

**Lori R. Lopez**



LORI LOPEZ-14

**Spider Soup**

# Spider Soup

by Lori R. Lopez

Fairy Fly Entertainment

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You are never truly alone. While you sleep, nocturnal creatures stir. A couple discovers that things have changed overnight, and they are no longer in control. Their house is full of cobwebs, and they are being moved little by little in this suspenseful horror tale.

After inheriting a house, a husband and wife encounter a frightful surprise. They are surrounded by layer upon layer of silk crawling with arachnids. What lies beyond the cellar door? Find out in *Spider Soup*, a quirky story from the horror collection *Odds And Ends* by Lori R. Lopez, author of *The Fairy Fly* and *An Ill Wind Blows*. Can a relationship survive being pushed past the brink? How far is too far over the edge? Alternately tense and humorous, this short story presents a very sticky situation!

The couple awakened in the same blink of an eye, for there was a disturbance at their household that jostled them from sleep. Not a noise or intrusion but rather the opposite, as the home was shared by many a creature and apparently it was an inside job.

The evidence extended wall to wall, with every corner a part of the intricate scheme, embroidered into the fabric. A myriad of fibers had unspooled and been knotted into an exceptionally thick tapestry. The humans slid along a corridor tugged by rope-like braids, until one's bare foot connected with the leg of a hall table and tipped a brittle porcelain vase, which smashed to the floorboards and sounded the alarm.

Instinctively both reached to shake the other as orbs widened. Appendages were restricted. The pair goggled in amazement, awed by the industriousness of tiny arachnids to achieve this elaborate engineering feat overnight! When they had gone to bed around Midnight, the house appeared normal. By Six A.M. (according to the gongs of a grandfather clock) it was crowded by a matting so dense, they could pluck it with fingers and hear a vibrant hum. Yet it resembled ordinary spider silk. For some arcane reason, the stuff had been produced in manic quantities — spun and woven with a frenzied burst of collective hyperactivity. Had Nature triggered a mutation, or was it something more sinister?

The young couple inherited the home from the man's great-aunt, a sweet lady who wouldn't hurt a fly. The spiders she revered and sheltered might. "They have to eat," she told Jordy and his wife Darcy during their final visit — before expiring unexpectedly due to a stroke. Like hunger, grief could be a powerful stimulus. Did the appetites of the eight-leggers abruptly grow to include people-sized morsels? Or had the eccentric spinster been feeding her little darlings a special diet and now they were starved?

A modest assortment of cobwebs ornamented the single-story dwelling when the newlyweds moved in, strung across ceilings, and Darcy promptly aimed a broom to brush off the signs of neglect. Jordy stopped her. "This is Aunt Zinnia's house. She let them reside here and we will too. She trusted us to be the caretakers, allowing us to live with them. We should respect her wishes."

The average wife would file for divorce. Darcy possessed a tender heart, one of the countless things Jordan Maynard adored about his bride. The duo cared deeply for animals as well as each other. It hadn't been so difficult to modify their views on spiders. They felt guilty over regarding the visits to Aunt Zinnia "weird" and the woman a "crackpot". She did, after all, leave them her quaint abode. Even if it was infested by an abundance of creepy crawlies!

A wan band of light glimmering from a window filtered through the vast array of tangled and interlaced webs congesting the space above them. This enormous amorphous rigging had no pattern, no specific ornamentation. It was chaotic, a jumbled mess — as if the spider population were drunk, spinning under the influence, binge-weaving.

"What's going on?" whispered Darcy as they continued to be slowly dragged.

"I have no idea," her husband replied. "I don't like it."

The cobwebbed couple became aware of an arachnid swarm thronging the layers of lace . . . and them. Spiders of varied denominations prowled whitish-gray patches briefly visible in pale beams. Familiar long-limbed Cellar Spiders were rampant, dominating the ranks of the horde. The journey's pace gradually accelerated, spiking anxiety. Jordy struggled against sticky tethers. His sleep-tousled brown hair protruded in clumps; a medium frame was heavily bound, practically cocooned.

"I'm scared!" whimpered Darcy, straining to free herself. A jumble of clipped sandy curls bobbed in agitation.

"I'd wonder if you weren't." A tense laugh. "Stay calm. There has to be something we can do." Jordy's tone wasn't very convincing.

Darcy trusted him to come up with a plan. He always knew how to handle situations. She was less pragmatic, more emotional. It wasn't in her composition to accept defeat, however. An eternal optimist, the woman believed that everything had a bright side. "You're right . . . We'll find a way to get loose." Groping between the gaps, digits contacted her spouse's skin and their fingers ever so slightly touched. It was enough. She smiled, comforted by his proximity. They were not in this "bind" alone.

"The strange part is, I didn't observe an increase, either in the amount of spiders or webs. Did you?"

She mulled recent memories. "No, not really."

"We ought to have seen warnings of this. How could it spring up in a single night?"

"I know. It's freaky."

"Must be some paranormal phenomenon. That's all I can figure."

"Are they going to . . . eat us?"

"That would be my guess. Spiders rarely act unless it's for a purpose. And that purpose usually involves their next meal."

"Oh boy," moaned Darcy. "Looks like being tolerant of them backfired."

"I'm sorry. It's my fault," Jordy admitted. "I shouldn't have forced you to put up with them."

His beloved sighed. "You couldn't have anticipated this. Nobody could. It's completely bizarre."

"Whatever they want, I refuse to let them make Spider Soup of us," vowed Jordy.

They froze as an eerie muffled wail penetrated the gauze cluttering their perimeter.

"*What was that?*" hissed Darcy. Trembling, she stiffened and attempted to be brave so her husband wouldn't glimpse what a nervous wreck she was and perceive her as too needy.

"It definitely wasn't human." Jordy could feel the lace quiver. "Hang on, babe. We'll get through this."

"Okay." A girlish murmur.

The man's heart lurched. Desiring desperately to embrace his wife, he resisted the lashings that confined him and kept him so close yet so distant from the woman right beside him. She was seldom dejected or discouraged. He saw these flashes of vulnerability as a precious trait. Jordy needed her to need him, albeit temporarily. The man wanted to be there when she did. "*Aaahhh!*" He gave a frustrated bellow.

"What happened?" Concern heightened in her voice.

"Nothing. I'm angry. About the predicament, being embroiled in this snarl . . . I apologize for upsetting you."

She had to be strong, Darcy inwardly chided, despite suffering an acute case of Arachnophobia at the moment. The spiders circulated in the netting, occasionally stepping on her face, traversing eyelids. The bugglies entered ears, tickled nostrils. Reflexively the woman sneezed.

"Bless you." A whisper. She wasn't the only one afraid. The guy shuddered, a hairy upside-down Wolf Spider pausing in front of his gaze to inspect him with the orbs at the top of its head. Jordy cleared his throat cautiously, so as not to startle the spider and so his bride wouldn't attribute hoarseness with lack of confidence. The whole thing was nightmarish. Maybe that was precisely what it was! The fingers not linked to Darcy strove to pinch his flank. The flesh stung. Not a dream. And he couldn't recall having this vivid of nightmares, or in color. Squinting, the fellow thought he could detect dull hues.

The web cast a gray pall in the sheen trickling from windowpanes.

Ripples of compulsive itchiness tormented Darcy. Trussed securely by threads, she was helpless to scratch her prickles and tingles, the points that were driving her mad. The female thrashed side to side in vain.

Jordy misinterpreted her distress. "I am sorry. I've already failed you. I didn't even take you on a proper honeymoon. I should have done better. I will, I promise. I'll make you happy."

"I'm not unhappy. I'm itchy. And I'm not too thrilled at present. That doesn't have anything to do with you." Seeking distraction, she chattered on. "It's probably good we couldn't decide what kind of pet to adopt. They might have eaten the dog or cat first."

"I'm glad you're happy . . . most of the time."

"Jordan, I'm not happy. I'm ecstatic!"

"Me too."

Squirming, endeavoring to kiss, they settled for exchanging smiles. Then remembered . . . the humongous web; a profusion of arachnids hauling them along the floor. Their smiles faded.



Another howl arose. Glass rattled. Cords pulling them twitched and vibrated. The humans inched past an archway. Spiders had multiplied, prolific, legs scurrying, and Darcy's discomfiture leaped to mind-boggling proportions. Teeth clenched, she fought the scream building in her toes, coursing blood and tissue like a swollen river, bottled behind lips and bulgent eyeballs.

The pair slipped forward, arriving in the kitchen.

Jordy peered at the bottom of a gaping door straight ahead. They were being conveyed to the cellar's threshold. Milling, eight-leggers traveled his forehead and chin, the stubbled path of his throat. They roamed beneath his teeshirt and polka-dotted boxers.

A stifled shriek emitted as a gasp. Darcy prayed the butterflies in her stomach weren't actually spiders. She didn't feel well. Maybe it was the circumstances. Or perhaps she'd been poisoned. What was the word? Envenomated. Concentrating, she searched herself with a mental probe for any trace of a sting or bite. There was a far ickier possibility. Spiders could have crept into her mouth while she was asleep and laid eggs. It might be an urban myth, but that didn't mean it couldn't occur! She felt peculiar, as if her body had been infiltrated. A limitless supply of hope dissolved. She pictured herself as a bowl of soup. That image was stuck in her brain.

Jordy stared at the base of the chasm that yawned before them and shook his cranium, which was not quite as mummified as the rest of him. Why were the creatures transporting them to the cellar? What was down there, some type of nest? He envisioned a lair burgeoning with eggs, though he couldn't fathom how it might have developed. They explored the underground level when they moved in. A dusty, unpleasant, far less charming region than the upper domain. Rough-hewn posts and shelves; bricks and mortar. The staircase wobbled. His impression had been stark. The last thing he wanted was to return there.

Feet trekked her lips. Darcy coughed. Her chest felt funny. Did the spiders invade her lungs?

Dread pooled like cold turbid rainwater in Jordy's veins, a brackish stream of apprehension. He yearned to be a hero for his lady, yet could not even extricate himself from cobwebs! The spiders were making him look bad, very bad.

Eight legs caressed a nostril. Did it emerge from her nasal cavity? She writhed, conscious of stray impulses nagging and gnawing.

Vermin, that's all they were. He had honored them, leerily tolerated them — humoring the whims of a batty senile biddy who belonged in an old-folks home!

Flesh convulsed. Muscles spasmed. Her entire constitution fidgeted as they scuttled inside of her like an advancing army, proliferating like cancer cells.

A disease. A plague. He had permitted them to spread throughout the cottage unchecked. How could he have been so foolish?

It was agonizingly obvious. She was full of spiders, her body taken over.

The cellar doorway loomed, brimming with menace . . . the gate to a voracious pit. He began to perspire, discerning the hollow's approach. Did she mean it? Was she content? What was in there? What did the spiders want?

Nausea roiled. She suppressed an urge to vomit. Her frantic intellect conjured a terrifying spiderwoman . . . appendages reshaping, sprouting, expanding.

Aside from daily threats, including the Russian Roulette odds of surviving traffic, Jordan Maynard had never faced mortality — never peeked into the jaws of a lion or swum with sharks. That would be unnecessarily dangerous. The guy preferred to stay home and fuel his adrenaline by virtual adventure. Risk-free. Did his wife think such reserve was childish? Worse, did she fancy him a coward?

Darcy swallowed a lump of acid-flavored trepidation. Dare she tell him? Would he take her qualms seriously or dismiss them as silly?

Jordan's fear gave way to resentment. None of this made sense! Everything had been going so perfectly — a fairytale ending; the beginning of a new life. Why were the spiders on a rampage?

What was their problem? He and Darce didn't do anything to deserve this! "I can't understand it. What could have provoked this degree of hostility? We were nice to them. We aren't those people who see a spider and automatically squish it," he complained.

"Maybe you didn't. I did," confessed his bride.

"You did?" A strangled question.

"Yeah. Knee-jerk reactions. I'd flatten them with books or the heels of shoes. Whatever I could grab. Not anymore. I haven't done that here."

"Are you certain? Just once? A quick splat?"

"No. I told you. I stopped."

"They must be riled about something."

"Well, it wasn't me."

"This isn't natural."

"I know."

"Maybe you forgot. Or did it without thinking. A reflex."

"No! Are you saying I'm to blame?"

*Careful*, the voice that advised him not to be an idiot cautioned. Now and then he listened. Not this time. "It's a theory. I'm speculating. There has to be an explanation."

"And of course you assume it's something I did."

"No, I am merely considering the options."

"I seem to be the Number One suspect!"

"I'm attempting to rationalize. Apply logic. It's as if the balance shifted, or they've been excited. I have to weigh the available data."

"This isn't a computer simulation. It isn't one of your stupid video games!"

The man's chin sagged in astonishment. "I thought you liked my games. You said they were cute. It's what I do. My career. Is there anything else you pretended to like? Or you *hate* about me?"

Darcy regretted the statement. It had been a mistake. She didn't intend to offend him. She wasn't that sort of person. If anything, she was overly polite. But he had started to needle her in an irritating fashion that drove her crazy. The woman gave an exasperated huff.

"We might as well discuss it," persisted Jordy. "There may not be a chance later."

"You want to have a fight? Now? This is so typical!"

"There you go. You don't care for my typical behavior. What exactly is it? Would you mind enlightening me?"

"That! Being sarcastic as a defense, when you don't know what else to say!"

"Pardon me. A thousand and one pardons. I had no idea I was so unbearable."

"You see? Exaggerating. It's something else you do. In *addition* to playing games."

"At least I'm honest. You act like everything's fine and then drop a bomb that you're dissatisfied. How can I be sure I even know you?"

"There's the dire and drastic ultimatum. The ridiculously premature, jumping-to-conclusions, gloom-and-doom speech."

"Oh, okay. That's your opinion of me? I'm ridiculous?"

She didn't answer, stunned by her bitterness, peeved at his attitude.

He grew impatient. "Don't hold back. We're on the verge of death. Say what's on your mind."

"Why are you being so cruel?"

"I'm being cruel? You're the one who's slandering me!"

"Slander! Is that what you call having an argument? Isn't that a tad extreme?"

"It's accurate, that's what it is."

"You're out of your gourd."

"So now I'm a basket-case?"

"You're twisting everything! It's like you threw a switch and turned into a stranger. As if our life went out of focus. I don't recognize you!"

"Have you noticed how it's always my fault?"

"You said it was, not me! Prior to waging war and deciding that I'm the one who's responsible."

"I was pondering! You started making nasty accusations! I'm the victim here!"

"I can't believe this! I put up with your great-aunt's spiders, you sitting around in your underwear all day playing games, and me not being able to conduct a civilized or mature conversation with you . . . For what? To be treated as if I'm a villain?"

"I think you've got it reversed. What about your list of grievances that has my name at the top? I've got a list too, you know! There's your perpetual sunshiny disposition that's so glaring, I feel I have to don shades around you!"

"What?! You used to love it when we were dating! You said I brightened your day. Was that a lie?"

"Calling me a liar. The list goes on . . . So does mine. Next there's your incessant singing or humming. It's very distracting when I'm trying to work. If I want to hear music, I'll crank up the radio or play my Alternative Rock collection."

"You don't like my singing?"

"It gives me headaches like your constant knitting! You're worse than these spiders. How many scarves do you think I can wear? And sweaters? It doesn't even snow here. Summers are getting longer. Put away the needles! Their click-click-clicking is aggravating. Between the knitting and the humming, my teeth are on edge!"

"Your teeth have edges because you grind them all night! It keeps me awake! And during the day I never know when you're working or playing! All you do is tap the keys of your computer and grin like you're having fun! How should I know if I'm annoying you? We never have a conversation!"

"We're having one now, aren't we?"

"This isn't a conversation," the woman disputed. "It's a shouting match!"

"It wouldn't be if you'd stop shouting!" he exhorted. "Where's your bubbly effervescent personality now? Was it just a mask, a disguise? Was it painted on like a clown's smile?"

Darcy's emotions staggered from the blow. "Wow! You see? You're like a kid having a temper tantrum! Whenever I try to talk to you, I either get ignored or you pitch a hissy-fit that you're busy! It's so juvenile! Grow up already! Sometimes I think you married me so you wouldn't forget to eat and drink! I feel like your mother!"

Jordy squawked, "My *mother*?" The words sliced an artery, having been picked on for his meager stature as a kid. He was sensitive about age, and still had boyish features so he grew a beard, then shaved it off when she protested it was like kissing a broom. Wounded, he cut her back. "Maybe it's the broad fanny and thighs you're so uptight about!"

She was mortified. "Leave my posterior out of this!"

"Leave my mother out of it!"

"I quit my job to be here for you. I was next in line for Manager!"

"And that's my fault?"

"I'm not the enemy!" Darcy declared.

"You could have fooled me!" her husband blared.

A cavernous shocked silence filled the void left by their voices. Jaws steeled, on the brink of losing everything, they managed to rein in the beasts they had unleashed.

Jordy couldn't conceive why he had directed rage toward the arachnids at his mate. She was his missing piece, truly his better half. Yet he had pounced on her viciously, snapping and foaming to rip her throat out! That wasn't him.

Darcy's abdomen retched. Experiencing dry heaves, the wife debated again whether to spill her guts and confess that she was metamorphosing into some kind of hybrid. A monster, like in one of his video games.

Ashamed, feeling unworthy, Jordan wouldn't be surprised if she left him after this!

Twin fangs of despair and anguish stabbed Darcy. Would he abandon her? Of course!

The couple experienced a simultaneous thought: If they got out of this plight.

Their true dilemma registered, having been fleetly shoved from mind. Sober, they scrutinized a hodgepodge of disorderly strands. Probability was not in their favor.

Harboring a scarce-controlled hysteria, Jordan ogled the cellar threshold, which was closer, sneaking up while they quarreled.

Confronted by death, he mutely shuffled the deck he had been dealt in life. It was time to lay his cards on the table and read them. Whatever turned up — be it hanged men and magicians, lovers and hermits, or numbers and royalty — the man braced himself for the inevitable. The fate everyone sooner or later must surrender to and heed. Jordan danced around it, jiggling merrily, a Joker, crafting horrors for amusement. In a jester's cap he had cleverly juggled Hearts and Diamonds, Clubs and Spades with equanimity, an aloof smirk. Perhaps it was all to prepare himself for the end. His composure had been a charade. He was frightened. He had always been frightened of this moment, lurking on the horizon. Somewhere in the future. Not here and now as he laid his cards out. The game couldn't be over! Eyes narrowed, he poured his energy into distinguishing a message. It was imperative to comprehend this. People died every day. He knew that. It could happen. It would happen. But why now? Why on this morning, in this manner? And why must it happen to the lady he loved? He would do anything for her, yet he could do nothing. It wasn't fair, wasn't playing by the rules!

Darcy hadn't paid attention to the doorway, the cellarmouth they were nearing. It sank in. That was their destination. *Oh lord.* She rebelled. The notion of descending into a tomb-like abyss was overwhelming. She couldn't do it. Sheathed in silk, the spooked female wrestled her chrysalis, hating spiders, feeling trapped. Her skin moist, flipping from cool to warm, she wriggled and kicked, furious at the perplexity enveloping them. A cry of indignation. Was this it? The sum of her life? How could it end this way? What about dreams? What about the family they were going to form? What a waste. She rued the time squandered on dieting, counting calories and carbs, fretting about food going to her hips when she could have eaten that dessert! Her stomach growled. She could have ordered the Breadsticks, the Lasagna, instead of just soup and a salad the last evening they went to a restaurant to celebrate. What was it for? A birthday? No, Jordy quitting his job to work at home. She was exuberant. They would have more time together. But then she became preoccupied with her reflection, the numbers on the bathroom scale, whether clothes fit too snug — deciphering his lack of interest, being absorbed in his computer as the result of the pounds she had gained since they wed. They had been spiderwebbed for months, unaware, unable to communicate . . . Incapable of shedding the doubts and restraint, the petty squabbles that didn't qualify as conflicts. Worrying about less-important stuff. Being cooped up, enmeshed by their own paranoid delusions and misconceptions. If she had the chance, she would dance in the street, throw her arms in the air and skip joyfully, cherish every instant of what they had. But even if they could escape, she was infected. A host. Eggs would hatch. Spiderlings would feast.

"I'm so sorry." His voice cracked with remorse.

"I'm sorry too." A contrite sob.

"Am I really so awful? Maybe I am!" It horrified him. He didn't see how she could forgive him, but he would beg her to upon his knees . . . if he could.

"No. You're not. You're a wonderful man."

A tide of relief swamped him, left him gulping air with gratitude. “So are you. Woman, not man. You’re absolutely right. I’ve been a dunce. I’ve been sitting in the corner with a pointy hat on my head, failing to appreciate my amazing new life. I guess I could pull on shorts or sweatpants. I just liked being comfortable, feeling at home. I was savoring the fact I didn’t have to commute and sit in an office building all day, wearing a monkey suit. And I got used to living alone for several years. It isn’t that I changed. I didn’t, and that’s the trouble. I need to compromise and sacrifice. I should be on my best behavior with you, the same as when we met. Every single day.”

“I love you, through the best or worst. And monkeys don’t wear suits. It’s more like a penguin. Or a Tuxedo Cat.”

Neither was in the mood to laugh. They beseeched the other’s pardon. If they had a second chance, both swore to remember this ugly quarrel and never repeat it. That was a pretty big if.

She realized, “This was our first fight.”

“It won’t be our last.” A Black Widow traipsed over an eye, the crimson hourglass a blur. He battled the desire to blink and rasped, “But we’ll be okay.”

“Will we?”

“I won’t ignore you again. We’ll talk, share our feelings.”

“That’s fantastic. I meant about the spiders. How are we going to get out of this?”

“Oh.” He had no clue.

Their silence resumed, only they did not feel isolated or divided. The pair was united by misery and suspense — as the dratted cellar maw impended. Millimeter by millimeter they were propelled in the most stealthy torture. They might die of boredom.

The man’s brain feverishly sifted a muddle of solutions buried in a field of ashes. Why did it have to be this hard? Why couldn’t he think? He was an intelligent human being . . . against spiders! *Do something!* Jordy commanded himself. He might not be a hero, he might be just a runt, but he was too smart to take this lying down. The gamer rolled to the sides, then jacked his legs upward to bang his heels on the floor. That would have caused significant pain since he had no shoes, but he couldn’t raise his legs very high. The fellow stubbornly dug his heels to impede the cable dragging him like Gulliver in Lilliput. Swathed knees bent a paltry angle, hampering leverage. Things were easier in a Virtual World.

“I feel more of them.” Darcy’s timbre was solemn. “Where are they coming from?”

“And what do they want?”

The couple stared at grayish-white matting above them. Arachnids rapidly scrambled overhead, bustling to the ominous threshold in the kitchen. The silk churned with a pandemonium of bodies in transit, early-morning commuters hastening to their tasks and duties within a complex network. As the rate of traffic escalated, so did the speed of their progress toward an unknown fate at the base of wood steps.

“Perhaps they all have invitations to a banquet,” suggested Darcy, her voice even glummer. “And we’re the main course.”

“Of course,” he echoed.

It wasn’t the place or time for levity, but a giggle exuded from Darcy. The pair was soon immersed in a current of macabre mirth, swept away by helpless cackles and hooting.

“Why are we laughing? It isn’t funny.”

“I suppose it’s what you do in the face of death. We’ve reached the final stage. The last level.” Jordy swallowed. “The endgame.”

Somberness stole back like fog. They wished they could hold hands. Oddly, after their meltdowns they felt closer than ever, as if weathering the torrent had strengthened their relationship.

They also felt themselves actually glide, bit by bit. It wouldn’t be long.



The cellar's dark gullet awaited, teeming with eight-legged atrocities magnified by fear into larger-than-life theatrical dimensions, perceived on a gigantic screen. A melodramatic atmosphere draped the humans like a funeral shroud.

"I'm no poet. I can't put this into phrases that would suffice, that could express how you make me feel. It wasn't me saying those lies. The words toppled careless off my tongue, yet I honestly do not feel that way. I love you. That is all I am. Love for you." Eyes shimmering with tears, Jordy turned his head as far as he was able.

Orbs damp, shining with affection, Darcy kissed the air . . . hoping it would float the sentiment to his lips.

Fierce subdued howls erupted. The kitchen jarred. About to take a sleigh-ride down steeply inclined stairs, the wrapped bodies skewed in tandem and slanted across the jambs, piled on their sides. The husband deplored that he was squashing his wife, who blocked the doorway behind him. "We can't even die with dignity," the man forlorned.

"We're saved, you dope. And you know I like to spoon."

His features brightened. She had that effect.

Alas, the spongy borders of their tunnel pushed heads and feet, exerting an elastic pressure that would bow them at the waist.

"We have to stay rigid," he grunted.

Spines ached as the nonathletic couple staunchly maintained their vantage. They couldn't yield. Couldn't fold. Gritting their teeth, they held on for the other's sake.

Eventually they had to budge, middles succumbing.

Half-slingshotted, half-yanked, the newlyweds tobagganed down steps shoulder to shoulder. Heads and haunches bumped planks; their silk-encased forms gravitated to the bottom of the slope in a rush.

The couple lay numb, backs of skulls sore. Consciousness flickered like a dimming bulb. Plethoral rustlings occupied the basement, the friction of innumerable legs. A door slammed. Sputtering cognizance faded to black . . .

Jordy's lids flapped like window shades. A multitude of limbs drummed an uncanny cadence on walls and floor, the ceiling. Pulsing, resonating, the beat sounded rhythmic, contrived. How could it be? Arachnids had no musical skills. The percussion ceased. Was he imagining things?

"Darce?" A tentative croak. Reclining in a dank vault, he blindly tuned his ears for a response. "Honey?"

His heart erratically palpitated, anxious for her voice. He had never been so needy before meeting her. He saw this as a benefit, not a weakness. "Where are you?" Eyes adjusted, aided by a faint luminescence through the purls of gossamer embroidery, yet confusion and obscurity prevailed.

Scratching. What was that? Foundations of bulky objects huddled in his vicinity, random junk they didn't get around to tossing out. The kind that accumulated over decades. He remembered Aunt Zinnia saying a person would be rich not spending the money on those seldom-used items that ended up in cellars and attics. A person would be richer, he amended, not wasting so many of the priceless minutes that made up a lifetime. All moot points now. A tear wet his cheek. Why did she have to bequeath him this house? It was cursed!

The scrapes reminded him of claws. What madness patrolled the hellhole? To his dismay, the noises were zeroing in amidst ghastly yowls. An especially virulent roar led to involuntary shudders. "Darcy," the man wept, thankful she didn't answer, didn't see him falling apart. "I love you. So much."

He needed to get a grip. It was the kind of tribulation that could render one psychologically cowed, surfing a white froth of terror, but he wasn't finished. They had to survive. Huskily the man hailed his wife. "Are you okay? Why aren't you answering? Say something. Please, just say something." He drew a breath.

The surface below him quaked. Determination wavered. They were sitting ducks. He corrected the analogy: spiderbait. He was fraught by a suspicion the things had bitten Darcy. It might be too late.

A presence abided. He heard it. A beast grown too huge to exit its murky lair. Being the spinner of tales and worlds in his career, Jordy was half-fascinated by whatever may have evolved in the crypt-like den and why. They might never know the catalyst. But if his beloved bride were dead, poisoned, betrayed by these wretched fiends, he intended to look their queen or king in one of its glossy eyes and shove his fist as far as he could inside its mangy throat!

Legs stumped toward him supporting an immense body.

"Darcy? Darcy, wake up! You have to wake up!"

No reply. This traumatized him more than the ogre stalking the cellar.

"Darcy . . ."

Thorned appendages crashed down to either side of his trussed form. A wicked visage, thick hooked fangs and circular bulging orbs towered over him. Jordy lost his cool, lost it completely. The man hollered so loud, he nearly gagged on his tonsils.

It was the most appalling scream. *Jordan?* Her voice choked, constricted by fear. Eyes and face were now spiderwebbed. The woman's body endured a claustrophobic panic that she might suffocate, and an inner yen to itch so violently it would flay her skin to the bone with finger grooves and ruts. Such insanity felt more perturbing than the whisk of spider feet had been on her flesh. Darcy lay torn between an urgency to shred herself and a fervent wish to shriek her lungs out.

Cramps seized her, and shivering. A cough attack. Then the tingles within altered to a raking, a striation of minuscule talons, rending and slashing her to ribbons. The imminent peril clutching her in its thrall for hours was this. To each their own nightmare. In hers she served as a shell. There would be no banquet, and she would not transform to a monstrous entity.

Darcy cringed, overcome by revulsion, the vexation too horrible to cope with as she disintegrated, peeled apart to accommodate an exodus of the bristling critters that scored and lacerated their way out, leaving her in ruins . . .

The couple stirred at the bottom of the cellar steps where they had been deposited. Shaking off their dreams, they were elated to discover themselves intact, the other alive and whole. A warped disheveled blanket remained, haphazardly woven and strewn from beam to beam, as if a textile factory had exploded. The pods of thread that enveloped them were cut off. Jordan and Darcy embraced, never so eager to be together. They laughed, delirious, then clambered upstairs.

Hurrying, stooping, the pair ventured through dismal rooms entwined with silk. Legions of spiders had vanished or gone back to hiding. The humans were baffled, having been certain they were about to be consumed by the billions or trillions that had suddenly crawled out of the woodwork.

Jordan unbolted a sturdy oak door. The entrance was barricaded by strands so gummy and compact, he was prevented from severing them with his bare hands. The man and woman sighed then retraced their path to the kitchen. Drawers were obstructed as well. Darcy located a paring knife in the dishrack next to the sink and extracted it through a space. She gave it to her husband. Warily they hustled to the front door, and Jordy hacked at strings wielding the small knife. It was like blazing a trail in a jungle. Perspiring, hunched over, he wrenched open the portal.

The newlyweds blinked, surveying a devastated world. Sunlight caused their eyes to water; the drops grew salty and tears flowed as they squinted at the rubble of a neighborhood.

Jordy hopped down. The porch had been stripped away. He assisted Darcy. Hand in hand, they plodded through a plain of debris. The town had mysteriously been demolished. It struck them how incredibly lucky they had been. As if drained of emotion by the spiders, it took hours to process. They stumbled down roads littered by branches or trees, overturned vehicles, destruction. Then Darcy collapsed in tremors of sorrow. Jordy perched beside her on a smooth section of lumber, once the eave of a roof. He curved an arm around her shoulders.

The woman wiped her cheeks on grimy fingers. "What do you think did this?"

Biting his upper lip, Jordan shook his head. "A bomb. An earthquake. A tornado. The spiders knew. Somehow they were forewarned. Animals sense disaster."

But maybe it was more than that. Perhaps a guardian angel was peeping over their shoulders, he surmised, and spurred a wave of mass hysteria to shield them. Or the spiders had simply done so out of mutual respect, for protecting their generations.

The Maynards would learn that a superstorm had brewed in an unstable climate. The cobwebs were so condensed, they cushioned the home's interior from a massive cyclone that razed the entire community. Though the house's exterior sustained damage and needed major repairs, the place was still standing — while everything surrounding it had been ravaged.

There was also a bun in the oven, which would grow into a cute little girl named Zinnia in honor of her great-great-aunt.

Darcy continued knitting, inspired by their pets. She started an internet store to sell web-designed creations and became as successful as her husband.

Coincidentally, the tempest was named Arachne.

## **About the author and artist**

Lori R. Lopez has long been a friend to eight-legged freaks and most manner of crawly-creepers with six or four limbs (even some with two or three). A wee child, she would rescue insects and spiders from the menaces of shoes and a turtle-feeding brother. As an unusual little girl, Lori held funerals for the creatures she couldn't save. Considered a rather odd adult, she and her sons have continued to protect such critterlings around them. A spider is even the main character of Lori's novel *THE FAIRY FLY*. Strange, isn't it? Not that she's obsessed or anything. Heh-heh. So her house has a few too many cobwebs . . . what does that prove? Stephen King has a spiderweb on his front gate! You don't hear people talking about him. And even if you do, it's because he's a famous writer. Lori might never be quite that famous. Who is? But that's no reason not to talk about her! Maybe you should talk about her. It might be nice, unless what you're saying isn't nice, in which case you should think twice before talking about other people. However, if you should meet Lori and she doesn't have a chance to run the opposite direction for fear you're a crazed autograph-hound, you will probably notice an assortment of spiders emerge from below her brim or cap or beret. This is nothing to worry about. They protect her from the monsters who lurk under hats and are terribly afraid of — you guessed it — spiders.



**[More works](#) by Lori R. Lopez**

Look for the author's [horror collection](#) *Odds And Ends*, containing "Spider Soup"!

Lori and her talented sons have a creative company at [fairyflyentertainment.com](http://fairyflyentertainment.com).  
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