to entertain himself, sometimes for as long as half an hour at a time. Kim looks after him when Tallulah goes to college and she occasionally gets a kick of panic in her gut at the realisation that she has not heard him make a noise for a few minutes. She rushes to his high chair or to the swing seat or to the corner of the sofa to check that he is still alive and finds him deep in thought whilst turning the pages of a fabric book.

Noah is a dreamy baby. But he does not like to sleep and Kim finds this darkly stressful.

At the moment Tallulah and Noah live here with Kim, along-side Zach, Noah's father. Noah sleeps between them in Tallulah's double bed and Kim puts in her earplugs and plays some white noise on her smartphone and is generally saved from the night-time cacophony of Noah's sleeplessness.

But tonight Zach has taken Tallulah out on what they're calling a 'date night', which sounds strangely middle-aged for a pair of nineteen-year-olds. They've gone to the very pub that Kim would normally be sitting in tonight. She slipped Zach a twenty-pound note as they were leaving and told them to have fun. It's the first time they've been out as a couple since before Noah was born. They split up while Tallulah was pregnant and got back together again about six months ago with Zach pledging to be the best dad in the world. And, so far, he's been true to his word.

Noah's crying has kicked in properly now and Kim sighs and gets to her feet.

As she does so her phone buzzes with a text message. She clicks it and reads.

Mum, there's some ppl here from college, they asked us back to theirs. Just for an hour or so. Is that OK? 😊

Then, as she's typing a reply, another message follows immediately.

Is Noah OK?

Noah is fine, she types. Good as gold. Go and have fun. Stay as long as you like. Love you.

Kim goes upstairs to Noah's cot, her heart heavy with the prospect of another hour of rocking and soothing and sighing and whispering in the dark while the moon hangs out there in the balmy midsummer sky, which still holds pale smudges of day-light, and the house creaks emptily and other people sit in pubs. But as she approaches him, the moonlight catches the curve of his cheek and she sees his eyes light up at the sight of her, hears his breath catch with relief that someone has come and sees his arms reach up to her.

She collects him up and places him against her chest and says, 'What's all the fuss now, baby boy, what's all the fuss?' and her heart suddenly expands and contracts with the knowledge that this boy is a part of her and that he loves her, that he is not seeking out his mother, he is content for her to come to him in the dark of night to comfort him.

She takes Noah into the living room and sits him on her lap. She gives him the remote control to play with; he loves to press the buttons, but Kim can tell he's too tired to press buttons, he wants to sleep. As he grows heavy on top of her, she knows she should put him back into his cot, good sleep hygiene, good habits, all of that, but now Kim is tired too and her eyes grow heavy and she pulls the throw from the sofa across her lap and adjusts the cushion behind her head and she and Noah fall silently into a peaceful slumber.

Kim awakes suddenly several hours later. The brief midsummer night is almost over and the sky through the living-room window is shimmering with the first blades of hot morning sun. She straightens her neck and feels all the muscles shout at her. Noah is still heavy with sleep and she gently adjusts him so that she can reach her phone. It's four twenty in the morning.

She feels a small blast of annoyance. She knows she told Tallulah to stay out as late as she liked, but this is madness. She brings up Tallulah's number and calls it. It goes straight to voice-mail so she brings up Zach's number and calls it. Again, it goes to voicemail.

Maybe, she thinks, maybe they came in in the night and saw Noah asleep on top of her and decided that it would be nice to have the bed to themselves. She pictures them peering at her around the door of the living room and taking off their shoes, tip-toeing up the stairs and jumping into the empty bed in a tangle of arms and legs and playful, drunken kisses.

Slowly, carefully, she tucks Noah into herself and gets off the sofa. She climbs the stairs and goes to the door of Tallulah's room. It's wide open, just as she left it at eleven o'clock the night before when she came to collect Noah. She lowers him gently into his cot and, miraculously, he does not stir. Then she sits on the side of Tallulah's bed and calls her phone again.

Once more it goes straight to voicemail. She calls Zach. It goes to voicemail. She continues this ping-pong game for another hour. The sun is fully risen now; it is morning, but too early to call anyone else. So Kim makes herself a coffee and cuts herself a slice of bread off the farmhouse loaf she always buys Tallulah for the weekend and eats it with butter, and honey bought from the beekeeper down the road who sells it from his front door, and she waits and waits for the day to begin.

This is an extract from ***The Night She Disappeared*** by Lisa Jewell (published by Penguin Random House, \$32.99) out 22 July.